

# CHILD MARRIAGES RISE AS FAMILIES STRUGGLE TO COPE IN YEMEN



Nezar<sup>1</sup> left his country, Yemen, and is now living in Europe. In Europe, he left Islam and became a follower of Jesus. Now he tries to help the Yemeni people however he can while living abroad. He's worried about his country and the deep poverty caused by the war, which has been going on since March 2015. One consequence of the war particularly concerns him: a growing number of child marriages.

It can be hard for anyone to understand why fathers are marrying their young daughters to elderly men in 2020. Although historically even in many Western countries, it wasn't unusual for young girls to be married off to elderly men, these countries have now largely ended child marriage. However, strict Islamic countries have struggled to abolish the practice due to legalistic interpretations of Islam that forbid any deviation from cultural norms practiced by Arab tribes a thousand years ago.

Such was the case in 1999 when Yemen's parliament cited religious grounds as it abolished article 15 of Yemen's Personal Status Law, which set the minimum age for marriage for boys and girls at 15. Since then, Yemen has had no minimum age for marriage. Human Rights Watch (HRW) points out that while now "boys or girls can be married at any age, in practice it is girls who are most often married young, often to much older men."<sup>2</sup>

Today, international organizations such as UNICEF, regard marriage by a person below the age of 18 to be a child marriage and a violation of human rights. According to UNICEF, Yemen remains one of only a handful of nations in the region without a legal minimum age for marriage.<sup>3</sup> Yet even without a legal basis, in rare cases, Yemeni officials have been known to intervene on behalf of very young girls whose cases come to their attention.

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms used to protect the identity of partners working in sensitive contexts.

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/12/07/how-come-you-allow-little-girls-get-married/child-marriage-yemen>

<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/after-years-civil-war-child-marriage-rise-yemen/33762>



“A nine-year old girl was married to a 70-year old man,” Nezar says, sharing one example. “She listened to a radio program and followed my advice to search for a judge. She talked to the judge for three hours. The judge considered that this girl was not physically ready to have a sexual relationship and took the case seriously. The judge had death threats issued against him, but he won and became a kind of surrogate father to the girl, helping to protect her.”

However, this example happened several years ago, before the war started. The war has caused bitter poverty in this already poor country, and the growing poverty has led to a rise in child marriages.

“I hear of girls younger than 12 being married to men of 50 or 60 for money,” Nezar says. “Poverty forces some fathers to sell their daughters to rich people from all over the Arabian Peninsula. They will pay 1,000 US dollars for a girl. In Yemeni refugee camps, but also in Yemen, young girls are often married off for a period of two weeks. For some families with several daughters, this is a real business opportunity.”

Nezar explains that these brief marriages allow the men to have sex with the children legally. The couple will then be divorced and the girl returns home to be sold again. “According to what I hear, there are hundreds of cases among the Yemeni people, inside and outside Yemen,” says Nezar.

The girls endure terrible consequences. They face shame and social isolation. There are almost no prospects of finding a husband who will accept them. There is broken trust with their father. If the child becomes pregnant, her children will be rejected by society. There will be deep emotional consequences of being married while such a young child.

Nezar says families are driven by the need to survive. “Fathers initially despair, when they feel they must marry off their young daughter,” he explains. “But sometimes these fathers, once they have tasted money, continue with their other daughters. Some marry their daughters over and over in these short marriages. We hear some are married to foreigners. Many are smuggled into Saudi Arabia.”

Nezar’s words about the growth of child marriages in Yemen are confirmed by many others. In 2017 the UN’s Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that 52% of Yemeni girls and women had gotten married before the age of 18. Between 2017 and the next year, the OCHA reported a threefold increase in under-18 marriages although accurate statistics are difficult to collect amid the conflict.

According to Girls Not Brides, a global partnership of more than 1400 civil society organizations committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfill their potential, “This rise in child marriages in Yemen is a visible indicator of the conflict’s disproportionate impact on children. Child marriage has been used both as a coping mechanism to protect girls and sustain families, and has left child brides with nowhere to turn due to a breakdown in welfare services and schools.”

Girls Not Brides says that child marriage is driven by gender inequality and the belief that girls are somehow inferior to boys. For Yemen, they identify contributing factors as the armed conflict, the level of education, family honor, forced sexual exploitation by members of armed groups, and gender norms.<sup>4</sup>

Turning the tide on child marriage in Yemen currently revolves around two key issues: awareness and the war. In several Islamic countries, it is common for fathers to make marriage decisions for their daughters. Other people in the community don't seem to care or are hesitant to intervene in another family's choices, especially when they are unaware of the devastating consequences of child marriage.

