

Combatting Child Marriage: A Study of Youth-Led Civil Society Initiatives in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines

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Abstract

Numerous initiatives, including one in the Philippines, have been developed around the world to support the demand to end child marriage. Child marriage is widely practiced in indigenous and Muslim communities in the Philippines, but Republic Act No. 11596, known as the "Prohibition of Child Marriage Law," made it illegal in January 2022. Several actors, including youth groups in Muslim Mindanao, are seen as participants in this great success. This study aims to investigate the engagements and contributions of two Bangsamoro youth civil society organizations (CSOs) in this advocacy to recognize youth participation. Also, this study uses an institutional approach to seek and identify the enabling environment for youth participation in their quest to become active agents of positive change. Qualitative approaches are used to collect data from CSO youth members and other key informants. The findings imply that institutionalizing participation venues and the availability of initiatives funded by diverse donors promote robust youth engagement. Respondents also identified community involvement and school-based leadership development as motivators for joining and forming organizations. Networks among Bangsamoro youth groups encourage involvement and provide support in the pursuit of their advocacy. Intergenerational differences, on the other hand, limit youth engagement.

Keywords: Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, CEFM, Youth-led engagement, Civil society organizations, Institutions



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I. INTRODUCTION

Child marriage, a deeply entrenched violation of human rights, continues to cast a shadow on global progress, significantly affecting young girls' futures. This practice curtails their access to education, healthcare, personal autonomy, and opportunities for personal growth, which is not just a social issue but a significant impediment to sustainable development. The United Nations, as early as 1989, recognized the gravity of this issue. Since then, numerous researchers, including Loaiza and Wong¹, Bennett, Meghdadi et al., and Sakharina and Daud² have delved into its intricacies, documenting its widespread prevalence and the profound negative consequences on girls' lives.

Despite the international community's concerted efforts, child marriage remains deeply rooted in certain societal groups. The indigenous and Islamic communities of the Philippines, particularly in the Muslim Mindanao region, serve as a stark example of this challenge. Despite global condemnation, these communities' cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors have allowed child marriage to persist. Recognizing the situation's urgency and the need for local legislative action, the Philippine government took a decisive step. In January 2022, they enacted Republic Act No. 11596, the "Prohibition of Child Marriage Law." While criminalizing child marriage, this legislation also lays down provisions to protect children's fundamental rights, reflecting a holistic approach.³

The Philippines, with its diverse cultural tapestry, presents a unique challenge. Regions like Muslim Mindanao report alarmingly high rates of child marriage, with statistics suggesting that one in every six young females is affected.⁴ Such figures are not just numbers; they represent lost opportunities, curtailed freedoms, and shattered dreams. This practice is a formidable barrier to realizing human rights in the region. The need for a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach has never been more pressing.⁵ The journey to the enactment of Republic Act No. 11596 was not isolated. It was a collaboration of efforts involving NGOs, international institutions, human rights advocates, and policymakers. Their collective endeavor was underpinned by a shared vision: safeguarding children's rights and advancing gender parity.

Amidst this backdrop, a new transformative force has emerged: youth civil society organizations (CSOs). Especially in the Bangsamoro region, these organizations have become the torchbearers of change. With their energy, passion, and unique

¹ Edilberto Sr. Loaiza and Sylvia Wong, 'Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage.' 38(3): 481-500., *Population and Development Review* 38, no. 3 (2012): 481-500.

² Iin Sakharina and Aidir Daud, 'Abolition of Child Marriage Practices in Indonesia According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *Scholars International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 3 (26 June 2020): 202-7.

³ Oyunsai Khan Dendevnorov, 'Passage of "Prohibition of Child Marriage Law" Is a Major Milestone for Child Rights', UNICEF Philippines, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/press-releases/passage-prohibition-child-marriage-law-major-milestone-child-rights>.

⁴ Oxfam Philippines, 'The Future of BARMM: Students Stand Up Against Child Marriage', 2021, <https://philippines.oxfam.org/latest/image-story/future-barmm-students-stand-against-child-marriage>.

⁵ Dendevnorov, 'Passage of "Prohibition of Child Marriage Law" Is a Major Milestone for Child Rights'.

perspectives, young advocates have brought fresh vigor to the fight against child marriage. Their diverse backgrounds, ranging from students to young professionals, have enabled them to approach the issue from various angles, making their advocacy multifaceted and inclusive.⁶ Crucially, there is a pressing need to explore the potential strategy of empowering these young girls or advocates in the BARMM region. Amplifying their roles and voices could bolster advocacy efforts against this practice, providing a more targeted and practical approach. This is the research gap addressed by this investigation despite the extensive data on Child Marriage global trends and prevalence.

This study is anchored on three fundamental objectives. Firstly, it seeks to investigate the advocacy initiatives of Bangsamoro youth CSOs in their fight against child marriage, focusing on understanding their driving motivations, the extent of their active involvement, and the impacts of their endeavors. Secondly, the research aims to dissect the institutional landscape, both formal and informal structures, that either facilitates or impedes youth engagement in the Bangsamoro region, offering a lens into the structural challenges and opportunities these young advocates encounter. Lastly, the study endeavors to contextualize child marriage within the expansive framework of international human rights instruments, analyzing the dynamics of youth engagement and institutions' influential role in molding these interactions.

The implications of this study are multiple. By understanding child marriage within the specific context of indigenous and Muslim communities in the Philippines, the research aims to fill a critical knowledge gap. It underscores the significance of youth-led initiatives, highlighting the factors that drive or hinder their involvement. Furthermore, by delving into the institutional dynamics at play, the study offers invaluable insights that can inform the formulation of targeted, effective strategies to combat child marriage.

