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WAYS TO IMPROVE SOCIAL WORK TO REDUCE EARLY MARRIAGE IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: This article examines how social work can help reduce the risk of early marriage in Uzbekistan and identifies practical ways to strengthen prevention. Early marriage is approached not merely as an issue of legal age, but as a complex social concern associated with school disengagement, economic dependency, gender inequality, family and community pressure, limited knowledge of reproductive health, and barriers to protective services. The study draws on a review of national legal provisions and international guidance, a systems perspective, and conceptual analysis of social work practice. It argues that prevention should be coordinated across schools, mahalla institutions, healthcare providers, employment services, and agencies supporting young people and women. Recommendations include early risk identification, case management, family counselling, legal-literacy activities, support for continued education, confidential referral pathways, and outcome monitoring. The article is an analytical review of legal and practice frameworks; it does not claim to report original survey findings.
Keywords: Early marriage, social work, prevention, case management, gender equality, legal literacy, school retention, mahalla, inter-agency cooperation, child rights.

O'ZBEKISTON SHAROITIDA ERTA TURMUSH QURISHNI KAMAYTIRISHDA IJTIMOIY ISHNI TAKOMILLASHTIRISH YO'LLARI

Annotatsiya: Maqolada O'zbekiston sharoitida erta turmush qurish xavfini kamaytirishda ijtimoiy ish tizimining imkoniyatlari, mavjud muammolari va uni takomillashtirish yo'llari tahlil qilinadi. Erta turmush faqat nikoh yoshiga oid masala emas, balki ta'limdan uzilish, iqtisodiy qaramlik, gender tengsizligi, oilaviy va jamoaviy bosim, reproduktiv salomatlik bo'yicha bilimlarning yetarli emasligi hamda himoya xizmatlaridan foydalanishdagi to'siqlar bilan bog'liq murakkab ijtimoiy hodisa sifatida ko'rib chiqiladi. Tadqiqotda normativ-huquqiy hujjatlar va xalqaro tashkilotlar tavsiyalarini tahlil qilish, tizimli yondashuv hamda ijtimoiy ish amaliyotiga oid konseptual tahlil usullaridan foydalanildi. Natijalar profilaktik ishni maktab, mahalla, sog'liqni saqlash, bandlik, yoshlar va xotin-qizlarni qo'llab-quvvatlash tuzilmalari hamkorligida olib borish zarurligini ko'rsatadi. Maqolada individual holatni boshqarish (case management), xavfni erta aniqlash, oilalar bilan maslahatlashuv, huquqiy savodxonlik, ta'limda qolishni qo'llab-quvvatlash va natijalarni monitoring qilish bo'yicha takliflar ishlab chiqilgan. Maqola empirik so'rov natijalarini emas, mavjud huquqiy asoslar va ilmiy-amaliy yondashuvlarning tahlilini taqdim etadi.
Kalit so'zlar: Erta turmush, erta nikoh, ijtimoiy ish, profilaktika, case management, gender tengligi, huquqiy savodxonlik, ta'limni davom ettirish, mahalla, idoralararo hamkorlik, bola huquqlari.

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ПУТИ СОВЕРШЕНСТВОВАНИЯ СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ РАБОТЫ ПО СНИЖЕНИЮ УРОВНЯ РАННИХ БРАКОВ В УСЛОВИЯХ УЗБЕКИСТАНА

Аннотация: В статье рассматриваются возможности социальной работы по снижению риска ранних браков в условиях Узбекистана, основные проблемы профилактики и направления совершенствования практики. Ранний брак анализируется не только как вопрос возраста вступления в брак, но и как сложное социальное явление, связанное с прекращением образования, экономической зависимостью, гендерным неравенством, давлением семьи и сообщества, недостаточной информированностью о репродуктивном здоровье и ограниченным доступом к защитным услугам. Методологическую основу составили анализ нормативно-правовых документов и рекомендаций международных организаций, системный подход и концептуальный анализ практики социальной работы. Обосновывается необходимость межведомственного взаимодействия школ, махаллей, учреждений здравоохранения, служб занятости и структур поддержки молодежи и женщин. Предлагаются меры по раннему выявлению риска, ведению индивидуального случая (case management), консультированию семей, повышению правовой грамотности, поддержке продолжения образования и мониторингу результатов. Статья представляет аналитический обзор нормативных и научно-практических подходов и не заявляет о проведении самостоятельного эмпирического опроса.

