



Save the Children

Preventing Child Marriage in Somaliland

About the Project

The Save the Children project aims to: enhance the capacity of the government to develop and enforce legal and policy frameworks that protect children and prevent early marriage; enhance the capacity and knowledge of communities, including religious and traditional leaders, Child Welfare Committees and Community Education Committees, to prevent and protect girls and boys from early marriage; and empower children and women through gender-sensitive health, education, livelihoods and capacity building activities and opportunities to prevent early marriage and promote gender equality in Somaliland.

Through this project, the Ministry of Justice of Somaliland has developed a Code of Conduct and provided certification to Qadis (traditional marriage ceremony providers), in addition to carrying out capacity building activities for Qadis on the harmful effects of child marriage. Prevention efforts with the government also include work dedicated to strengthening existing legislative frameworks for child protection and gender equality, and improving implementation of these frameworks.

In addition to community awareness raising on the subject, which includes activities with traditional and religious leaders, parents and children to promote gender equality and prevent child marriage, the project trains law enforcement officials at regional and national levels, community based structures and Women's Lobby Groups on child rights and gender equality. These education and training opportunities enable groups to effectively engage in and promote discussions on child marriage, child protection and gender equality in their communities.

Finally, the project provides a wide range of opportunities and services (i.e. education, health, vocational training and life skills) to girls and boys (unmarried, married and divorced) which enable them to make informed and healthy decisions about their future.

Funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC), this project is implemented by Save the Children in partnership with two local partners: Horn of Africa Voluntary Youth Committees (HAVOYOCO) and NAGAAD Network, in Sahil, Togdheer, Maroodi Jeeh and Awdal regions of Somaliland.



Saynab Osman*

16 years old

I got married two years ago at the age of 14 years; I am still married. My husband has a small shop and a bakery in our village. Our parents arranged our marriage. It was going well during my pregnancy until I reached the delivery date when I got seriously ill. I delivered a dead baby at the hospital. A few days before I was taken to the hospital, I felt the baby was no longer moving. I visited a nurse but she told me that there was no problem and that the baby was alive. A few days after this my labor started. I was in labor for 6 hours in our village and then I was transferred to Berbera hospital for assistance. I was in labor for two more hours in the hospital, but the baby was already dead. The doctors used forceps to remove him.

I attribute these problems to getting married too early. I think I would have delivered normally if I got married at an older age. I faced many challenges in my marriage life and I regret a lot about it. That is why I advise young girls not to rush and get married early. It affects your health and also your education. You have also a lot of responsibilities and might not even be able to do your homework if you are still in school.

While I think this was my destiny, I still think I could have avoided it if I didn't marry at a young age. But I want to go back to my school when I recover fully and I hope to restart my life again.



Nasrin Mohamed*

15 years old



I was married to a man I had never met before. I never saw him or had any relationship with him before. I was only 14 years old at the time. He came to my family and asked to marry me; my parents couldn't refuse because that is against our culture and they agreed to our marriage. He told my

family that he was okay for me to continue with school and finish my education. He was even prepared to wait for me until I finished my exams. However, one month after our engagement he came to my family and told them that he wanted to move in with me. But he said he would keep his promise. The family agreed to it and we moved in together.

A while after the wedding, I told him that I wanted to go back to school. Unfortunately he said: "No, you are not going anywhere". I should stay at home. He did not even allow me to go to Quranic School. I don't know why he changed everything and broke his promise.

I told my mother about it and my mother spoke to him, but he still wasn't convinced. My mother supported me with the school papers, because I was in grade eight at the time and was doing the national leaving examinations. I finished my examinations without him knowing about it and I scored good marks. Then we started to have problems from that day. We used to fight over family issues and everything, including even the food I prepare. If I asked for anything or told him something is finished, he would fight with me.

