

# **Education is Power: Reducing Child Marriages in Egypt and Sudan**

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## ***Abstract***

*This article looks at the effects of child marriage and lack of education on young girls in Egypt and Sudan. Though both countries have made improvements, child marriage is still a prevalent issue. This article investigates causalities for child marriage and its negative impacts on young girls. It also addresses the ethical faults of child marriage and concludes looking towards education as a potential source to prevent and reduce the number of these marriages in Egypt and Sudan.*

## **I. Introduction**

Girls Not Brides (2002) states that “12 million girls are married [every year] before the age of 18. That is 23 girls every minute. Nearly 1 every 2 seconds.” While they may seem like a thing of the past in the industrialized world, child marriages are surprisingly prevalent in the developing world today. It is estimated that as many as 650 million women alive today were married before the age of eighteen.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the United Nations passed several conventions coming out against gender inequality and sexual violence. Moreover, it has become illegal to marry a girl before the age of eighteen in most nations worldwide. Regardless of these initiatives, child marriage has not ceased to be an issue.

The Arab Republic of Egypt (henceforth Egypt) and the Republic of Sudan (henceforth Sudan) are currently combating the issue of child marriage, as well as gender discrimination within the education sector. While they are making some progress, both countries still have too many girls that marry too young and leave school too early.

This article explores the causal factors that contribute to the high rates of child marriage in Egypt and Sudan. It also investigates the preventative measures these countries are taking while exploring areas for growth in the future. The research focuses on the prevalence of child marriage, contributing factors, and potential solutions. The article is structured into six sections. After the introduction, there is a brief review of relevant literature (Section II). Section III provides a socio-economic background on the countries. Section IV explores the ethical arguments against child marriage and related issues. The discussion section (Section V) examines the evolution of child

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2019), Fact 1.

marriage over time with particular attention to its predominance today in Egypt and Sudan. It also explores how laws and cultures in these two countries encourage and sustain this practice. The section also examines the closely related issue of female genital mutilation and then addresses the discrimination against girls in the education sector. Both of which prevent that more progress is made on child marriages. Finally, it provides some conclusions.

## **II. Brief Literature Review**

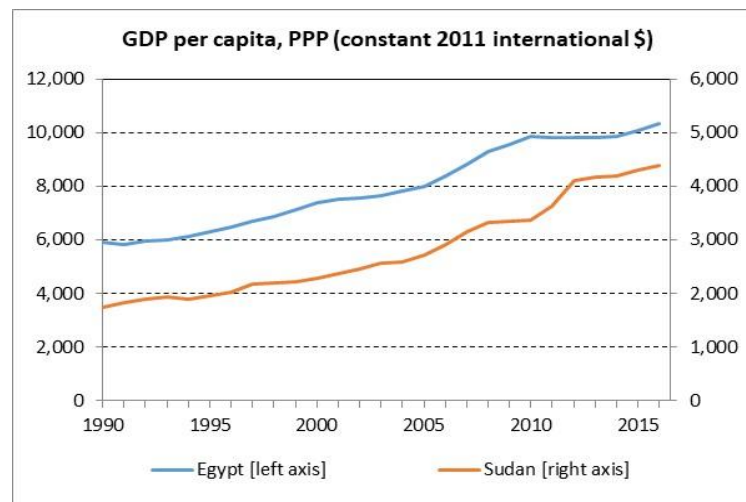
There is extensive research on the issue of girl's education in both Egypt and Sudan. While more work is being done on the subject, within these two countries, there is limited information on child marriages. There are two reports by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), one by Sultana (2008) and another one by UNICEF Sudan (2009), that provide overviews into the problems surrounding the education of girls within, respectively, Egypt and Sudan. Malé and Wodon (2016) and El Nagar, Bamkar and Tønnessen (2017) provide more specific insight into the issues of child marriage, respectively in Egypt and Sudan. The following paragraphs contain summaries of these publications.

