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Child Marriage in Ghana: A ProjectsAbroad Internship

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Child Marriage, Ghana, Final Report

Bailey Pelletier and Rikki Bergen

Identifying the Problem

In spite of Ghana's reputation as one of the more developed nations in Africa, poverty and a lack of education among particular communities continue to cause an array of social problems. Particularly for young girls. 1/5 girls in Ghana are married before their 18th birthday, and the likelihood increases to 1/3 if the girl-child lives in the north. For more privileged Ghanaian's, these statistics can seem shocking, however for many, they are simply a reflection of their experience.

There are 4 types of child marriage that we found to occur in Ghana:

- 1. Dowry Girls:

This is a tradition frequently practiced by the Konkomba tribe in the Northern Region of Ghana. This practice occurs when a male finds a wife. If he has a sister at home, the custom states that he must give his sister to the other family in order to be granted his wife's hand. In this situation the exchanged girl becomes betrothed to the entire family, pending any male who decides to marry her – regardless of their age. Occasionally, if the girl is very young at the time of the betrothal, the physical exchange may not happen until later and the girl may not even be aware that her future is laid out for her. If the betrothed girl tries to escape, she is often beaten by the males in her family and then secured with a wooden block on her foot so that she is unable to leave. Discriminatory gender norms play a large role in the perpetuation of this custom as the community appears to struggle to recognize that each woman is her own being and capable of her own choices. Many men in this society believe that they need wives to take care of them, however they have not extended their faith in a women's household abilities to consider what she would be able to contribute to the community if given the chance.

- 2. Baby Betrothal:

Mostly practiced by the Moab or Bimboa people, this custom occurs when an older, generally wealthy man will decide to sponsor a girl either immediately following her birth or while she is still young. The man will pay for the costs to feed and clothe the child as well as any other costs associated with growing up such as school and medical fees, with the agreement that he will marry her once she gets older. Frequently in these situations, the man will reach a point where he is no longer able to pay the parents to raise the girl, therefore he will decide that it is time for them to be married – regardless of her age at the time. Up to this point, the girl may not have been aware that she was betrothed. This situation puts strain on the marriage from the beginning, as the man, now short of money, may no longer be able to fully support the girl and as the girl is still young and developing she likely lacks many skills to support herself.

- 3. Trokosi:

This tradition is common in the Upper Volta Region. It occurs when girls as young as four years old are offered to the gods as atonement for an offense committed by a relative. This tradition has been

around since the 18th century when priests stopped accepting livestock as compensation for offenses. The girl's involved become slaves to the priests. Their term of service is supposed to last between three and five years, depending on the offense, but as most families cannot afford the price to buy their daughters back, most girls are stuck there. These girls are considered 'wives of god' and live in horrendous conditions. They are frequently raped and beaten, forced to beg for food, given only rags to wear, are forced to work long hours in the priests fields. They have no access to education or medical attention. Any child born to any of the girls also becomes a slave to the priest. In the case that a priest dies, the girl becomes the property of his successor. If the girl dies before her sentence is up, her family is expected to replace her with another virgin girl. In some situations, the cycle has continued for generations.

- 4. General Early Marriage:

Practiced all over the country, early marriage occurs most frequently when a family does not have the financial stability to take care of all of the children. If a man selects a young girl to marry, he is expected to pay a dowry to the family of the girl, at which point she will be expected to marry and move in with him. Most of these girls are forced to leave school when they become married in order to best take care of their husbands. Children in relationships such as these are likely to experience domestic abuse, sexual assault and birthing complications. It is common in these situations that if a girl manages to escape the marriage, her family will not necessarily take her back, putting these girls in very compromised situations.

Why it happens (the bigger picture)

There are a variety of reasons girls are forced into marriage when they are still children. No matter the specific reason, there are generally 3 overlying factors which drive the practice of child marriage in Ghana.

1. Tradition/Discriminatory Gender Norms

As noted above, particular tribes and communities are following practices which have been passed down from previous generations. Considering that Ghana is a country with very diverse cultures and practices, it is a challenge to regulate what occurs on a local level. In many democracies, the state and the laws evolve as the people demand them to, and therefore the laws within the state generally reflect the values of a population. In the case of Ghana, the laws which protect human and children's rights were the result of external international pressure. The result is that although there are laws which prohibit children from being forced into marriage, customary law is frequently incompatible with state law.

In many traditions, there are very rigid gender norms which place women at a disadvantage. For example, it is still very common in Ghana for a man to pay a dowry to his wife's family. Therefore the wife is 'his' because he paid for her. It is important to recognize the value of a tradition like this. It promotes an open and generous relationship between the two families which will become united as one. This is the reason that all 14 of the teenage girls we talked to (of mixed religions), want their husband to pay a dowry. The problem with this though, is that many people take advantage of this tradition. They use it as an excuse to treat women as objects which are to be traded and 'owned'. In sum, stripping them of their autonomy makes it permissible for parents to literally sell their daughter regardless of her own desires.