When I couldn't handle it anymore I decided to leave him. One day I came back to our house and I asked for a divorce. I didn't want to go back to him. My mother, who was following our situation closely, agreed and we got divorced. I now live with my parents. I didn't know marriage life was such a difficult experience. I went back to school when I got divorced. I want to finish my high school and my Madarasa and work for myself in the future. I don't want to go back to that life. I would advice parents not to do that to their daughters. It hurts a lot.





Rahma Abdi*

15 years old

I got married about five months ago; we live with my husband's family. I was a student when I got married but I dropped out of school later. I would have been form two [secondary school] now, but when my husband and I left for another town to get married I did not go back to school. We went to another village to get married because our parents wouldn't have allowed us to marry. He called his family, told them about it and we got engaged. We returned to Hargeisa after a few days and we settled there.

I'd like to go back to my school and continue my studies. But it is difficult for me now because my husband doesn't work and I can't afford the school fee. It is only his father who supports all of us through casual work, so he can't pay for our school fees.

Marriage life is good but hard, especially for young people because they can't do the family work and education together, so they drop out of school. Had I known this before I would have finished my studies first and then got married because by then, even if the husband doesn't have a job, I would have been able to work and support my family. I feel I didn't make the right decision.

Getting married early has also its own challenges because you have to take a lot of responsibility in the house. We might not even know how to care for children. You might not be physically strong to handle everything; I am now four months pregnant and I already feel the weight. I am worried about the labor too; I fear that the child might be too big for me to deliver normally.

These days, girls are getting married too early. I don't know why. I was the last to get married in our class. When one girl marries, the others also follow her and get married too. But the problem is that they also get divorced quickly because they are not prepared for that life, especially when both of them are young. The girl is then forced to come back to her family and she might be pregnant already. In our culture it is really bad that girls get divorced at such a young age because they might not be married again or they may just get busy taking care of the children and forget all about their future.

I want to go back to my school one day and finish my studies. I will leave the baby with my mother or mother-in-law during the school time because I want to have a better future.

Basra Ali*, Member of the Child Protection Committee - Rahma's relative

I am a member of the child protection committee in Hargeisa. These children haven't reached marriage age yet. They were students and ran away together to get married and when they came back, there was nothing that could be done except to care for them. They are now a burden to an already poor family living in the camp [for displaced people]. They are not even going to school now because marriage life is too demanding for them.

In our camp, when children finish high school and their families can't afford to pay for their university studies, they drop out and tend to either get married or migrate to countries overseas. And when the younger children in schools see that their older peers are not studying in universities, they get disappointed and drop out of school too; that affects their future. That is why many children get married early in our camp. It is a very common practice in the camps these days, with children getting married at the age of fourteen, fifteen or sixteen years.

We do awareness raising campaigns on early and forced marriage, on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting and on many other problems that can affect children's lives in our camps. These problems are not going away; they happen every day. We need to do more awareness raising to stop this. I think our children should be in schools to have a better future tomorrow.





Ashwaq Mohamud*

15 years old

Early this year, I decided to marry a boy I had a relationship with for a while. But when I told my mother about it and consulted with her, she advised me that it might not be a good thing for me now because of the effect it can have on my life and future. I am only 15 years old now and I am in high school.

He came to my family to ask for me, but I changed my mind and said no after my mother's advice. I wanted to continue with my studies. He didn't want me to continue school when we got married, and I didn't want to stop it. I wanted to finish my studies first and then find a job. Maybe that's when I will get married. But I don't think about it any longer now. I enjoy living with my parents who both work and our siblings. I have big dreams for the future. I want to become a president one day when I grow up and finish my studies.

In any case, I think marriage is good when you are over 18 years old. But these days, girls get married early. They usually run away with boys and get married; but unfortunately they also get divorced quickly. Such girls face many challenges in our community. If divorced, for example, they lose their education and hence might not have good future. They may not also be married again. Some also face health complications during delivery, for example prolonged labour and hence are operated because their body is not ready for this.

In our culture, if a boy and a girl run away together to get married, parents usually don't have a choice but to approve their marriage. Some girls are also married off to old men. That is why many girls drop out of school and get married. But fortunately for me, my mother understands this very well and she always gives me advice.