- Sultana (2008) provides an overview of girl's education in Egypt and specifically discusses the Girls' Education Initiative (GEI) in Egypt. The paper outlines the importance of girl's education, programs being implemented, and areas for improvement when looking towards the future. It highlights the positive impacts on the individual and the community; such as lower maternal mortality rates and support for development. Sultana also addresses factors that complicate the success of these programs. For example, there is a cultural fear that education makes girls less desirable for marriage. Sultana also acknowledges some organizational problems with implementing the GEI full scale.
- An education fact sheet by UNICEF Sudan (2009) provides detailed information about the education of women and children in Sudan. It addresses the main issues affecting access to education in Sudan. It lists factors such as limited learning spaces, shortage of qualified teachers, high costs of education, and societal views of educating girls. It also provides an overview of UNICEF's approaches to combating these issues. UNICEF is active in a large number of issues, including among others the promotion of girl's education initiatives, supporting early childhood development, the creation of safe school environments, and the production of resources to help educate the educators.
- Malé and Wodon (2016) provide an outline regarding child marriage in Egypt. They explain that while child marriage is still prevalent in Egypt, it has been declining over time. Although it has declined, it is still important to take preventative measures and inform policy, to avoid further child marriages. They describe the increased likelihood of women married young to be uneducated, have health risks, and have more children. They also conclude that child marriage is associated with lower wealth and higher labor force participation, which are however only correlations, not necessarily causal effects.
- El Nagar, Bamkar, and Tønnessen (2017) discuss child marriage, its drivers, and interventions with Sudan. They highlight key issues that allow for child marriage such as gender discrimination, laws that make it legal, education, and poverty. They also describe the lasting impacts of child marriage on the labor force, women's healthcare, and the safety of children. Finally, they discuss solutions such as by the group "Girls Not Brides" and organizations aiming to change marriage laws in Sudan.

### III. Socio-economic Background

Figure 1 shows GDP per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), for Egypt and Sudan from 1990-2016. GDP per capita has been rising in both countries. Though Egypt's GDP per capita has been increasing much more in absolute values, Sudan's GDP per capita has been growing at a much faster rate (i.e., in relative terms). In 1990, Sudan had an average GDP per capita of \$1,743, which increased to an average of \$4,386 in 2016. Hence Sudan's GDP per capita more than doubled within the last 26 years. By contrast, Egypt's GDP per capita was at an average of \$5,909 in 1990 and increased to \$10,319 in 2016, which is slightly less than twice its 1990 value.

**Figure 1: PPP-adjusted GDP per Capita (Constant 2011 International \$), 1990-2016**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2018).

Despite Egypt's relatively high PPP-adjusted GDP per capita, Egypt and Sudan are currently both classified by the World Bank (2018) as a lower-middle-income country as the World Bank's classification does not adjust income for differences in purchasing power. Egypt has a population estimated at 99 million in 2016, while Sudan, directly bordering Egypt to the South, has an estimated population of 43 million in 2016, i.e., about half that of Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

Poor living conditions and lack of employment in Egypt contributed to the 2011 revolution that overthrew then-President Hosni Mubarak. An additional series of violent protests in 2013 led to the ousting of then-President Mohamed Mursi. Currently, Egypt's President is Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Due to the uncertain political standing and security of the country, the economy has failed to grow. High unemployment persists. Currently, Egypt has an unemployment rate of 12.2 percent, with 27.8 percent of the population living below the national poverty line. Another major economic issue that Egypt faces, rising inflation, which stood at 23.5 percent in 2017.<sup>3</sup>

Sudan has been plagued with decades of conflict and civil war. When South Sudan seceded in 2011, the country lost three-quarters of its oil production, which had been sustaining Sudan's economy. Between the loss of oil and continued conflict with South Sudan, close to half of Sudan's

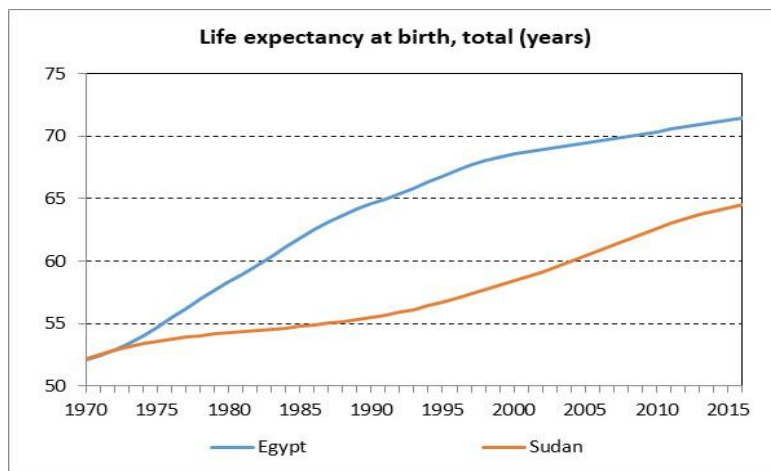
<sup>2</sup> World Bank (2018).