2. Poverty/ Lack of Education (Ignorance)

Poverty and a lack of education cannot be discussed separately. A lack of education causes poverty, and poverty makes education inaccessible. They are a complexly intertwined set of problems which function together as a cycle that allows child marriage to occur.

- Lack of sexual education leads to parents having too many kids that they cannot support financially.
- Girls are perceived to not need education and therefore if their fate is to become a wife, it is more convenient to marry her off sooner rather than later. Families cannot support all their children and can benefit from the dowry that a man pays for their daughter.
- When girls are not educated, they cannot be economically empowered.
- People are ignorant of the law because of a lack of civic education.
- Children do not know their rights.
- People are forced to focus on short term gain rather than long term sustainability. Therefore, it is hard for families to go without food in order to put a girl through school, despite the fact that it will benefit them more in the long run.

3. Absence of State Intervention and Funding

From our interviews, we learned that in theory, there are multiple laws which should be protecting female children from being married. However, not a single person we interviewed could think of a time where there was police monitoring done in communities. There is no enforcement of the law when it comes to human rights being violated unless a tip is called into them or a physical letter is written. Even then, it is not common for police to intervene unless they are being pushed to act by a heavy handed person or group. The people also do not have confidence in the police because of the widespread corruption.

The Ghanaian government also has multiple commissions which claim to promote human rights and civic education for “all Ghanaians”. There is the NCCE (National Commission for Civic Education) which is supposed to have 216 district offices, 10 regional, and one head office in Accra. They are also supposed to receive funding from the European Union. Then there is the CHRAJ (Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice) which is intended to function as a body which both educates citizens on their human rights and also intervenes when those rights are compromised. A retired official from the NCCE, Eric Bortui, told us that in reality, the government does not fund the NCCE other than during elections, that district offices are frequently closed down, and that staff often go unpaid. The CHRAJ also has similar issues with receiving proper funding

Furthermore, there is the issue of language rights. The only government sponsored language in Ghana is English. All commercial signs and documents are printed in English, the courts operate in English, and education is in English. Meanwhile there are a vast array of languages and dialects in different communities not only around Ghana but in Accra alone. For the people who have only a very basic English vocabulary, they become marginalized and cannot access adequate services.

Finally, in 2007 the government passed a domestic violence act which promised the establishment of a fund which would pay for shelters and medical care for survivors. This would include shelters for

women who have already entered into marriages. Unfortunately, the fund was never created and there is only one shelter listed online with space for 30 people in the entire country. There are occasionally a few other shelters for domestic abuse victims funded by NGO's, but their funding isn't consistent. It is easier to intervene when girls are still young and don't have kids because they can then be taken in by children's shelters. A vast majority of girls who are forced into marriage are, or become victims of domestic abuse and once the marriage is finalized and the wife begins having children, it is much more difficult for them to seek help. There is generally nowhere for these girls and women to go unless a third party intervenes and is able and willing to remove them from the situation. Furthermore, girls and women are not only shamed for seeking divorce or trying to flee before entering a marriage, they also often have no financial independence or support from the community. Regardless, early intervention is critical when tackling the issue of forced marriage.

Where to allocate resources

Considering that there are a variety of factors in the country which contribute to child marriage culture, it can be overwhelming to know where to start. We have come up with a few suggestions for Projects Abroad and for future volunteers on how this problem can be tackled.

1. Having volunteers in high-risk areas

From our research, we noticed that the reality that children are facing is very different from community to community. For example, we were at Benkum Senior High School in the Akuapem Hills, and the issue of child marriage was one that seemed very removed from their lives. On the other hand, when we were in Mamobi with the girls from Achievers Ghana, early and forced marriage is a part of their everyday lives. Volunteers in any area is very beneficial regardless, and it would also be excellent to identify the areas where girls are at high risk so that other volunteers can be placed there as well.

2. Build off the work done by past volunteers

Regardless of the program, it is important that volunteers are able to learn from and build off of the work that others have done. The time spent researching an issue or learning to understand a project could be minimized if new volunteers pick up where the previous ones have left off. Final reports and resources created by previous volunteers who worked on the same project could be given to new volunteers for review on their first working day. This would allow human rights volunteers to begin working hands on in the community more quickly and frequently.

Final Notes

In addition to the information listed, when we return home we will be writing papers about what we have learned about early and forced marriage. Once completed, we will make them along with the fully transcribed interviews we have done, available for PAHO to use.