Hawa Yusuf*, Mother and a Member of the Child Protection Committee

Ashwaq [her daughter] is just 15 years old and still in school. She had a relationship with a boy but she came for my advice and approval before she accepted it [his proposal for marriage]. Not many girls do this now. I told her that she is still young and that even her older sister is still not married.

I advised her to continue her education. I also told her that there are many challenges that can come with getting married early which she might not be prepared for at this age. For example, they usually have complications with pregnancy and delivery.

Ashwaq has fortunately accepted my advice. She also convinced the boy who was so committed to the marriage. He wanted her to no longer go to school, but be home schooled when they got married.

I had a bad experience from early marriage. I was only 14 years old when my uncle married

me off to a man, and when I refused my mother forced me to accept it. I ran away to another village, but another uncle of mine came after me. He beat me and brought me back home. Then I was married by force. I had a bad experience from

that marriage because nothing worked for us. We fought every time and we were never happy. Every time I left him, my family would take me back to him. It was never my choice. I later left him and refused to go back. I asked for divorce because that was the only way out. That is why I don't want any of my daughters to go through the same experience.

***I had a
bad experience
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I am now a member of the child protection committee and we meet many children who are married at a young age. Many are also divorced and have children. I think this is what helped me to give my daughter a good advice. We do awareness raising campaigns to prevent and reduce such practices in the community.



Dr. Abdirizak Yusuf Abdilahi, Head of Maternal Health, Hargeisa General Hospital

Generally, mothers in Somaliland face many challenges in terms of health and there is a high rate of maternal mortality, which is worse for those married at a young age. Young mothers and girls who get married at an early age face different health complications and social challenges including taking big family responsibility. When they get pregnant, they

may face complications as their body is not yet ready physically to

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carry a baby. The body might react to these changes negatively and the young mother might fall sick.

And during delivery, young mothers can get hypertension and physical stress which, if not properly controlled, can lead to a stroke and hence disability. It is also possible that they face prolonged labor which can also result in death of the baby or fistula if not properly handled, and that can adversely affect the young mother's future. It is very unfortunate for everyone if that happens. When they are delivering, these young mothers' lives are at stake. They may need to be operated on and that risks their lives and that of their babies.

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Khadar Ahmed Diriye, Director General, Ministry of Justice, Somaliland

In general, it is our ministry's mandate to ensure that children and every citizen get justice. And that is the case if children's rights are violated or the children are abused. We do this through the judiciary system and processes. We hire lawyers to support children through this, and that applies if children who face early marriage seek justice.

Being a Muslim community, we follow the Islamic rule of law when it comes to marriage and the cultural axis of our people. There is also juvenile justice law in place, which has been developed for children and is currently being reviewed to reflect the challenges faced by children through early marriage.

In an effort to streamline the marriage process and ensure that children don't get married, we brought together the religious leaders who do the "Nikah" or the engagement and trained them [on child marriage], provided them with templates for proper documentations, and agreed with them on actions points for minimizing child marriage in Somaliland. We are also

registering the sheikhs who should do the Nikah and we will give them license. Only those with a license will then be able to do the Nikah and provide marriage certificates. They will then help to control child marriage.

We have many gaps in our legal system. The constitution of Somaliland defines a child as below the age of 15 years. Any one above that is considered as an adult. There is no another law in Somaliland that defines the age of the child and this is what needs to be developed. The international conventions define a child as anyone below the age of 18 years. We need to negotiate these laws like the other Muslim countries in the world.

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This issue also needs more studies and researches to find out the underlying causes and consequences and find ultimate solutions. We need to put a huge effort together to increase awareness on the issue and we need to develop proper laws in line with the Sharia law and the context. We must understand better how best we can do it.





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Save the Children

Save the Children

4141 Yonge Street, Suite 300

Toronto, Ontario M2P 2A8

info@savethechildren.ca

1-800-668-5036

Charitable Registration: 10795 8621 RR0001

www.savethechildren.ca