The United Nations International Children's Fund is a United Nations agency responsible for providing developmental and humanitarian aid to children in over 190 countries and territories. UNICEF, formerly the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund from 1946-53, was initially created with the purpose of providing relief to children impacted by the devastation of World War II. The organization’s name change in 1953 reflected the shift in commitment to a broader range of issues, now including the mission of saving children’s lives, defending their rights, and helping them reach full potential, from childhood through adolescence. Headquartered in New York City, their worldwide work is funded entirely through private donations and government partnerships; the total income for 2019 amounted to US $6.4 billion.

I. Child Migrants in Central America

Statement of the Issue:

Facing gang violence, intimidation, and stifling poverty, many Central American children and their families are making the difficult decision to leave their homes in search of safety and a better life. Most migrants hail from the countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Despite the extreme dangers of making the trek north, many families report that their choice is to either flee their home countries or die. Maria Perceval, UNICEF Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, stated that in many cases, children are more likely to attempt migration again if sent back to their home countries because they face impossible situations domestically and essentially have no home or safe place to return to. UNICEF firmly believes that all children and young people are entitled to the same basic human rights, no matter where
they are from or where they are going. All children who are forced to flee their homes deserve protection every step of the way.\textsuperscript{2}

The global pandemic has made a bad situation worse for migrant children and their families. Since early March, at least 1,000 unaccompanied migrant children have been returned from the United States to Mexico and northern Central America despite serious protection risks in their communities. Limited public information on testing for the coronavirus, treatment, and containment protocols is causing extreme confusion and fear amongst returnees and the general population, leaving many children to be “doubly at risk and in even greater peril than when they left their communities,” said the executive director of UNICEF in May of 2020.

**History:**

Since the earliest times, humanity has been migrating. While some move in search of work or upward economic mobility, others move to escape political, social, or cultural conflict, along with persecution, terrorism, or other human rights violations. Today, more people than ever live in a country other than the one in which they were born, as the number of migrants globally reached 272 million in 2019 or about 3.5% of the world’s population.

In 1951, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) was established as the leading inter-governmental organization in the field of migration. The goals of IOM are to facilitate orderly and humane management of migration while promoting international cooperation on migration issues aimed at finding practical solutions to migration problems. IOM pays special attention to refugees and internally displaced people. In 2016, IOM entered into an agreement with the United Nations to become one of their specialized agencies.\textsuperscript{3}

The early 1980’s saw a large influx of Central American immigrants beginning to make their way toward U.S. soil. Before 1980, refugee status was only to be granted to those who were escaping Communist regimes. However, the passage of the 1980 U.S. Refugee Act “declared anyone eligible for political asylum who had suffered persecution or had a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” The 1980’s were a double-edged sword for immigrants from Central America coming to the United States because even though the Refugee Act expanded opportunities for migrants and spawned the creation of smaller organizations in the states, immigration policy tightened at the same time. Many potential Central American immigrants were detained or sent back to their countries.\textsuperscript{4}

One of UNICEF’s publications, *Child Alert*, presents the core challenges for children in a given crisis location at a given time. In August of 2018, they focused specifically on irregular
migration patterns from northern Central America and the challenges faced by migrant and refugee children throughout the journey. UNICEF concluded with a call to action on ensuring the safety and well-being of these displaced children and their families.⁵

Echoing similar sentiments two months later, UN experts explicitly expressed their desires to protect Central American migrants. “Rather than fueling tensions with hate speech and threats, Governments should work together to tackle inequality, poverty, social exclusion, violence, insecurity, environmental degradation and persecution as the main drivers of migration in Central America.” UN experts also cited the rise of racist and xenophobic language and U.S. practices in terms of border control which present a threat to international human rights equality and non-discrimination standards.⁶

Analysis:

Northern Central America contains some of the world’s most violent countries that are not engaged in active warfare. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are some of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, causing many to travel north in hope of a better future.⁷ Too many children and families have been exposed to the dangers they hoped to leave behind during their journey. As Central Americans cross into Mexico and the United States, they risk being kidnapped, trafficked, raped, or killed. There is also a strong likelihood that they are denied entry into these countries. From January to August 2019, 32,000 children were returned from the United States and Mexico to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, doubling the numbers during the same period from the year before. It is clear that migration from Central America is in steady flow, with 72,873 unaccompanied children and 457,871 families attempting to cross the U.S. border from October 2018 to September 2019.

New policies have emerged that leave migrant children and their families stranded for months in Mexican border cities as they wait for their asylum cases to move through the U.S. court system. The leaving of migrants in limbo stems from a 2019 policy implemented by the U.S. government called Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). Instituted by the Department of Homeland Security and framed as the best way forward in restoring a safe and orderly immigration process in decreasing the number of those looking to take advantage of the immigration system, MPP has caused the migrants to face increased exploitation, violence, and abuse. They lack access to basic essential services and struggle to find shelter.⁸

Despite this harmful government program, UNICEF has continued its efforts to protect children in their countries of origin, while in transit, and at their final destination. UNICEF has a long-standing presence in Central America and has strong relationships with government actors
on the federal and local levels, as well as partnerships on the ground. Their multi-pronged intervention strategy includes interrupting violence in the region, providing psychosocial support to children, promoting alternatives to immigration detention, and working to assimilate children back into their communities if they are returned.

**Conclusion:**

The battle for successful migration into the United States for Central American children and their families has always been difficult. However, the struggle has been exacerbated recently. In particular, there has been a lot of harsh rhetoric and racist and xenophobic sentiments over the last handful of years; these ideas seem to have taken hold in dangerous ways. It is essential for UNICEF and the international community to continue the fight for safe and efficient migration for those searching for a better life.