Ключевые слова: Ранний брак, социальная работа, профилактика, ведение случая, гендерное равенство, правовая грамотность, продолжение образования, махалля, межведомственное взаимодействие, права ребёнка.

Introduction. The family is an important social institution that plays a significant role in human socialization, generational continuity, and the development of mutual support relationships. At the same time, marital stability and healthy family relationships depend on the voluntary nature of marriage, the adequate psychosocial preparedness of both parties, legal protection, and access to education and life opportunities. Early marriage, particularly when a minor is involved in marriage or subjected to pressure to marry, may adversely affect an individual's opportunities to pursue education, determine their own future, protect their health, and develop in a safe environment.

Under the Family Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the legal marriage age is set at 18 for both men and women. The Code establishes the voluntary nature of marriage and prohibits coercion into marriage. In exceptional circumstances, where the grounds specified by law exist, the marriage age may be lowered by no more than one year [1]. Therefore, preventive efforts must not only ensure an accurate understanding of the legislation but also place the interests, safety, and free consent of young people at the centre of all interventions.

The factors contributing to early marriage are diverse and include family economic hardship, restrictive attitudes towards girls' education and career choices, social pressure, the desire to escape domestic violence, misconceptions about marriage and parenthood, and the failure of schools or local services to identify warning signs in a timely manner. These factors do not manifest in the same way

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in every family. Consequently, rather than adopting a single measure for everyone, social support should be tailored to the specific circumstances of each case

[2, 3, 4, 5].

Research aim. The aim of the study is to substantiate theoretical and practical approaches to improving social work to reduce the risk of early marriage in the context of Uzbekistan. To achieve this aim, the following research objectives were established: to systematize the social causes of early marriage; to examine the national legal framework; to identify the preventive responsibilities of social work professionals; to propose an interagency cooperation and individual case management model; and to develop practical recommendations and evaluation indicators [3, 4, 6].

The practical significance of the article lies in the potential application of its recommendations to coordinating the activities of mahallas (local community self-governance bodies), educational institutions, social services, healthcare institutions, and organizations working with young people. The proposed approach focuses not on punishment or blaming families, but on early risk identification, explaining legal rights, providing reliable support, and expanding young people's opportunities for education and personal development [6, 8].

Research methodology. The methodological framework of the study is based on the systems approach, the human rights-based approach, the ecological model, and the strengths-based model of social work. The systems approach recognizes that individuals' decisions are not determined solely by personal characteristics; rather, families, peers, educational institutions, mahallas, economic conditions, and public services interact and influence one another. The ecological model facilitates the analysis of the problem at the micro level (the individual and family), mezzo level (schools, mahallas, and communities), and macro level (legislation, social policy, and economic opportunities) [8, 9, 10].

The main research methods include: (1) analysis of regulatory and legal documents; (2) content analysis of recommendations developed by international organizations concerning children's rights and the prevention of early marriage; (3) comparative and conceptual analysis of approaches used in social work practice; and (4) systematization of the relationships between problems, resources, services, and outcomes. The provisions of the Family Code concerning the legal marriage age and the voluntary nature of marriage were adopted as national legal benchmarks. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was examined as an international instrument establishing general principles relating to children's best interests, protection, and right to development [1, 2, 3, 4].

No new surveys, interviews, or statistical calculations were conducted as part of this study. Therefore, the article's conclusions should not be interpreted as measured empirical findings concerning early marriage rates or the effectiveness of services in a particular region. Instead, they represent analytical conclusions based on legal documents, international recommendations, and social work theory. To determine the practical effectiveness of the proposed measures in the future, further research across different regions is recommended, with due regard for confidentiality and ethical requirements [2, 3, 4, 6].

Ethical principles constitute an integral part of the methodology. When working with minors, it is essential to listen to their views, prioritize their safety, protect personal information, avoid judgmental attitudes, and refer them to authorized protection services when necessary. Confidentiality is not absolute: where violence, coercion, or a serious risk is present, appropriate measures must be taken in accordance with applicable legislation and child protection procedures

[2, 6].