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph draws on the CIA (2018a).

population struggles with poverty. There have been efforts to create non-oil economic growth in the areas of gold mining and agriculture, the latter of which employs 80 percent of the workforce. Despite these efforts, unemployment persists, standing at 19.6 percent. Sudan is also struggling with the issue of inflation, which was at 35 percent in 2017.<sup>4</sup>

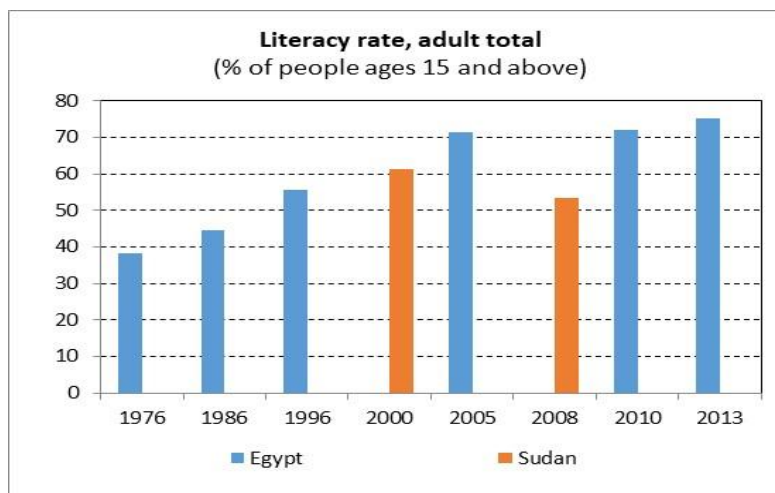
Figure 2 shows life expectancy at birth in both Sudan and Egypt from 1970 to 2016. The countries started with nearly the same life expectancy, but over time, Egypt pulled ahead and was rising at a faster rate than Sudan. That being said, Sudan has recently started to close the gap, though it has a lot to do to catch up with Egypt. In 1970, Sudan had an average life expectancy of 52.23 years, but they have since raised it to 64.5 years. Egypt’s average life expectancy was 52.16 years in 1970, but by 2016 it rose to 71.5 years.

**Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth (in years), 1970-2015**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2018).

**Figure 3: Adult Literacy Rates (all available years)**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2018).

<sup>4</sup> This paragraph draws on the CIA (2018b).

Figure 3 shows the adult literacy rates for Egypt and Sudan for all the years the World Bank (2018) has such data. The very limited Sudanese data indicate that adult literacy has recently decreased, from 61.3 percent in 2000 to 53.5 percent in 2008. Egypt's literacy rates have generally moved up, though relatively little progress has been made from 2005-2010. Starting at just 38.2 percent in 1976, Egypt's literacy rate has increased progressively until 2005 (increasing by 6.2 percentage points from 1976 to 1986, then by 11.2 percentage points from 1986-1996, and finally jumped up by 15.8 percentage points in the next nine years (1996-2005), which is an average annual increase of 1.8 percentage points). However, from 2005 to 2010, the average annual increase was only 0.13 percentage points. Fortunately, from 2010 to 2013, the average annual increase was with 1.0 percentage points once again showing some more progress and hope.

#### **IV. Ethical Origins and Existing Ethical Structures**

There are two ethical approaches of particular significance for the issue of child marriage. The first being the rights approach, which the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University defines as “the belief that humans have a dignity based on their human nature per se or on their ability to choose freely what they do with their lives.”<sup>5</sup> This is of the utmost importance when trying to understand the ethical violations of child marriage. Most evident of these violations is the inability of children to have a voice in this issue or to make choices for their future when they are married off at such a young age.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, provides further support for this assessment. Article 16 of the UDHR states: “Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.”<sup>6</sup> Child marriage is once more an ethical violation of this right as children are unable to give free and full consent to anything, let alone a life-long commitment to another human being.

Furthermore, in 1962, the United Nations passed a Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, which states: “Reaffirming that all States... should take all appropriate measures with a view to abolishing such customs, ancient laws and practices by ensuring, inter alia, complete freedom in the choice of a spouse, eliminating completely child marriages and the betrothal of young girls before the age of puberty.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, goal number five of the sustainable development goals (SDGs), “aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” This once more shows an international acknowledgment of the severity of the issue. However, acknowledgment is not enough and more needs to be done to achieve these goals.