This research is not just an academic exercise but a clarion call for change. By spotlighting the advocacy of youth CSOs in the Bangsamoro region, it seeks to amplify their voices, celebrate their contributions, and underscore the power of youth activism. The multi-dimensional theoretical framework provides a foundation, enabling a profound understanding of child marriage and its many facets. As we move forward, the subsequent chapters will delve deeper into the scholarly discourse on child marriage, encompassing a detailed examination of research methodologies, a thorough analysis of findings, and a reflection on this endeavor's broader academic and societal significance.

A. Child Marriage: Global Prevalence, Underlying Drivers, Consequences, and the Pursuit of Human Rights.

Child marriage, a pervasive practice across numerous cultures, has profound implications for young girls' health, well-being, and rights. Often viewed through the

⁶ Kristine Valerio and Anam Parvez Butt, 'Intersecting Injustices: The Links between Social Norms, Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and Violence against Women and Girls', 2020.

prisms of tradition and socio-economic necessity, this issue demands a comprehensive exploration. Drawing from diverse research and literature, this review delves into the multifaceted dimensions of child marriage. We will examine its global prevalence, the intricate determinants, far-reaching consequences, and the collective efforts to combat it, with a spotlight on the Philippines. Furthermore, we will assess its categorization as a human rights violation, emphasizing the urgency of addressing this profoundly entrenched issue.

Child marriage's global footprint is alarmingly expansive, predominantly afflicting low and middle-income nations. UNFPA⁷ paints a grim picture, revealing that one in three girls is coerced into marriage before reaching 18. This statistic underscores the sheer magnitude of the issue and highlights the urgency required to address it. In many of these nations, child marriage is not just a cultural practice but is often seen as a survival strategy, deeply intertwined with socio-economic challenges. Efevbera et al.⁸ augment this narrative, employing high-resolution maps to delineate the prevalence visually. These visual representations are potent tools, spotlighting regions with the highest incidences and aiding targeted interventions. The maps also reveal patterns, indicating areas where the practice has persisted over time and regions where interventions might show positive results. Such comprehensive overviews of global trends are crucial for policymakers, NGOs, and other stakeholders to strategize and prioritize efforts in the fight against child marriage.

The underpinnings of child marriage are intricate, weaving a complex mix of socio-economic, cultural, and gender-related factors. At the forefront of this discourse is the undeniable influence of socio-economic vulnerabilities. Families grappling with the shackles of poverty often perceive early marriages as a financial reprieve to alleviate economic hardships.⁹ Cultural traditions and religious beliefs further cement the practice, with traditional harmful behaviors and varying interpretations of religious tenets playing pivotal roles.¹⁰ Gender dynamics, deeply entrenched in societal structures, further exacerbate the issue, with traditional roles and societal expectations perpetuating child marriages.¹¹

⁷ UNFPA, 'Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage.' (United Nations Population Fund, 2012).

⁸ Yvette Efevbera et al., 'The Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium: Connecting Data and Evidence for Action', *Journal of Adolescent Health* 69, no. 6 (1 December 2021): S4–5.

⁹ Stephanie R. Psaki, Andrea J. Melnikas, and Sajeda Amin, 'What Are the Drivers of Child Marriage? A Conceptual Framework to Guide Policies and Programs', *Journal of Adolescent Health*, The Diversity and Complexity of Child Marriage, 69, no. 6 (1 December 2021): S13–22; Pintu Paul, 'Effects of Education and Poverty on the Prevalence of Girl Child Marriage in India: A District-Level Analysis', *Children and Youth Services Review* 100 (1 May 2019): 16–21; Sana Fatima, 'Rural Development and Education: Critical Strategies for Ending Child Marriages', *Archives of the Social Sciences: A Journal of Collaborative Memory* 1, no. 1 (19 January 2023): 1–15.

¹⁰ Hoko Hori, 'Child Marriage as a "Solution" to Modern Youth in Bali', *Progress in Development Studies* 20, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 282–95; Plan International, Women's Refugee Commission, and Transforming Fragilities, 'Our Voices, Our Future: Understanding Risks and Adaptive Capacities to Prevent and Respond to Child Marriage in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao', *Girls Not Brides*, 2022.

¹¹ Psaki, Melnikas, and Amin, 'What Are the Drivers of Child Marriage? A Conceptual Framework to Guide Policies and Programs'; Plan International, Women's Refugee Commission, and Transforming Fragilities,

The ramifications of child marriage extend beyond the immediate, often having intergenerational consequences. The early onset of childbearing, a common outcome of these unions, poses severe health risks to the mother and the child. Young girls, whose bodies are not yet fully developed, face complications during childbirth, leading to higher maternal and infant mortality rates.¹² Furthermore, children born to young mothers often suffer from malnutrition, stunted growth, and cognitive delays, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and limited opportunities.¹³ Economically, families entrenched in the cycle of child marriage often remain in poverty, as the practice limits women's earning potential, thereby stifling community and national growth.¹⁴ Additionally, the psychological trauma experienced by these young brides, resulting from forced marital obligations and early motherhood, often leads to chronic depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues, further diminishing their quality of life and potential to contribute positively to society.¹⁵

Addressing this deeply rooted issue necessitates a combination of interventions. The prerequisite of these strategies is evidence-based policy formulation. Empirical data should guide interventions, placing adolescent girls at the epicenter of these strategies.¹⁶ Education emerges as a formidable deterrent, with both UNICEF¹⁷ and GirlsNotBrides¹⁸ championing its role. Beyond formal education, skills-based training and awareness programs can empower girls, equipping them with the tools to challenge societal norms and advocate for their rights.¹⁹ Societal transformation is equally pivotal, with societal perceptions and values becoming indispensable.²⁰ Engaging community influencers, such as religious and traditional leaders, can catalyze this transformation, as their endorsement can sway public opinion and challenge entrenched beliefs.²¹ Legislation tailored to cultural and religious nuances forms another cornerstone in this battle.²² However, laws alone are insufficient; their rigorous enforcement and public awareness

'Our Voices, Our Future: Understanding Risks and Adaptive Capacities to Prevent and Respond to Child Marriage in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao'; Annabel Erulkar, 'Changes in the Prevalence of Child Marriage in Ethiopia, 2005–2016', *Reproductive Health* 19, no. 1 (2021): 195.