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Analysis and results

1. Social factors contributing to early marriage

To reduce early marriage, it is first necessary to distinguish between its underlying causes. The first group comprises economic factors. Low family income, limited opportunities for young people to acquire vocational skills, or the failure to perceive daughters as individuals capable of achieving economic independence may lead families to view early marriage as a way of "solving the problem." In such situations, social workers should not limit their efforts to awareness-raising activities. They should also inform families about available social benefits, educational opportunities, vocational guidance, and employment services, referring them to the relevant services when necessary.

The second group comprises sociocultural factors. Rigid beliefs that "girls should marry early," pressure from relatives, and perceptions of family reputation or tradition may overshadow young people's own wishes. Cultural sensitivity is important; however, it must not be used to justify coercion or restrictions on children's rights. An effective approach involves communicating with parents without stigmatizing families, discussing the long-term benefits of education, and engaging influential community members who can serve as positive role models.

The third group comprises education-related factors. Irregular school attendance, learning difficulties, a lack of safe transportation or educational resources, bullying at school, and limited information about future career opportunities may discourage young people from continuing their education. Disengagement from education can be both a cause and a consequence of early marriage. Therefore, school psychologists, class teachers, and social workers should pay attention to significant changes in attendance, statements about dropping out of school, and signs of family pressure [3, 4, 7].

The fourth group comprises legal and informational factors. When knowledge of the legal marriage age, consent, civil registration, the prohibition of forced marriage, and procedures for seeking assistance is insufficient, young people and their relatives may fail to understand the legal implications of a particular situation. Legal literacy initiatives should not be limited to lectures; they should also incorporate discussions of real-life scenarios, anonymous questions, and reliable referral channels [1, 2, 3].

The fifth group comprises factors related to family conflict and safety. Violence, excessive control, psychological pressure, and domestic conflict may lead some young people to perceive early marriage as a way out of their circumstances. In such cases, simply advising them to "discuss the matter within the family" is insufficient. It is necessary to assess safety, conduct a separate and confidential conversation with the young person, refer them to appropriate services, and develop a safety plan in collaboration with relevant professionals [2, 3, 4, 5].

2. Preventive responsibilities of social work

The first responsibility of social work is universal prevention, which involves developing legal awareness, psychological competencies, and life skills among all young people and families. Age-appropriate activities in schools and mahallas can address healthy relationships, consent, peaceful conflict resolution, gender equality, career choices, financial literacy, and future planning. These activities should target not only girls but also boys, parents, and community leaders [2, 6, 7].

The second responsibility is selective prevention. This approach involves providing additional support to young people who are at risk of disengaging from education, experiencing family or

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economic difficulties, or displaying signs of social isolation or pressure. The presence of a risk factor does not, in itself, mean that early marriage will occur. Therefore, professionals should assess each situation carefully without stigmatizing individuals on the basis of assumptions [3, 4, 6].

The third responsibility is individual protection and service coordination. If a minor is being pressured to enter into marriage, the social worker should separately assess the young person's safety, views, and needs and arrange appropriate assistance in cooperation with authorized organizations. The objective is not merely to postpone marriage, but also to restore opportunities to continue education, live in a safe environment, receive psychological support, and exercise one's rights [2, 6].

The fourth responsibility is working with families. Discussions with parents should be based not on blame or threats, but on informed communication about their child's development, education, health, and future independence. In situations where power is unequally distributed within the family, a joint family discussion may be unsafe. Therefore, the format of communication should be determined on the basis of a risk assessment, taking the young person's consent and best interests into account

[2, 6, 8].The fifth responsibility is mobilizing community resources. Mahalla citizens' assemblies, schools, family polyclinics, youth leaders, officials responsible for women's affairs, non-governmental organizations, and legal aid services should operate as a complementary system. Each organization must understand the limits of its mandate, share information only when necessary, and ensure that individuals seeking assistance are not “lost” between services [6, 8, 10].

3. Case management

Case management is the process of assessing, planning, coordinating, and monitoring assistance for individuals or families with complex needs. This approach is particularly important in reducing the risk of early marriage because the problem often involves several interconnected areas, including education, legal protection, mental health, family relationships, and financial assistance.