Child marriages place serious restrictions on the ability of young girls to improve upon their lives and to live in safety. They are unlikely to be educated, face higher maternal mortality rates, and are likely to have more children. The fact remains, that this is a completely unnecessary issue that should not exist. When women are not married off, they can have a choice as to the course of their lives and can become contributing members to society. Moreover, if they are educated and enter the workforce, they have the means to help themselves and their countries grow economically. Justifications for marriage, whether legal or cultural, fall short when the lack of ethics becomes evident. Logically, there is no sound reason to continue to marry off young girls.

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<sup>5</sup> Markkula Center (2009), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations (1948).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations (1964).

Another ethical approach that is relevant to the issue of child marriage is the fairness or justice approach. According to the Markkula Center, the fairness or justice approach is one where “ethical actions treat all human beings equally-or if unequally, then fairly based on some standard that is defensible.”<sup>8</sup> This article aims to propose education as a means to avoid child marriage and enhance the lives of children, though it also considers child marriages (which typically involve underage girls) preventing girls from getting an education. Given that child marriage typically pulls young girls out of school, child marriage is an ethical violation based on the Fairness or Justice approach, as child marriage discriminates unfairly against girls.

## **V. Discussion**

This discussion section will first look at the continued history and prominence of child marriages in Egypt and Sudan, which will include a review of how legal and cultural factors influence child marriage. Additionally, it will shortly review the closely related and even more ethically wrong tradition of female genital mutilation. Finally, it will discuss the development of women and examine the preventative power and role that education can play in preserving the lives of girls and young women.

### **V.1. Prevalence and History of Child Marriage**

#### ***V.1.a. Legal influence***

To get an overview, Figure 4 provides a world map that color-codes the countries based on the legal age minimums for girls to get married. It shows that there are four countries (Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen) that have no age minimum for girls to get married. About a dozen countries, including Sudan, have the legal minimum for girls to get married at or below 16 years. For example, in Sudan, the minimum legal age for girls to get married is age 10.<sup>9</sup> Some five countries have set the minimum legal age for girls at 17 years, while the large majority of countries have set the minimum legal age for girls at 18 years. In about ten countries, the minimum legal age for girls to get married is 19 years or older.

Given the very low legal limit for girls to get married in Sudan (10 years), Figure 5 shows that child marriage is very high in Sudan and child marriages have become more frequent in Sudan from 1990 to 2006. In 1990, 26.9 percent of women (ages 20-24) in Sudan were married by the age of 18. By 2010 this number had risen to 32.9 percent. Even though it decreased slightly from 2006 to 2010, it is clear that the lack of legal ramifications has resulted in a lack of incentive to abstain from marrying children. This resulted in sustained high levels of child marriages with more than 30 percent of women (ages 20-24) being married before the age of 18.

In Egypt, the minimum legal age of marriage is 18 years old. Unfortunately, this law is often circumvented through the use of an unofficial marriage custom (known as *urfi*), which allows for the marriage of underage girls. As shown in Figure 5, in 1988, 30.5 percent of women in Egypt (ages 20-24) were married by age 18. In 2008, the Egyptian Child Law was enacted, which raised the legal age of marriage to 18.<sup>10</sup> And as shown in Figure 5, the percentage of Egyptian women married by age 18 decreased to 16.6 percent in 2008. However, the percentage has since climbed

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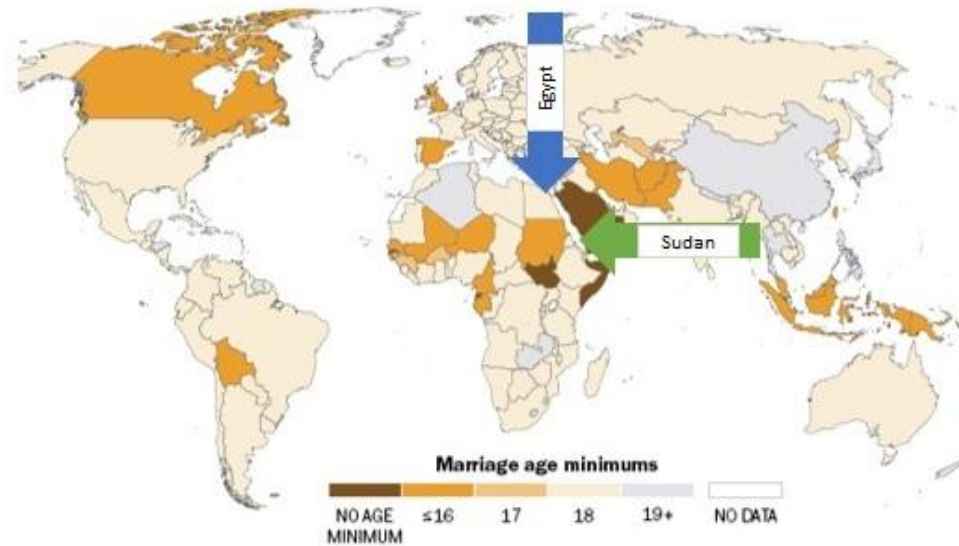
<sup>8</sup> Markkula Center (2009), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Migiros (2013).