¹² Richard de Groot et al., 'Child Marriage and Associated Outcomes in Northern Ghana: A Cross-Sectional Study', *BMC Public Health* 18, no. 1 (26 February 2018): 285.

¹³ Jennifer Parsons et al., 'Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: A Review of the Literature', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 3 (3 July 2015): 12–22.

¹⁴ Sanni Yaya et al., 'Effects of Birth Spacing on Adverse Childhood Health Outcomes: Evidence from 34 Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa', *The Journal of Maternal-Fetal & Neonatal Medicine* 34, no. 8 (2019): 1–9.

¹⁵ UNICEF, 'Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice - A Statistical Exploration' (The United Nations Children's Fund, 2005).

¹⁶ GirlsNotBrides, 'Policy Brief on Child Marriage', Girls Not Brides, 2020.

¹⁷ UNICEF, 'Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice - A Statistical Exploration'.

¹⁸ GirlsNotBrides, 'Policy Brief on Child Marriage'.

¹⁹ Horii, 'Child Marriage as a "Solution" to Modern Youth in Bali'.

²⁰ GirlsNotBrides, 'Policy Brief on Child Marriage'; Plan International, Women's Refugee Commission, and Transforming Fragilities, 'Our Voices, Our Future: Understanding Risks and Adaptive Capacities to Prevent and Respond to Child Marriage in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao'.

²¹ Erulkar, 'Changes in the Prevalence of Child Marriage in Ethiopia, 2005–2016'.

²² GirlsNotBrides, 'Policy Brief on Child Marriage'; J.M. Muslimin and Rahmatul Ummah, 'Comparative Analysis of Marriage Age Provisions: Family Code of the Philippines vs. Code of Muslim Personal Laws', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2022.

campaigns are crucial to ensure compliance and societal acceptance.²³ Community interventions adapted to regional disparities further fortify these efforts, ensuring strategies resonate with local contexts and address unique challenges.²⁴

Child Marriage as a Human Rights Violation. The practice of child marriage transcends mere tradition, emerging as a profound violation of fundamental human rights.²⁵ The societal devaluation of girls, coupled with gender inequality, perpetuates this violation.²⁶ The health implications, especially reproductive health, further underscore its gravity.²⁷ International conventions, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, emphasize the need to combat child marriage to safeguard girls' rights.²⁸ Horii²⁹ further contextualizes child marriage within a spectrum of intersecting human rights issues, such as violence against women and traditional harmful behaviors. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also implicitly condemns child marriage, asserting the right to free and full consent in marriage. These international stances highlight the global consensus on the urgency to eradicate this practice and uphold the dignity and rights of every child.

The existing literature predominantly addresses child marriage's prevalence, causes, and effects, emphasizing socio-economic, cultural, and health aspects. However, a noticeable gap exists concerning youth empowerment and its active role in countering child marriage. This oversight is significant. As direct victims, youth offer unique insights from their experiences, making them invaluable in shaping interventions. By empowering them, we enable them to challenge societal norms and transform them into change agents. The current study emphasizes youth empowerment in the fight against child marriage, underscoring its importance in preserving human rights.

Framework of Analysis. The advocacy efforts of the two Bangsamoro youth civil society organizations (CSOs) in ending CEFM (child, early, and forced marriage) are best understood through an institutionalist lens. Institutions, conceptualized as humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction, play a pivotal role in determining the behavior of actors and the subsequent political outcomes, as highlighted

²³ Sakharina and Daud, 'Abolition of Child Marriage Practices in Indonesia According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child'.

²⁴ Anita Raj, Lotus McDougal, and Melanie L A Rusch, 'Changes in Prevalence of Girl Child Marriage in South Asia', *Journal of the American Medical Association* 307, no. 19 (16 May 2012): 2027–29.

²⁵ Anwar M. Nawawi et al., 'Harmonization of Islam and Human Rights: Judges' Legal Arguments in Rejecting Child Marriage Dispensation in Sukadana, Indonesia', *Journal of Legal Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022): 45–60.

²⁶ Parsons et al., 'Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: A Review of the Literature'.

²⁷ de Groot et al., 'Child Marriage and Associated Outcomes in Northern Ghana: A Cross-Sectional Study'; Yaya et al., 'Effects of Birth Spacing on Adverse Childhood Health Outcomes: Evidence from 34 Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa'.

²⁸ Sakharina and Daud, 'Abolition of Child Marriage Practices in Indonesia According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child'; Loaiza and Wong, 'Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage.' 38(3): 481-500.'

²⁹ Horii, 'Child Marriage as a "Solution" to Modern Youth in Bali'.

by North³⁰, Peters, and Schmidt³¹. The endeavors of these youth organizations may be deeply influenced by the sociopolitical landscape, which encompasses political structures, power dynamics, governance systems, and policies. These elements delineate the roles and influence of CSOs, and legal frameworks, political ideologies, and interactions with government institutions further mold their engagement. As Arvidson et al.³² emphasize, CSOs often face challenges in voicing criticism due to financial, organizational, and institutional factors, potentially compromising their advocacy strategies.

The cultural milieu of the Bangsamoro region significantly impacts the efforts of CSOs. Their efficacy hinges on a profound understanding of the cultural norms, beliefs, traditions, and identities of the communities they serve. CSOs must align its strategies and messaging with these cultural values to ensure effective communication and resonance. Economic factors also play a crucial role in determining CSOs' capacity to promote their regional advocacy. This includes understanding the economic landscape, resource allocation, livelihood opportunities, and community disparities. Economic conditions influence CSOs' resource mobilization and sustainability, making addressing economic disparities and fostering sustainable livelihoods integral to their peacebuilding initiatives.

