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Conclusion

Child marriage has been shown to have lifetime consequences for girls regarding poor educational, health and economic outcomes, depriving them of fundamental rights and leaving the next generation at a disadvantage.⁵⁴ The issue has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and demands effective and conscious intervention, especially in the poorest countries, which exhibit the highest rates of child marriage. A growing volume of studies are increasingly demonstrating the harmful effects of child marriage on varied aspects of development outcomes.⁵⁵ However, concerted efforts and resources to neutralize the practice remain inadequate across the Arab region. To stimulate efforts towards ending child marriage, the present study presents the economic costs of child marriage and its key mechanisms.

The respective economic costs of child marriage for 13 Arab countries have been estimated from 2001 to 2050. However, the timeline varies for a few countries due to the non-availability of data. The estimated economic cost of child marriage in terms of total GDP and the percentage of GDP lost provide compelling evidence that child marriage induces enormous and exponential economic costs for the Arab region. The GDP lost due to child marriage across 13 Arab countries is estimated at 3.2 per cent for 2021

and projected to be 3 per cent in 2050, with the cumulative GDP loss around \$3 trillion during the forecasted period. Country-wise, Algeria and the Sudan were estimated to lose the highest percentage of GDP due to child marriage in 2021, while Qatar lost the lowest rate of GDP.

On the other hand, in 2050, the Sudan (5.1 per cent), Algeria (4.8 per cent) and Tunisia (4.6 per cent) are projected to lose the highest GDP due to child marriage if the current rate persists. The country-level differentials in the economic costs of child marriage in terms of GDP loss are both due to the level of child marriage and endowment factors such as the quality of health care and the socioeconomic system. It is possible that, despite similar child marriage rates, some countries have managed to control the damage caused by child marriage through better health-care and socioeconomic systems, thus reflected in the lower percentages of GDP loss. And some countries, such as the Sudan, have not experienced a significant difference in demographic and socioeconomic outcomes between females married below 18 years of age and those married at 18 years and above. Thus, economic costs solely attributable to child marriage are relatively less despite having a higher prevalence of child marriage and inferior demographic and socioeconomic outcomes in the country.

At the outset, the study finds that the economic cost of child marriage is substantial across the Arab region. Our estimate (3.1 per cent in 2021 for the Arab region) is slightly on the higher side compared to the 1.05 per cent reported by Mitra and others (2020) in the case of EMDCs and the 1.44 per cent noted by Wodon and others (2017) in the case of South Asian, Middle Eastern and African countries. The higher side estimate from the current study can be attributed to a greater number of components (i.e. direct and indirect costs) considered for the estimation. The estimated economic cost of child marriage in this study accounts for several direct and indirect costs, as shown in the analytical framework (figure 2). The economic cost due to child marriage not only depends on the level of its prevalence but also on the economies of scale and the country's socioeconomic, demographic and health policies.

From a policy perspective, the study suggests that Arab countries can increase their GDP around 3 per cent by eliminating child marriage. It is important to note that the current study does not engage in detailed empirical analyses of all the pathways through which child marriage impacts the economy of a State and intervention strategies to eliminate child marriage because they are widely documented in the existing literature. Along with its conceptual framework, a synthesis of the empirical evidence found in this study in the context of previous literature provides insights into the mechanisms through which child marriage

induces economic costs for a State and also provides possible intervention strategies to overcome this consequence.⁵⁶ The critical mechanisms identified are demographic, social and health implications. Demographic implications comprise unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions that alter future growth, survival and/or reproduction.⁵⁷ Social implications include the loss of educational attainment by girls who are married as children, which eventually harms the exercise of their basic rights, agency, decision-making ability, earning prospects, community support and empowerment in general.⁵⁸ Health implications include the high fertility rates of females marrying early and higher maternal morbidity and mortality rates.⁵⁹ These implications, endured by girls who marry early, might be direct or indirect, as well as monetary or non-monetary, for individuals and households and are cumulated at the State level.⁶⁰

In conclusion, the present study advances the suggestions put forward by Asha George and others (2020) that eliminating child marriage also requires addressing the structural determinants of gender inequality. The sooner a Government acts to eradicate child marriage, the greater the economic savings. Although the financial costs should not be the only reason for investing in the end of this practice, it certainly is a paramount concern. Arab countries must strengthen their social, economic, population and health policies to ensure greater gender equality in education, health and labour market outcomes. Moreover, financing to eliminate child marriage ensures human rights.