<sup>10</sup> The National Council for Childhood & Motherhood Child Rights Observatory (2018).

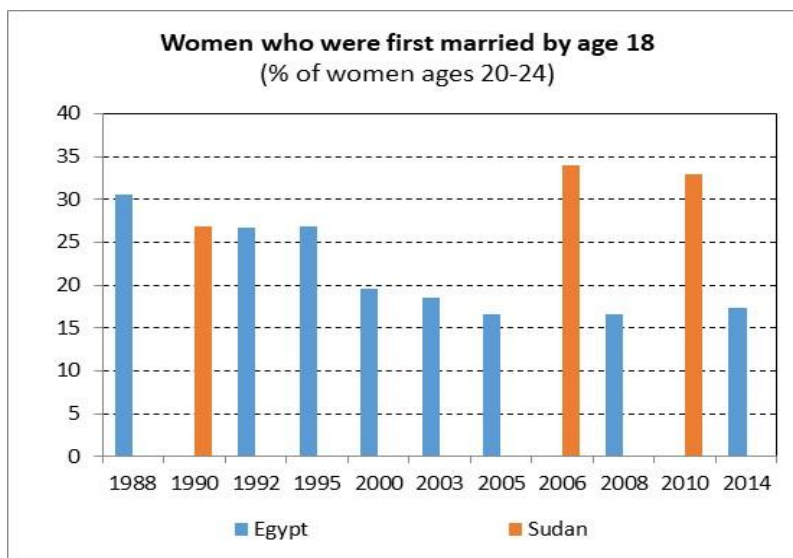
back up to 17.4 percent in 2014, which raises concerns about the execution of these laws. Still, the overall decline in the percentage of child marriages in Egypt is indicative of the success of adopting the law. Comparing Egypt with Sudan, it appears that Sudan struggles more in preventing child marriage. That being said, in absolute numbers (not as a percent of the population), Egypt has the 13<sup>th</sup> highest number of child brides in the world, Sudan has the 16<sup>th</sup> highest number.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 4: Minimum Legal Age for Girls to Get Married around the World**



Source: Pew Research Center (2015), arrows added by author.

**Figure 5: Women Who Were First Married by Age 18 (all available years)**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2018).

<sup>11</sup> This section draws from Girls Not Brides (2002) Egypt and Sudan.

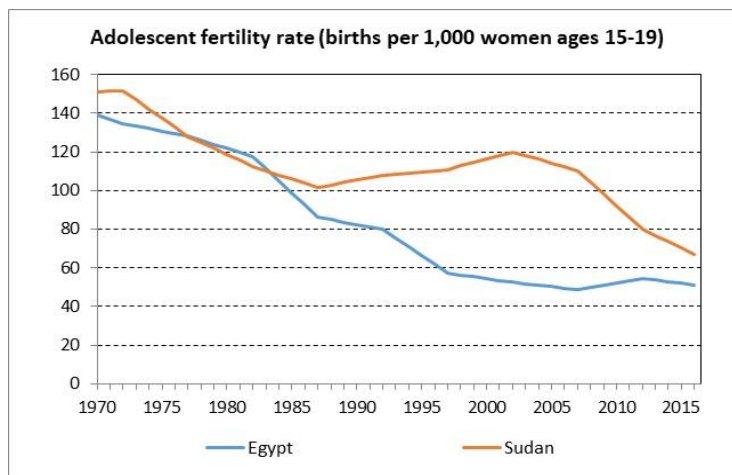
Each nation has taken different preventative measures to proactively address the problem of child marriage. Sudan has done less because child marriage is permitted by law and is therefore not seen as a pressing issue. Internationally, Sudan’s response to legal initiatives has been mixed. Sudan did not ratify the *African Chart on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* due, nor did it ratify the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*. However, in 2015, it launched the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa, and the year before it signed a Charter Committing to End Child Marriage by 2020 at the Girl Summit. Due to Sudan’s inconsistent response, it is unclear if real efforts to end child marriage will be incorporated into Sudanese law or if it is solely an international cooperation front by Sudan.<sup>12</sup>