The formal institutional backdrop, which includes legal regulations and official structures, dictates the operational environment for CSOs. Palihovic³³ emphasizes the importance of dialogue and cooperation between public authorities and CSOs, which various social, economic, and political factors can influence. Additionally, informal institutions, comprising norms, customs, and societal expectations, are pivotal in shaping CSOs' efforts. The intricate interplay of these institutional domains—sociopolitical, cultural, economic, formal, and informal—determines the successes and challenges CSOs face in their advocacy. By navigating these institutional dynamics adeptly, successful CSOs can capitalize on opportunities and navigate challenges. Their ability to align their objectives and strategies with the institutional context is crucial for effecting positive change.

³⁰ Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³¹ Vivien Schmidt, 'Institutionalism', in *The State: Theories and Issues*, ed. Colin Hay, Michael Lister, and David Marsh, Political Analysis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 98–117.

³² Malin Arvidson, Håkan Johansson, and Roberto Scaramuzzino, 'Advocacy Compromised: How Financial, Organizational and Institutional Factors Shape Advocacy Strategies of Civil Society Organizations', *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 29, no. 4 (1 August 2018): 844–56.

³³ Liliana Palihovici, 'Tendencies of Developing Dialogue between Public Administration and Civil Society Organizations in the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Armenia', *Moldoscopia* 3, no. 94 (February 2022): 82–104.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research approach, selected for its depth and capacity to elucidate the complex dynamics of child marriage advocacy within the indigenous and Muslim communities of the Philippines. Using this approach, the researcher aimed to understand the lived experiences deeply, challenges, and strategies of youth organizations actively opposing child marriage. The primary data collection focused on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members from two key organizations: the Maguindanao Alliance of Youth Advocates and the Linding Ko Kalombayan, also known as the Lanao Initiative and Network for the Development of Innovative Growth for the Youth. Both organizations, affiliated with OXFAM's "Creating Spaces" program were chosen for their active roles and locations.

For a well-rounded perspective, the researcher also conducted Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with various stakeholders, including government officials from child marriage-centric agencies, representatives from different non-governmental organizations and donor agencies, and local community and religious leaders from the target communities. Along with individual interviews, focus group discussions were organized, essential in capturing collective viewpoints and fostering in-depth dialogues among participants. These discussions helped reveal common challenges, strategies, and community-specific details.

Besides primary data sources, the researcher examined secondary data, including video presentations, brochures, social media content, and academic articles. This combination of primary and secondary data provided a comprehensive view of the advocacy landscape. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. Each participant received detailed information about the study's objectives and their role. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring participants knew their rights, including confidentiality assurance and the option to withdraw at any point. All data was carefully anonymized to protect participants' identities.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unique challenges, leading the researcher to conduct interviews online using Zoom and Google Meet. Participants received necessary technological assistance in these cases and reaffirmed their consent for the online format. After data collection, the researcher undertook a detailed thematic analysis of the qualitative data, which included manual coding, identifying patterns, and grouping these patterns into broader themes. This illuminated youth organizations' advocacy strategies, challenges, and successes in their fight against child marriage.

III. CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE PHILIPPINES: CULTURAL COMPLEXITIES, ADVOCACY EFFORTS, AND THE PATH TO ERADICATION

The practice of marrying off children without consent has long persisted, particularly in regions like the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), where traditional customs and religious beliefs often intersect with the rights of young girls.

While exact prevalence rates of child marriage in the Philippines are challenging to determine due to data limitations, especially in BARMM³⁴, the underlying factors driving this practice are discernible. The Presidential Decree 1083, or the Code of Muslim Personal Laws, has been a significant legal instrument that allowed marriage among Muslims at puberty, creating a stark contrast with the Family Code of the Philippines, which sets the legal marriage age at 18 for non-Muslims³⁵. This divergence underscores the complexities of harmonizing religious beliefs with national laws, highlighting the challenges in formulating universally applicable regulations.

The fight against child marriage in the Philippines has been multifaceted, involving grassroots movements, advocacy campaigns, and legislative reforms. Prominent among these initiatives is the "Creating Spaces to Take Action on Violence Against Women and Girls" project, initiated by Oxfam, aimed to address the deeply entrenched issues of VAWC (violence against women and children) and CEFM (child early and forced marriage). Spanning five years (2016–2021) and extending across six countries, this Oxfam-led initiative sought to shift societal and behavioral norms. The project's focus in the Philippines was amplified by collaborations with key partners like the Al-Mujadilah Women's Association (AMWA) and the United Youth of the Philippines – Women (UnYPhil). Together, they employed strategies ranging from media campaigns to legislative lobbying. A notable outcome was the emergence of the Maguindanao Alliance of Youth Advocates (MAYA), with the project's support, championed the cause, leveraging platforms like social media and radio to raise awareness, especially in conflict-affected areas of Maguindanao. The project's holistic approach, combined with the relentless efforts of organizations like MAYA, underscores the potential for transformative change in societal norms.³⁶ In Lanao del Sur, the Al-Mujadillah Women's Association has harnessed the dedication of volunteers and skilled students, utilizing their training in various workshops and symposiums. These individuals have taken on the crucial role of being the "front liners" of AMWA's initiatives. Over time, they united to establish the "Linding Ko Kalombayan" group, which translates to "Protectors of the Youth." This collective effort ensures the continuity

³⁴ Plan International, Women's Refugee Commission, and Transforming Fragilities, 'Our Voices, Our Future: Understanding Risks and Adaptive Capacities to Prevent and Respond to Child Marriage in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao'.

³⁵ Muslimin and Ummah, 'Comparative Analysis of Marriage Age Provisions: Family Code of the Philippines vs. Code of Muslim Personal Laws'.

³⁶ Oxfam Philippines, 'The Future of BARMM: Students Stand Up Against Child Marriage'.

of their advocacies and underscores their commitment to safeguarding the welfare of the younger generation.

