



24 May 2021

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
jscfadt@aph.gov.au

Re: Inquiry into certain aspects of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Annual Report 2019-20: Child and forced marriage

Dear Committee,

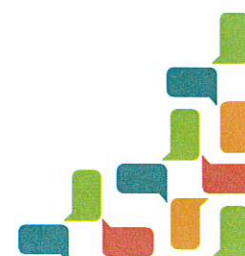
Family Planning NSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the 'Inquiry into certain aspects of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Annual Report 2019-20: Child and forced marriage'.

Family Planning NSW is the leading provider of reproductive and sexual health clinical services in New South Wales and Australia. We have been operating for over 95 years, working with communities across New South Wales, Australia and the Pacific. As a specialist reproductive and sexual health service provider, we have significant expertise in the provision of comprehensive sexuality education, a known strategy to prevent gender-based violence.

Child forced marriage is a violation of children's rights and a direct child protection concern. Driven by gender inequality, child forced marriage is a manifestation of deeply entrenched societal structures and stereotypes often related to sexuality and gender. Child forced marriage is more prevalent in countries where gender inequality and discrimination against women and girls is deeply entrenched.

Over 650 million women are married before 18 years of age. If change does not accelerate, 1.2 billion women alive in 2050 will have been a child bride – which is akin to the entire population of India. In the East South East Asia and Oceania (ESEAO) region, child forced marriage and early union continue to be practiced under the guise of cultural and religious reasons. Governments need to be accountable and responsible in protecting the rights of a child especially those who had signed up to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

While there is very little information on the prevalence of child forced marriage in Australia, and no publicly available government data on child forced marriage in Australia, the National Children's and Youth Law Centre estimates 250 cases have occurred since 2012.(1) Experts assert that this number is likely underreported.(1)





Some detrimental effects of child forced marriage and early union include complications during childbirth which may result in death, sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and sexual and gender-based violence. In most instances, married girls are often forced to leave school to shoulder household responsibilities which robs them off their rights to education.

Ending child forced marriage is critical in achieving eight of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, to which Australia is a signatory, including those related to poverty, health, education, nutrition, food security, inequality and economic growth. Ending child marriage requires work across all sectors and at all levels.

The vast majority of policy measures that aim to address child forced marriage focus on prohibition, as opposed to prevention. While prohibition is essential given the significant human rights implications of child forced marriage, prevention is critical. Child forced marriage can be prevented through the delivery of evidence-based holistic comprehensive sexuality education that provides young girls and their families with skills and information on their rights regarding relationships and health. Experts assert that timely and universal support must be provided to all families, teachers, health professionals and community workers to facilitate the provision of comprehensive sexuality education and identify children at risk before early intervention is required.(1)

A child and adolescents' right to access sexuality education is recognised as a basic human right in both the annual report of Special Rapporteur on the right to education to the UN General Assembly in 2010 and General Comment No. 4 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Additionally, access to quality education, including sexuality education that is inclusive of sustainable development, gender equality and human rights, is enshrined within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

It is essential that comprehensive sexuality education is holistic and encompasses learning around gender equality, informed consent and respectful relationships, gender-based and sexual violence and human rights.(2) Additionally, comprehensive sexuality education should promote the empowerment of women and girls and enable their full and meaningful participation in society.(2)

To address child forced marriage within Australia and the Pacific region, Family Planning NSW recommend the following:

- provide access to education and resources to assist reproductive and sexual health professionals identify children and young people at risk of child forced marriage to enable effective intervention including referral, reporting and support
- invest in and increase access to consistently delivered comprehensive sexuality education programs both within schools and through community programs



In your deliberations, I strongly urge you to consider these recommendations to fully appreciate the importance of evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education as an essential strategy to prevent child forced marriage. To further discuss this letter, I am available by phone on [REDACTED] or by email [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely



References

1. Jelenic T, Keeley M. End child marriage: report on the forced marriage of children in Australia. Sydney: National Children's and Youth Law Centre 2013.
2. United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. Emerging evidence, lessons and practice in comprehensive sexuality education: A global review. France; 2015.