Egypt ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which set the minimum age for marriage at 18 years. However, as was already mentioned, Egypt only raised the legal age of marriage with the enactment of the Egyptian Child Law in 2008, that is 18 years after ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Egypt also co-sponsored the Human Rights Council *Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage* in 2013.<sup>13</sup> However, as stated above, many families in Egypt continue to circumvent the law, which limits its effectiveness. The question remains, as to whether or not they will put these laws into practice and enforce them.<sup>14</sup>

### V.1.b. Cultural influence

Cultural norms are common and powerful drivers of child marriage in both Egypt and Sudan. Cultural norms of Egypt and Sudan encourage girls to marry young and stigmatize those who try to delay it. Moreover, many customs hold that a girl is ready to marry once she has hit puberty, regardless of her age. There is also a cultural misconception that education is not necessary for girls, because their place is in the home, with the children and the housework, not in society. This leads to a push for them to marry young and learn their household chores rather than “wasting time” being educated.

**Figure 6: Adolescent Fertility Rate, 1970-2016**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Draws on *Girls Not Brides* (2002), Sudan.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations (2013).

<sup>14</sup> Draws on *Girls Not Brides* (2002), Egypt.



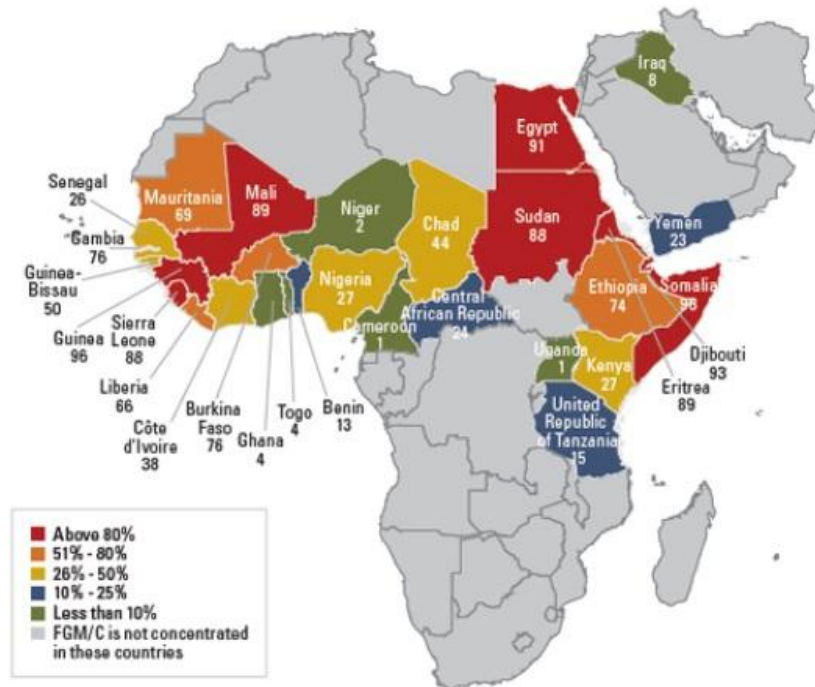
Following the cultural norm to get married early not only raises the rate of child marriages, but also the adolescent fertility rate. Figure 6 shows the adolescent fertility rate in Egypt and Sudan from 1970 to 2016. In 1970, Sudan had an adolescent fertility rate of 151 births per 1,000 women ages 15-19. By 2016, this number had fallen to roughly 67. Egypt started with an adolescent fertility rate of 139 in 1970, which fell to about 51 in 2016. Interestingly, for a brief period between 1977 and 1983, Sudan had a lower rate than Egypt, before it began to climb again.

## V.2. Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting

Another cultural custom that is closely linked to child marriage is female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C). As stated by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2016, p. 1):

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is a human rights issue that affects girls and women worldwide. As such, its elimination is a global concern. In 2012, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a milestone resolution calling on the international community to intensify efforts to end the practice. More recently, in September 2015, the global community agreed to a new set of development goals – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – which includes a target under Goal 5 to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and FGM/C, by the year 2030.

**Figure 7: Percentage of Women (ages 15-49) Who Have Undergone Female Genital Mutilation in Africa**



Source: UNICEF (2013); cited by World Health Organization (undated).