In January 2022, a significant stride was made with the enactment of Republic Act No. 11596, which criminalizes child marriage and punishes anyone encouraging or forcing such unions. This legislation establishes a legal framework to protect the rights of young girls and boys from being coerced into early marriages. The law's passage marked a substantial step towards aligning the country's legal framework with international human rights standards, ensuring the protection and well-being of children, irrespective of religious or cultural backgrounds.³⁷

The Republic Act 11596, while criminalizing those who violate its provisions against child marriage, is only an initial step in addressing the deeply rooted issue and highlighting the need for further actions to challenge the cultural biases and stereotypes perpetuating child marriage. While the new law mandates the Department of Education to create a sexual education curriculum and other government agencies to raise awareness, there is a clear indication that more comprehensive efforts are required.³⁸ This achievement underscores the importance of the work done by youth organizations like MAYA and LKK, as they play a crucial role in filling the gaps, raising awareness, and supporting victims. Their efforts become even more vital in ensuring the holistic implementation of the law and genuinely eradicating child marriage in the Philippines.

A. Dynamics of Youth Advocacy Against Child Marriage in Bangsamoro: Motives, Approaches and Strategies, and Impacts of Maguindanao Alliance of Youth Advocates and Linding Ko Kalombayan.

The Bangsamoro region, renowned for its rich socio-cultural traditions, has become a beacon for youth-led initiatives against child marriage. Two organizations, Linding Ko Kalombayan (LKK) and Maguindanao Alliance of Youth Advocates (MAYA), stand out as champions in this advocacy. This analysis delves deeper into their motivations, strategies, impacts, and how their efforts align with broader literature on youth CSOs in various advocacy domains.

1. *Motivations for Engagement.* LKK's advocacy is deeply personal. In a focus group discussion, the members shared transformative stories, evolving from passive observers to fervent advocates.

"I genuinely had no prior knowledge about the topic. My friend suggested we attend the discussion since we didn't have any class at that time. I went in without any expectations or understanding of the issue. However, by the end of the seminar, I had an epiphany. I realized that this issue was never taught to me before and was a normalized situation in my community. It saddened me to recognize that such practices, which have detrimental

³⁷ Republic of the Philippines, 'Republic Act No. 11596: Prohibition of Child Marriage Law', Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2022, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2021/12dec/20211210-RA-11596-RRD.pdf>.

³⁸ Center for Reproductive Rights, 'Victory for Children's Rights: Ending Child Marriage in the Philippines', 13 January 2022, <https://reproductiverights.org/philippines-criminalizes-child-marriage/>.

effects on children, including early marriages, were so ingrained in our culture. It was at this seminar that I first learned about VAWC and CEFM."³⁹

Another respondent recounted her experience of attending a school-sponsored symposium on child marriage.

*"The school chose me to represent them at this event, and I felt like at the beginning, I was like an 'empty bottle.' However, by the end of the training, I felt enlightened and informed. The topic hit close to home because some of my aunts were married off at a young age. I understood that these early marriages in my family were driven by political motives, aiming to expand our family's influence. This realization made me question: Should I wait until I become a victim of this practice?"*⁴⁰

These narratives serve as a testament to the power of personal experiences in driving change. These member's journey from ignorance to enlightenment post-training, underscores the profound influence of education and awareness.

MAYA, while also rooted in personal experiences, extends its motivations to address broader societal implications of child marriage. The advocates are united by a fervent commitment to amplify the voices of the voiceless youth, particularly those entangled in early marriages. To this effect, one member stated,

*"I joined the advocacy because I want to be the voice of voiceless young people since I know a lot of young people who get married at a very young age including my friends and cousins."*⁴¹

Rooted in empathy and shared experiences, their mission extends beyond personal growth, striving for a brighter future fueled by education. Another advocate emphasized,

*"I also want my fellow youth to have a bright future ahead of them because I know that as a young girl there's many youth out there who wants to finish their studies and to have a better future."*⁴²

The advocates comprehend the societal reverberations of premature unions, witnessing peers forfeit education and youth. One voiced, "Seeing my fellow youth marrying early is painful because seeing them disrupt their growth and development, seeing them drop out of school, is a different kind of pain as a youth advocate."⁴³ They adamantly believe that by challenging child marriage's grasp, they bolster not only individual aspirations but the very foundation of their nation's prospects.

2. *Approaches and Strategies.* The collaborative approach lies at the heart of MAYA's and LKK's endeavor to combat child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM). Strengthened by partnerships with key organizations like the United Youth of the Philippines-Women and Al-Mujadillah Women Association (AMWA), which are adult partners of

³⁹ FGD, LKK members, July 21, 2023

⁴⁰ FGD, LKK members, July 21, 2023

⁴¹ Maya Stories, video presentation.

⁴² Maya Stories, video presentation.

⁴³ Maya Stories, video presentation.

OXFAM's Creating Spaces Projects, their efforts have transcended individual initiatives. These partnerships furnish essential training in CEFM awareness and engender a multifaceted advocacy approach. Armed with insights from their partners, the youth respondents have effectively expanded their outreach to even the most inaccessible communities. This strategy hinges on community-level engagement, employing seminars and CEFM sessions to disseminate insights about its root causes and consequences.⁴⁴

Central to LKK's and Maya's grassroots strategy are house-to-house visits and dialogues. This method ensures that their advocacy resonates deeply within communities. These youth advocates challenge ingrained beliefs by directly interacting with families and fostering intimate conversations about CEFM and VAWC (Violence Against Women and Children). Their dedication to grassroots involvement is amplified by well-executed public communication campaigns, which have tangibly shifted community perceptions.⁴⁵

Their collaboration also finds meaningful expression within educational institutions. Combined efforts have incorporated discussions concerning child marriage into school flag ceremonies. Spearheaded by youth advocates, these discussions aim to raise awareness among peers. Symposia hosted within schools further amplify the comprehension of CEFM's ramifications, reaching a broader audience and solidifying the collaborative strategy as a potent weapon against this social dilemma. This underlines their belief in education's transformative potential. By targeting educational institutions, MAYA seeks to mold perspectives from a tender age.