According to a publication of the World Economic Forum, "Girls who marry as children are less likely to achieve their full potential. They are more likely to leave education early, suffer domestic violence, contract HIV/AIDS and die due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth – their bodies simply aren't ready."<sup>5</sup>

Organizations who have focused on bringing grassroots awareness about the dangers of child marriage and how it can destroy a young girl's future have seen success in changing local attitudes. In some cases this has influenced the decisions that fathers are making for their daughters. However, as Nezar points out awareness and other initiatives are likely to have only a limited impact on the rate of child marriage in Yemen as long as the war continues.

"The only solution is for the war to stop; people must start to breathe again," Nezar says. "People are in survival mode. Before the war there was poverty too, but the situation was not as bad as now. Before, people helped each other, now most can only think of their own survival. There have always been poor people in Yemen, but they had food. You now see people searching the garbage, but the garbage is empty of food. People cook weeds and leaves for their children."

Yemen entered its sixth year of war in April and has also been facing the threat of Covid-19 since the second week of April, when the first cases were diagnosed. "At the start, people thought it would never get to Yemen, but it did," says Nezar. "We're not hearing the real numbers about Covid-19—the number of infected people and the number of people who have died because of the virus. In a country where there is no food, no good health care system, where the immune system of most people is already affected, one can expect the virus to spread easily."

Covid-19 entered Yemen on top of what the United Nations (UN) has called the largest humanitarian crisis in the world today. This is a man-made crisis, created by Yemen's war. Meanwhile, Western governments continue to authorize weapons sales to the warring parties rather than pressuring them to stay at the negotiating table until a political solution is realized. At the same time, the UN faces drastic funding shortages for its operations in Yemen, just as the virus has begun to surge across the country. On June 19th, the Associated Press reported that some 75% of UN programs for Yemen, covering essential sectors like food, health care, and nutrition, have shut their doors or reduced operations. In the absence of the political will to end the conflict, the parallel lack of humanitarian assistance in Yemen will continue driving more Yemeni families to resort to horrific coping mechanisms such as forcing their children into marriage to survive.

<sup>4</sup> Source: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/yemen/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/09/these-are-the-countries-where-child-marriage-is-legal/>



“Giving humanitarian aid to the neediest people can help desperate fathers who are faced with the choice of selling their daughters or watching them starve along with their other children,” one partner says. “Increased food security will reduce the number of child marriages. We know of cases where families were in the process of arranging a marriage for one of their young daughters but when they started receiving a regular food basket from a humanitarian organization they broke off the arrangement. When there is food security, when a father can feed his family, he won’t despair. People outside Yemen can, in fact, do something about child marriage in Yemen today by supporting organizations that are meeting the basic needs of the Yemeni people.”

Nezar also points out that while desperation has sparked the rise in child marriages, it has also led to a growth in spiritual openness among Yemenis. “They are open for anything. All kinds of religions now try to spread their message in Yemen,” he says.

This includes believers inside the country, with whom Nezar is in close contact. “Christians in Yemen are giving a good example. They help the people around them, including their Muslim neighbors,” he says. Though not all Christians are helping, Nezar says that, “overall you can say there are many good testimonies of Christians who are a blessing for the people around them.”

These Yemeni Christians are also an example to us. Out of their own poverty and desperation, they are reaching out to their Muslim neighbors to be a blessing. Let’s join Nezar in trying to help the Yemeni people however we can, including by sharing about the devastating consequences of this war, such as the rise in child marriage and its impact on a generation of Yemeni girls.

## Prayer:

Pray for local church groups in Yemen, that they would be a voice of advocacy with regards to child marriage.

Pray that local church members in Yemen would be in the right place, at the right time and have the right words to speak to heads of households who may be considering a marriage for an underage daughter.

Pray that God would make a way for Nezar to reach his country with the gospel and to share his faith in Jesus Christ.

## Connect:

- Isolated Arabian Peninsula (AP) believers can reach out and connect with other believers who are practicing their faith in community on the AP through the CAP Voices Facebook page: [https://web.facebook.com/cap.voices0/?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/cap.voices0/?_rdc=1&_rdr)
- Write to [info@dev-ap.com](mailto:info@dev-ap.com) for more information about current initiatives assisting and empowering AP believers to connect, share their faith, and impact the society around them.
- Receive a daily prayer request shared by AP BMBs by subscribing to the CAP prayer feed on the PrayerMate App. 60 BMBs, the majority of whom live inside the AP, are regularly contributing prayer requests to the feed: <http://bit.ly/2tbXPwO>