Figure 7 displays the percentage of women ages 15 to 49, who have experienced FGM/C in African countries. Based on Figure 7, the percentage of women aged 15-49, who have undergone female genital mutilation is 91 percent in Egypt and 88 percent in Sudan. More recent data indicates that

in Egypt, the prevalence of FGM/C among girls aged 15 to 19 has decreased from 97 percent in 1985 to 70 percent in 2015.<sup>15</sup> However, the latest data for Sudan indicates that a staggering 89 percent of women have been subjected to the harmful practice of FGM/C in the name of tradition and culture.<sup>16</sup>

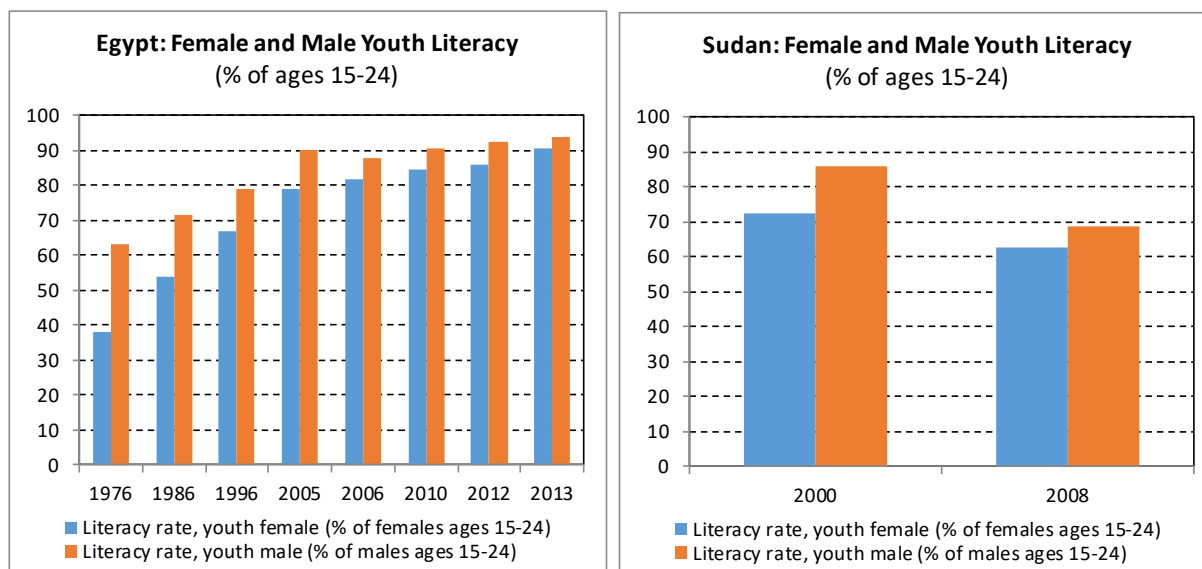
There is a high correlation between the practice of child marriage and FGM/C because the parents who marry off their girls early are typically also the ones who are worried about their girls being sexually active. The correlation between FGM/C and child marriage is a concerning factor, but one that is hard to control, because it is embedded in the culture. For FGM/C to decrease, the people would have to be convinced to stop FGM/C. Legal prosecution might also reduce the official incidence, though may also push the practice to the underground, with more unqualified persons performing it and hence, potentially harming the girls even more.

### V.3. Education and Women’s Development

Figures 8 and 9 represent the female and male youth literacy rate, respectively in Egypt (left figure) and Sudan (right figure). In Egypt, both male and female youth literacy rates have been growing and the gender gap continues to close. In 1976, the male rate was around 63 percent and the female rate 38 percent. By 2013, however, this number rose to almost 94 percent for male youths and a little over 90 percent for female youths. This is encouraging progress, as increased literacy decreases many barriers for women.

Sudan lacks extensive data on literacy rates, but what it does show is concerning. Sudan has begun to close the gender gap, but unfortunately, in the process, both male and female literacy rates fell. In 2000, the rate was roughly 86 percent for males and 72 percent for females. By 2008, however, this had dropped to around 67 percent for males and 63 percent for females.

**Figures 8 and 9: Male and Female Youth Literacy Rate in Egypt and Sudan**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2018).