The symbiotic alliances between MAYA, LKKs, UNYPhil-Women, AMWA, and the Philippine Legislator's Committee on Population and Development (PLCPD) epitomize how collective action magnifies the efficacy of addressing societal quandaries. Their joint endeavors illuminate the potential of united efforts to propel change, expand awareness, and nurture a conducive environment for positive transformation.⁴⁶

Facilitating peer-to-peer conversations within MAYA and LKK's advocacy campaigns has proven exceptionally effective. This approach capitalizes on youth's innate understanding and relatability when communicating with their peers. These dialogues unfold within a space where the youth feel at ease and empowered to share their thoughts and concerns candidly. One young advocate aptly stated, "Conversations among youth foster an atmosphere where ideas flow freely without the perceived constraints that might arise in discussions with elders. This encourages

⁴⁴ Maya Stories, video presentation. FGD, LKK members, July 21, 2023

⁴⁵ Maya Stories, video presentation. FGD, LKK members, July 21, 2023, Interview with MAYA members, December 28, 2021

⁴⁶ Oxfam Philippines. (2021, October 8). The Future of BARMM: Students stand up against child marriage. Retrieved from <https://philippines.oxfam.org/latest/image-story/future-barmm-students-stand-against-child-marriage>

an unreserved exchange of perspectives and a more comprehensive exploration of the issue."⁴⁷

A profound sense of ownership and relevance emerges for the youth in these conversations. They acknowledge that the challenges tackled are not exclusive to the older generation; these issues directly impact their lives and future prospects. This realization fuels a sense of investment and urgency, motivating the youth to seek solutions and actively advocate for change. Furthermore, as young people are more likely to understand the intricacies of each other's experiences, peer-to-peer conversations inherently cultivate empathy and understanding.

MAYA and LKK have harnessed this dynamic by integrating peer-led discussions, seminars, and symposiums into their strategy. Through these initiatives, they have empowered youth to voice their concerns and spearhead awareness dissemination. This approach magnifies the impact of the advocacy, generating a ripple effect as informed and impassioned youth advocates involve their peers. The peer-to-peer approach embodies the concept that youth are not merely recipients of change but active agents propelling it forward. This results in a more engaged and unified movement for positive societal transformation.

The collaborative endeavors of MAYA and LKKs, supported by robust partnerships and innovative strategies, exemplify how working together can effectively address multifaceted societal challenges. By blending grassroots engagement, educational initiatives, and peer-to-peer interactions, they have disseminated awareness and nurtured a generation of empowered advocates committed to driving positive change. This collaborative approach showcases the remarkable impact that collective action can have on fostering a more enlightened and compassionate society.

3. *The Impacts of Youth Advocacy.* The impacts stemming from the advocacy efforts spearheaded by MAYA and LKK are profound, manifesting across personal and community realms and encompassing tangible and intangible changes. These impacts radiate in ways that underscore the remarkable influence of their endeavors.

Within the members of MAYA and LKK, a remarkable journey of personal growth unfolds as a direct consequence of their advocacy involvement. Their experience transcends mere education about child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM), fostering an intrinsic sense of purpose and direction. The advocacy serves as a crucible, igniting an impassioned drive within them to become active catalysts of transformation. One poignant testament to this transformation lies in the words of an LKK member, who shares that their participation in the movement has illuminated a clear path, enabling them to champion the rights of young girls and pave the way for a more promising future. This sense of purpose, in turn, bestows upon them a

⁴⁷ FGD, LKK members, July 21, 2023

newfound confidence and empowerment, equipping them to address audiences, navigate complex issues, and emerge as resilient advocates.⁴⁸

The resonance of the advocacy extends beyond quantifiable outcomes, encapsulating profound intangible shifts that carry immense significance. The heightened sense of ownership and relevance among the youth becomes palpable. They acknowledge that the issues under scrutiny are not confined to an older generation but rather intricately intertwine with their own lives and aspirations. This realization kindles an intensified investment, a sense of urgency, and a heightened engagement in seeking viable solutions and propelling the cause for change.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the advocacy sets in motion a cultural evolution, transforming the discourse around CEFM from silence to a vivid and active dialogue. The voices of the youth, once relegated to the periphery, rise to prominence within these conversations. This intangible shift signifies a seismic change in societal perspectives and priorities.

On a community level, the reverberations of the advocacy's impact manifest concretely in perception and policy shifts. Once cloaked in taboo, child marriage now assumes the role of an openly discussed topic within the Bangsamoro region. The unrelenting determination of MAYA and LKK has ushered in a heightened awareness regarding CEFM, prompting forthright dialogues regarding its adverse ramifications. This shift in mindset finds reinforcement in tangible policy transformations, exemplified by the successful enactment of a law in 2022 that unequivocally prohibits early child marriage. This legislative milestone stands as a testament to the potency of advocacy in influencing legal frameworks, thereby safeguarding the rights and well-being of the young population.⁵⁰

The ripples of the advocacy extend further to encompass societal empowerment and the nurturing of empathy. Youth advocates, rising as leaders and exemplars, effectively debunk the notion that age hinders impactful change. Through their endeavors, they recognize their voices' resonance and collective strength. Moreover, the advocacy fosters an enriched tapestry of empathy within the youth demographic. A more profound comprehension of one another's experiences and challenges drives home the reality that these issues are collectively borne. This burgeoning empathy solidifies a unified front against CEFM, bolstering collective determination for transformation.