The recommended process consists of six stages. The first stage involves receiving a referral and conducting an initial risk assessment. The second stage involves assessing needs through a safe, confidential, and age-appropriate conversation with the individual. The third stage involves developing an individualized support plan with the young person's participation. The fourth stage consists of referring the individual to relevant services and coordinating interventions in consultation with those services. The fifth stage involves regularly monitoring the implementation of the plan. The sixth stage involves evaluating whether the objectives have been achieved and either closing the case or continuing support as necessary.

An individualized plan should include specific, measurable, and time-bound objectives. For example, when a young person is at risk of disengaging from education, the plan may include an attendance plan agreed upon with the school, consultations with a psychologist, information for the family about available social assistance, and a reassessment after a specified period. It would be inappropriate to place the entire responsibility for achieving these objectives on the young person alone. The responsibilities of parents, educational institutions, and service providers must also be clearly defined [6, 8, 10].

The effectiveness of case management also depends on the quality of documentation. Records should be factual, objective, and limited to the information necessary for providing assistance. Assumptions must not be recorded as facts, and confidential information must not be disclosed without justification during general meetings. When working with minors, the storage and transfer of

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information must comply with applicable legislation, organizational procedures, and child protection requirements [2, 6].

4. Improving interagency cooperation

Reducing the risk of early marriage cannot be the sole responsibility of any single organization. Schools can identify changes in attendance and academic performance at an early stage; mahallas can be aware of families' social circumstances and available local resources; the healthcare system can provide age-appropriate counselling and necessary medical services; social services can assess needs and coordinate assistance; and authorized law enforcement and child protection agencies can act within their respective mandates when legal violations or threats to safety arise.

To make cooperation effective in practice, it is recommended that a written referral protocol be developed at the local level. This protocol should specify who must be notified when a risk indicator is identified, who conducts the initial assessment, which situations require urgent protective measures, who receives the information and in what format, and who is responsible for monitoring the subsequent situation of the individual referred to a service. Such a protocol can reduce duplication of responsibilities and prevent gaps in accountability [2, 6, 8].

When individual cases need to be discussed during interagency meetings, information should be disclosed only to the extent necessary to resolve the case. For general prevention and statistical analysis, aggregated data that do not allow individuals to be identified should be used wherever possible. This approach can strengthen trust in services and reduce the likelihood that young people will be afraid to seek assistance [2, 6].

5. Education, career guidance, and economic opportunities

Continuing education is an important protective factor in preventing early marriage. Therefore, when a social worker identifies a risk of disengagement from school, the response should not be limited to monitoring attendance; the underlying causes must also be identified. These may include transportation difficulties, educational expenses, learning challenges, discrimination, family responsibilities, or safety concerns. An appropriate solution should be selected for each identified cause. Where necessary, an individualized plan for returning to or continuing education should be developed in cooperation with the educational institution, family, and social services [3, 4, 7].

Career guidance and financial literacy expand young people's opportunities to plan for the future. Such efforts should consider not only rapid entry into the labour market but also access to quality education, vocational training, and decent working conditions. Where family or community barriers restrict girls' career choices, social workers can listen to their aspirations, engage in constructive dialogue with parents, and provide information about available educational programmes [6, 7, 8].

Financial assistance is not the only means of prevention, but it may be an important form of support for certain families. Social workers should assess family needs and, where appropriate, facilitate referrals to legally available social benefits, financial assistance, vocational education, or employment programmes. Families should not be publicly criticized, nor should young people be coerced into making particular decisions as a condition for receiving assistance [3, 4, 6].

6. Legal literacy and community engagement

Legal literacy initiatives should explain the legal marriage age and the principle of voluntary consent established in the Family Code in clear and accessible language. It should be clearly stated that the legal marriage age is 18 and that, under certain statutory exceptions, an authorized official may reduce it by no more than one year [1]. It is important to explain that this exception does not

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constitute the general rule. It is also necessary to clarify that a religious ceremony and a marriage registered by the state may differ in their legal status, and that the young person's free consent remains a fundamental consideration.

Public awareness campaigns should not rely on intimidation, shaming, or stigmatizing families. Such approaches may encourage people to conceal the problem and discourage young people from seeking help. Effective communication can highlight positive experiences of young people who have continued their education, acquired professional skills, and participated actively in making informed decisions about their lives. It can also emphasize parents' role in supporting their children's future and clearly identify reliable sources of advice and assistance

[3, 4, 7].