**Questions:**

1. How can NGOs and non-state actors help protect migrants crossing the border?
2. What have Central American governments said about this issue?
3. Will the outlook for migrants look different if presidential administrations change in November?
4. What policies should change to address the pandemic in assisting migrants?

**Resources**

1.“What We Do.” *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/what-we-do.

2.“Child Migrants in Central America, Mexico and the U.S.” *UNICEF USA*,
II. The Ongoing Issue of Child Marriages

Statement of the Issue:

UNICEF defines child marriage as any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child. The prevalence of child marriages around the world has decreased, yet the practice remains widespread in many parts of the world. Girls are disproportionately impacted by child marriages, making it a highly gendered issue with 21%
of young women globally being married before the age of 18. Child marriages are accompanied with a number of adverse consequences, including higher probability of experiencing domestic violence, complications during pregnancy and childbirth, and limited access to educational opportunities, that are likely to be perpetuated in generational cycles.

UNICEF is committed to working toward ending child marriage, as included in goal five of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) -- gender equality. In recognizing the root causes of child marriage around the world, UNICEF has partnered with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2016 for the Global Programme to End Child Marriage. The initiative aims to empower young women and girls around the world by providing life-skills training and school attendance support. The United Nations plays an important role in coordinating efforts of local organizations and national governments in an effort to address and counter child marriage trends.

History:

Around the world, it is estimated that 1 in 5 girls is married or in a union by the age of 18. In lesser developed countries, the numbers drastically increase with nearly 40% of girls being married before 18 and 12% married before 15. Within the past ten years, elimination of child marriages has seen the most success in South Asia, with percentage decreasing from 49 to 30 percent. Child marriages occur due to a number of social and economic factors, including poverty, cultural traditions, and gender inequality.

The 2011 United Nations General Assembly resolution 66/170 designated October 11 to be International Day of the Girl Child and was celebrated for the first time the following year, with a special spotlight on ending child marriages. Several years later, the first resolution on child marriages was adopted by the UN Human Rights Council. The resolution underscored a need for greater attention to be given to the issue in post-2015 development goals, and received support from over 100 countries. The UN Commission on the Status of Women and World Health Organization have acknowledged the issue of child marriage and the need for measurable progress. In 2016, UNICEF and UNFPA launched the Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage in 12 countries with the highest rates of child brides.

Outside of UN efforts, notable regional progress has also been made toward eliminating child marriages. In 2014, the African Union launched a campaign to end child marriages, with the United Nations recognizing the strength of the campaign’s in its ability to convene the continent’s governments and to work toward a united and prosperous Africa. Similarly, the South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC), an intergovernmental
regional body, adopted their first Regional Action Plan to End Child Marriage in South Asia in the same year. The governments, with support from civil society groups and development partners, are responsible for implementing the framework of the Regional Action Plan, which includes increasing minimum age of marriage and ensuring access to quality education.\(^8\)

**Analysis:**

Child marriage is a complex issue that results from the confluence of lack of opportunities for girls, cultural norms, and social insecurity. Given that girls with no education are 3x as likely to marry by 18 as those with secondary or higher education,\(^9\) it is vital for solutions to acknowledge the lack of educational opportunities in underdeveloped countries as being a major root cause of child marriage. In countries where individual opportunities for growth are limited, child marriages are often seen to be in the best interest of the girl, since it provides girls with the prospect of a stable future. In many situations, parents prefer young marriage to the harassment or assault that many young, unmarried girls would face in a dangerous workplace.\(^10\) Such examples go to show that motivating factors of child marriages are complex and varied, yet a commonality can be found in the lack of preferable options that give these children the foundations for a full childhood and young adulthood.

The elimination of child marriage is linked to a number of other Sustainable Development Goals. For instance, with the achievements of No Poverty and Quality Education, ending child marriages becomes more of a reality. In the cases of Reduced Inequality and Economic Growth, achieving elimination of child marriage should be seen as a prerequisite. For sustainable world development, the investment in human capital is essential. When the international community invests in education and skills development, societies are enabled with the tools for economic prosperity and long-term success.

Although the international community has made progress in forming a legal framework to eliminate the practice of child marriage, child marriages still occur on a widespread basis. Many countries around the world set the minimum age of marriage at 18, yet marriages still occur outside the law. Governments will need to work closely with religious and civil society leaders to raise awareness of and enforce the laws. In countries where marriage registration is weak or uncommon, governments that wish to decrease prevalence of child marriage must invest in the civil registration and the local authorities that manage it.\(^11\)

**Conclusion:**
Child marriage is a human rights violation, linked to poverty, lack of opportunities, and deep-seated cultural norms. In many instances, the issues that accompany a young marriage -- domestic violence, health issues, among others -- are perpetuated over many generations. The international community has taken measures to address child marriages, yet a lack of enforcement of laws and neglect for the underlying causes of child marriage contributes to the enduring issue. In many cases, the United Nations is uniquely positioned to coordinate the efforts of state governments, civil society organizations, and local leaders. With a multilateral approach that pays close attention to the root causes of child marriage around the world, child marriage can be effectively eliminated in time.

Questions:
1. How can we respect cultural norms while also protecting children from harmful practices?
2. How can the international community empower girls to make decisions for themselves?
3. Once a legal framework is set, what are some suitable enforcement mechanisms?

Resources:


“REVIEW OF THE AFRICAN UNION CAMPAIGN TO END CHILD MARRIAGE 2014 – 2018.” UNICEF,