LKK and MAYA's advocacy in the Bangsamoro region exemplifies the potent impact of youth engagement in public advocacy, bolstering prevailing research on youth-led Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The emphasis on personal narratives and grassroots strategies underscores the unique influence of youth voices, bridging traditional norms with the rights of young girls. Their use of peer-to-peer

⁴⁸ FGD, LKK members, July 21, 2023

⁴⁹ Maya Stories, video presentation. FGD, LKK members, July 21, 2023, Interview with MAYA members, December 28, 2021

⁵⁰ Oxfam Philippines. (2021, October 8). The Future of BARMM: Students stand up against child marriage. Retrieved from <https://philippines.oxfam.org/latest/image-story/future-barmm-students-stand-against-child-marriage>

communication is particularly striking, forging trust and receptivity through intimate dialogues during house-to-house visits and school engagements. This approach challenges deep-rooted beliefs and exemplifies the role of peer influencers in shifting community perceptions, a concept well-supported in advocacy literature. Their adept integration of communication tools, collaboration with key entities, and school engagements align with broader advocacy principles, underscoring the power of multifaceted communication. These strategies hold implications for future youth-led advocacy efforts, presenting a blueprint for CSOs and highlighting adaptability's value. Ultimately, LKK and MAYA's advocacy underscores the transformative potential of youth-driven advocacy in addressing societal challenges like child, early, and forced marriage, serving as a beacon for change on a broader scale.

B. Navigating The Institutional Terrain: Opportunities And Obstacles For Youth Advocacy In The Bangsamoro Region

In the Bangsamoro region, youth-led Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) such as MAYA and LKK embark on a crucial journey of advocacy against issues like child marriage. The region's institutional dynamics, spanning legal, political, socio-cultural, economic, and networking dimensions, shape the potential opportunities and obstacles these young activists encounter along their quest for change.

1. *Legal and Formal Institutional Frameworks:* A transformative development within this multifaceted landscape is the enactment of the Bangsamoro Youth Act on February 28, 2020. This legislation affirms youth's freedom of expression and association, recognizing their pivotal role in nation-building. Moreover, the Bangsamoro Youth Commission (BYC) is a pivotal platform for engaging youth in productive endeavors. This commission serves as a conduit for CSOs and individuals to channel their energies toward constructive change. The Bangsamoro Young Leaders Program, a brainchild of BYC, stands as a testament to this collaboration, fortified by financial support from the Ayala Foundation and the Australian Embassy. These partnerships eloquently convey the institutional eagerness to invest in youth-driven initiatives.

Formal institutions like schools emerge as crucibles for nurturing tomorrow's leaders. Within these educational bastions, the seeds of change against child marriage are sown. Schools, acting as agents of socialization, cultivate values and mold behaviors. As alarming cases of child marriage find their way into the open, schools become pivotal hubs for collecting critical information. Education equips youth with the tools to challenge societal norms and contribute to dismantling harmful practices. This harmonious alignment between education and advocacy underscores a symbiotic relationship where formal institutions become catalysts for change.

2. *Political Landscape:* The political landscape casts a long shadow on advocacy endeavors. The Marawi siege's aftermath shed light on Moro youth's susceptibility to radicalization and labels. Against this backdrop, CSOs are crucial in dispelling stereotypes through accurate information. This provides a platform for young

activists to challenge misconceptions, thereby shaping public opinion through their advocacy efforts.

Moreover, the evolution of the BARMM leadership's stance towards CSOs signifies a promising shift. A previously skeptical view has transformed into recognizing CSOs' potential contributions to governance. This shift illustrates the extent to which political institutions wield the power to shape the involvement and effectiveness of young activists. However, it is essential to note that not all local government leaders are receptive to youth participation, especially when they perceive the advocacy as challenging their leadership.

3. *Socio-Cultural Context:* The intricate challenges arising from intergenerational dynamics and cultural nuances are embedded within the region's sociopolitical landscape. This complex backdrop constitutes the socio-cultural context within which youth-led CSOs operate. As these organizations advocate against child marriage, they are treading the fine line between cultural norms and human rights. In this realm, the delicate task of addressing deeply rooted norms and bridging intergenerational gaps assumes paramount importance. Instances like the social media backlash serve as poignant reminders of the intricate tapestry these young activists must navigate. Balancing the challenge of challenging established intellectual figures while maintaining respect is pivotal to fostering progress. Successfully overcoming these challenges demands a nuanced grasp of the socio-political landscape, which is imbued with historical foundations and evolving power dynamics.
4. *Networks, Social Capital, and Youth Engagement:* Within the Bangsamoro context, networks and relationships are the cornerstones upon which the path of fledgling CSOs is built. The journey from training and seminars to full-fledged advocacy mirrors the growth of networks among Bangsamoro youth. These networks thrive on mentorship and support from entities like AMWA and UNYPHIL, providing strategic advantages in a landscape where established entities often dominate. These networks and the social capital they foster exemplify the dynamic essence of youth engagement. They underscore the significance of collaboration and partnerships in amplifying the voices of young activists.
5. *Organizational Values and Capacity:* The effectiveness of youth CSOs hinges on their organizational values and capacity. Anchored by their commitment to advocacy and personal attributes, these youth-led organizations make a tangible impact. However, the insufficiency of financial resources poses a substantial challenge. This scarcity hampers their ability to execute peacebuilding initiatives and compete with more established counterparts.

As youth-led CSOs like MAYA and LKK navigate the intricate institutional landscape, they transcend their roles as mere agents of change, becoming catalysts for transformative community impact. Recognizing and amplifying the voices of these youth activists is crucial for the region's journey toward stability. By fostering inclusivity, valuing diverse perspectives, and challenging entrenched norms, the Bangsamoro region can harness its youth's potential for sustainable progress. The interplay of legal, political,

socio-cultural, economic, and networking factors forms a complex yet navigable path to a brighter future.