Awareness materials should be prepared in Uzbek and, where necessary, in Russian and other local languages, in formats appropriate for different levels of literacy. Short videos, discussions for parents, youth clubs, anonymous question-and-answer sessions, and practical activities in schools can complement one another. Communication materials must not contain inaccurate statistics or unverified claims, nor should they portray particular regions or groups in a stigmatizing manner

[3, 4, 6].

7. Proposed practical model and evaluation of outcomes

Based on the analysis presented in this article, a four-tier prevention model is proposed. The first tier is universal prevention, which involves legal literacy and life-skills education for all students, parents, and community members. The second tier is targeted prevention, which provides additional counselling and referrals to relevant resources for young people at risk of disengaging from education or experiencing family pressure. The third tier is individual intervention, which involves case management and an interagency support plan when complex needs are identified. The fourth tier is protection, which involves a prompt response by authorized services in cases of coercion, violence, or serious risk. When implementing the model, outcomes should not be measured solely by the number of early marriage cases. Although this indicator may be important, it is influenced by multiple factors, and the quality of case registration may vary across regions. It is therefore recommended that additional indicators be used, including the proportion of young people who remain in education or return to school; the time elapsed between risk identification and referral to a service; the degree of implementation of individual support plans; the legal knowledge of young people and parents; service users' perceptions of safety and trust; and the participation of professionals in continuing professional development [2, 3, 4, 6, 8].

The monitoring system should include documentation of the baseline situation, regular reviews, and a final evaluation. Indicators should be established in advance, with the responsible organization and data collection frequency specified for each indicator. Data may be analysed by sex, age group, geographical area, and educational status. However, when there is a risk of identifying individuals within small groups, the data should be aggregated. Monitoring should serve as a mechanism for improving services rather than as an instrument of punishment [6, 8].

In practice, a pilot project could initially be tested in several areas with different socioeconomic conditions. During the pilot phase, the responsibilities of personnel, referral protocols, documentation procedures, and barriers to accessing services should be examined. The model can then be adapted in light of the findings and subsequently expanded in stages. Without measuring the outcomes of the

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pilot project, it would not be scientifically justified to declare the model equally effective across all regions [6, 8, 10].

Conclusion and recommendations

The analysis indicates that legal restrictions alone or one-off awareness-raising activities are insufficient to reduce the risk of early marriage in Uzbekistan. The problem may arise from the intersection of factors related to education, economic opportunities, gender relations, family decision-making, legal awareness, and access to services. Therefore, the social work system should integrate prevention, early identification, family counselling, individualized support, and interagency cooperation.

First, clear, youth-rights-based procedures should be developed at the mahalla and educational institution levels to identify early warning signs. Second, social workers should receive regular professional training in children's rights, the identification of coercion, risk assessment, confidential interviewing, trauma-informed practice, and case management. Third, written referral procedures should be established in every region to coordinate cooperation among educational institutions, healthcare providers, social services, mahallas, and legal assistance services. Fourth, efforts to support young people at risk of disengaging from education should be strengthened, including career guidance and the provision of information about scholarships and available social assistance. Fifth, work with parents and communities should be based on dialogue, trust, and an understanding of the child's best interests rather than blame. Sixth, where a minor is at risk of pressure or violence, safety and protection must take precedence over general awareness-raising activities. Seventh, it is recommended that a monitoring system be introduced to evaluate service effectiveness using indicators such as educational retention, referral response times, implementation of individual support plans, legal literacy, and experiences of accessing services. Eighth, the proposed model should be piloted in stages and refined in accordance with the results of independent evaluation. Ninth, future research should collect qualitative and quantitative data across different regions and examine the perspectives of young people, parents, and professionals in accordance with ethical requirements.

Overall, the most important task of social work in preventing early marriage is not to blame young people or marginalize their families, but to protect young people's rights, preserve their opportunities for education and development, provide families with the support they need, and activate protection mechanisms promptly in situations involving risk. A human rights-based, evidence-informed, and interagency-coordinated approach represents the most appropriate direction for improving the quality of prevention.

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