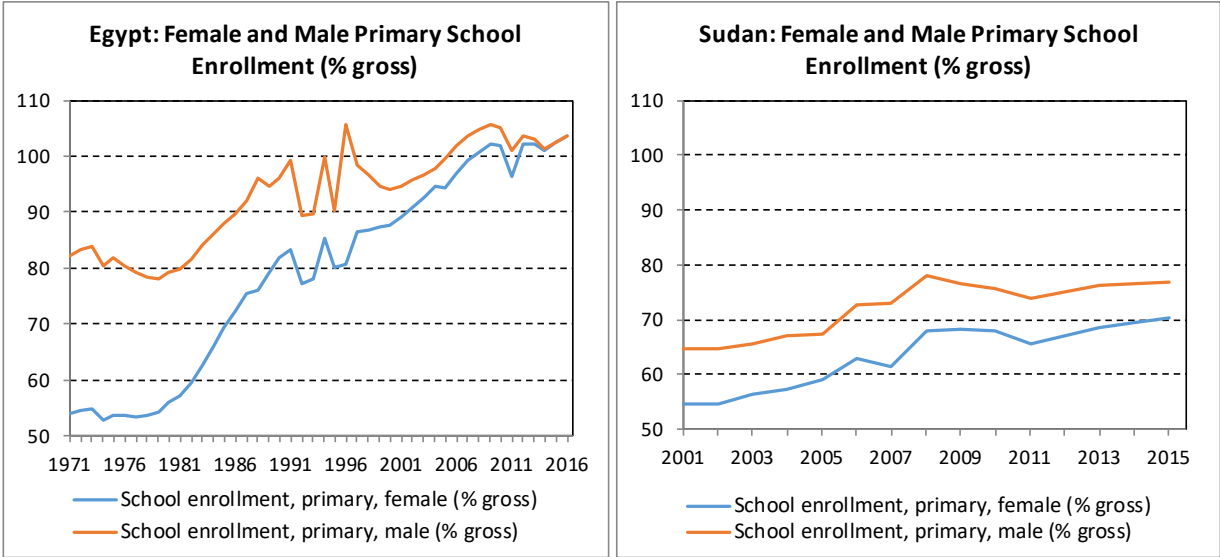
<sup>15</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2016).

<sup>16</sup> El Nagar, Bamkar and Tønnessen (2017), p. 7.

Figures 10 and 11 show gross primary school enrollment by gender, respectively for Egypt and Sudan. Bridging the gender gap here is crucial as it is likely the place where literacy improvements will occur. In Egypt, there was a substantial gender gap in primary enrollment in 1971, with 82 percent of males enrolled in primary school, while only 54 percent of females were enrolled. In 2015, however, this gap is gone completely, with females having reached the same rate (103 percent, gross).

Sudan has a limited data set in comparison to Egypt, only spanning from 2001 to 2015, but it still provides insight into the country’s progress. In 2001, Sudan had a primary gross school enrollment rate of almost 65 percent for males and 55 percent for females, which implies a gender gap of 10 percentage points. By 2015, this number had risen to roughly 77 percent for males and 70 percent for females. While there is still a noticeable gap between genders, it is decreasing. More importantly, despite the gap, the female rate is growing, which will help to increase literacy rates in the future.

**Figures 10 and 11: Female and Male Primary School Enrollment in Egypt and Sudan**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2018).

The implications for the development of women tie very closely to the ethical aspect of child marriage. Given the understanding that education is a right, child marriage is unethical on these grounds. Furthermore, if child marriages increase, literacy rates and educational enrollment will go down, as girls will be unable to educate themselves while married, which is unethical based on the fairness or justice approach. That being said, if education rates continue to increase, they could mean a reduction of child marriage all on their own.

**VI. Conclusion**

This article highlights some of the deep causalities and complications of child marriage in Egypt and Sudan. While both Egypt and Sudan still have high rates of child marriage, there is hope. Egypt’s percentage is decreasing as an increasing number of laws and regulations are being put

into place. Although Sudan's percentage did go up, as the country continues to adopt conventions that support a legal age limit for marriage, there is hope that it will follow Egypt's path.

Nevertheless, child marriage remains a multi-faceted issue that cannot be easily eradicated. That being said, just because it is not easy, does not mean it is not worth combating. The more work that is done to understand the reasons behind child marriage, the more that can be done to end child marriage. More importantly, however, with increased awareness, there is a greater chance of giving young girls agency in their lives and freedom to grow and thrive. The elimination of child marriages will improve the lives of millions of young girls and will have cascading positive effects on society as a whole.

Looking forward, the increasing number of girls that are educated and literate poses the greatest hope for the eradication of child marriage and the development of women. If Sudan and Egypt can continue to bridge the gender gap in education and literacy rates, then these girls are already on the step towards a brighter future. With these tools, they will be enabled to play a greater part in their own lives, enter the workforce, and put off marriage until they are ready. Future projects by these nations should supplement this and focus on the empowerment of the youth. Empowering girls today will dictate how they live their lives, which will change the way marriage is looked at for generations to come.

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