

Life of poverty, violence awaits Africa's child brides; Tradition often supersedes child protection laws

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Body

The 14-year-old girl had just arrived home when her family told her to swap her school uniform for traditional wedding robes. While she had been tending to her seventh-grade studies in South Africa, her male relatives had received a US\$570 bride price for her from a man she had never met who was twice her age.

As is the case with many **child** brides, beatings and rape were common in her new marital home. After several failed escape attempts, she finally made it over a fence and ran to a police station. She then filed charges for the case that would become the first criminal prosecution of **child** marriage in South Africa.

About 125 million African girls are **child** brides, with that number expected to rise to 310 million by 2050, creating a legacy of "lost childhoods and shattered futures," according to a report Thursday by UNICEF that demanded aggressive government actions to end the practice.

Across Africa girls are being married off to cover family debts, to keep them free of sin or simply because it's tradition, but their lives are ones of violence, poverty and increased risk of HIV, said UNICEF. The girls in this report have not been named because they are minors.

In last year's case in South Africa, the husband was convicted of rape, assault and human trafficking, and sentenced to 22 years in prison, but he maintained he was just following traditional practices.

Even in South Africa, with its liberal constitution and a litany of **laws** to protect **child** brides, the traditional practice of "ukuthwala" **often** supersedes modern **laws**, says the Commission for Gender Equality, a constitutional agency. Where once a young man would take a consenting girl home to his village to convince her family to agree to marriage, now some aging men are twisting the practice and abducting girls, raping them, and then forcing them into a union that **often** resembles slavery, the commission says.

Similarly in Ethiopia, abductions and forced marriages of girls were common in the countryside until outlawed, at least officially, in 2004.

In Mozambique, there are no **laws** preventing **child** marriages and existing **child protection laws** offer loopholes, said Carla Mendonca, a **child protection** specialist for UNICEF Mozambique. If a community decides a girl is to be married in a traditional ceremony, with or without her consent, lawmakers are powerless to intervene, says Mendonca.

Child marriage is a way out of poverty for many Mozambique families - one less mouth to feed and a windfall from the dowry. Nearly half of women aged 20 to 24 were married before the age of 18, UNICEF says.

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"My parents are poor, they cannot afford to look after me," said a 16-year-old, who has a one-year-old **child**. "I helped my family when I got married; they no longer need to support me."

In another village in Mozambique, a 16-year-old girl gave up on school after her husband told her it was too dangerous to study in the evening.

"I was in the ninth grade," said the girl, who lives with her in-**laws** while her husband works as a miner in neighbouring South Africa. "Now I get up at 6 a.m., I clean the house, then I clean my mother-in-**law**'s house and I also work on the farm."

Daughters are **often** used to pay off a debt, said Pascoa Claudino Sumbana Ferrao, government director in Inhambane City. "Mostly it's a situation where the mother herself was given away as a little girl, so they think it's normal. It becomes something generational."

In Zimbabwe, an early marriage is seen as the path to avoid sin. **Child** marriage is **often** encouraged among the 1.2 million followers of churches that combine evangelical Christianity and traditional beliefs, says Human Rights Watch. Church leaders also enforce virginity testing rituals on girls as young as 12.

"The problem is that girls and women are not allowed to speak," a church elder told Human Rights Watch. "If a man stands up in church and says God showed him in a dream that he should marry a certain girl, then that is God's commandment which must be obeyed." !@COPYRIGHT=© 2015 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

Graphic

Shiraaz Mohamed, The Associated Press; A 15-year-old pregnant girl holds hands with her 20-year-old husband-to-be in Guibombo, Mozambique. No **laws** prevent **child** marriages in the country and existing **child protection laws** offer loopholes.;

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