The efforts of Bangsamoro youth CSOs encapsulate broader institutional dynamics, providing insights into the fusion of sociopolitical, cultural, economic, and institutional forces. The institutionalist framework, advocated by scholars like North, Peters, and Schmidt, provides a robust lens to comprehend these intricacies. As CSOs like LKK and MAYA continue their advocacy journey, their adaptive resilience in navigating these terrains will be pivotal for meaningful change in the Bangsamoro region.

C. Youth Advocacy against Child Marriage in the Bangsamoro Region: Navigating the Intersections of Tradition, Religion, and Human Rights

The Bangsamoro region, with its mix deep-rooted traditions and religious beliefs, grapples with the global human rights discourse, especially concerning child marriage. The presence and activism of youth-led Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), LKK, and MAYA in this landscape offers a unique lens to understand the intricate balance between cultural traditions, religious principles, and international human rights standards.

As underscored by various international studies, child marriage is not just a cultural or religious practice but a significant violation of fundamental human rights. The practice deprives children, especially girls, of their fundamental rights to health, education, and freedom from violence.⁵¹ While the global community, through instruments like the Convention on the Rights of the Child, has recognized the detrimental impacts of child marriage, the challenge lies in contextualizing this global perspective within specific regional settings like the Bangsamoro.

With its strong Islamic identity, the Bangsamoro region often interprets practices like child marriage within the framework of religious teachings and cultural traditions. This perspective can sometimes be at odds with the global human rights viewpoint, which emphasizes individual autonomy, especially concerning marriage. The potential conflict between these two paradigms presents a complex challenge for advocacy groups. LKK and MAYA, in their fight against child marriage, are not merely confronting a practice but navigating a delicate balance between respecting religious and cultural sentiments and advocating for the rights of children. Their challenge is twofold: raising awareness about the adverse effects of child marriage and fostering a dialogue that bridges the gap between religious beliefs, cultural norms, and human rights principles.

LKK's strategy of engaging with Muslim scholars and leaders showcases their nuanced approach. Recognizing the influence and respect religious leaders command in the community, LKK seeks to build a bridge between religious teachings and human rights advocacy. They aim to ensure that the fight against child marriage is not seen as an

⁵¹ Nawawi et al., 'Harmonization of Islam and Human Rights: Judges' Legal Arguments in Rejecting Child Marriage Dispensation in Sukadana, Indonesia'.

external imposition but as an effort aligned with the core principles of Islam that prioritize the well-being and protection of children.

Additionally, MAYA adopts a collaborative approach, partnering with established organizations to amplify their voice. Their "girl defenders" narrative is powerful, emphasizing the personal stakes in the fight against child marriage. By positioning themselves as both advocates and stakeholders, MAYA underscores the urgency of addressing child marriage not just as a rights issue but as a matter that directly impacts their lives and futures.

The advocacy efforts of LKK and MAYA in the Bangsamoro region highlight the complexities of championing human rights in settings where cultural and religious beliefs are deeply entrenched. Their strategies, marked by dialogue, collaboration, and respect for local contexts, offer a blueprint for other regions grappling with similar challenges. As the Bangsamoro region stands at the crossroads of tradition, religion, and progress, the endeavors of LKK and MAYA illuminate a path forward—a path that respects cultural and religious identities while ensuring that the rights and dignity of every child are upheld.

IV. CONCLUSION

As the world's understanding of human rights deepens, age-old practices like child marriage are being re-evaluated in the region. Youth-driven organizations such as Linding Ko Kalombayan (LKK) and Maguindanao Alliance of Youth Advocates (MAYA) are pioneers of this critical reflection. Their efforts, deeply rooted in the region's unique context, echo the broader global discourse on human rights.

LKK and MAYA, though distinct in their approaches, share a unified vision. Their efforts transcend challenging societal norms; they aim to ensure every child's right to a dignified, safe, and healthy life. This vision aligns with international conventions like the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While not explicitly addressing child marriage, these conventions emphasize autonomy, informed consent, and child welfare principles. The advocacy of LKK and MAYA, emphasizing choice and children's rights, resonates with these global instruments. However, advocacy is fraught with challenges. The Bangsamoro region's institutional landscape, encompassing formal and informal structures, presents many challenges and opportunities. LKK's bureaucratic registration struggles and engagements with Muslim scholars underscore the complexities of advocating within a framework that sometimes juxtaposes cultural and religious norms with human rights principles. MAYA's journey highlights the importance of adaptability and strategic alliances by navigating entrenched cultural norms to forge collaborations with organizations like UNYPHIL-Women.

The institutionalist approach offers a lens to understand the dynamics of the Bangsamoro region. The socio-political, cultural, economic, formal, and informal dimensions influence the strategies and outcomes of LKK and MAYA. Their successes

and challenges reflect their ability to navigate this intricate institutional web. The recent legal strides, notably the law's passage in January 2022 criminalizing child marriage, introduce a new dimension to this advocacy landscape. This legal milestone amplifies the tension between traditional practices and modern human rights standards. The challenge now is not just about raising awareness but ensuring the effective implementation of this law in a context where cultural norms might resist such change.

LKK and MAYA's advocacy efforts resonate with global movements championing human rights. Their strategies, challenges, and successes offer insights into the potential of youth-led movements in driving societal change. Their resilience, adaptability, and commitment are a beacon of hope for the Bangsamoro region and similar contexts worldwide. Their stories underscore the universality of human rights and the potential of grassroots movements to challenge and reshape entrenched norms. The journey of the Bangsamoro region, championed by LKK and MAYA, symbolizes the broader global pursuit of dignity, autonomy, and justice. The advocacy against child marriage, deeply rooted in the region's socio-cultural context, is a testament to the transformative power of youth engagement and the universality of human rights. As the world navigates various challenges, from cultural resistance to legal obstacles, LKK and MAYA's endeavors offer hope. Their journey underscores the potential of youth-led movements to drive change, champion rights, and shape a more inclusive, just, and equitable future.

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