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# Forced marriage among Somali refugee girls: A qualitative study on poverty, gender-based violence, and human rights violations

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**Abstract:** The political landscape of the Horn of Africa has been marked by persistent instability over recent decades. This fragility, compounded by recurrent natural disasters, has profoundly impacted civilian populations, exacerbated food insecurity and triggered widespread displacement. Heightened political tensions between federal and regional authorities during the 2020/2021 elections further hindered the implementation of judicial, constitutional, and human rights frameworks. Protracted conflicts and droughts, floods, and locust infestations have intensified the humanitarian crisis, displacing millions. Among the displaced, a significant number of children flee the Horn of Africa to escape poverty, and conflict, and in pursuit of education and a better future. However, these children often become victims of abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), exploitation, and forced marriage—a phenomenon that has risen sharply according to recent UN reports. Forced marriage, particularly affecting women and girls, represents a severe form of GBV and a violation of fundamental human rights. Refugee women are especially vulnerable to forced marriage due to economic hardships, patriarchal structures, cultural traditions, and religious pressures. This study explores the phenomenon of forced marriage as a violation of human and children's rights, utilizing oral testimonies from unaccompanied minor refugee girls. The research sample comprised 20 refugee girls aged 16–17, residing in an Accommodation Centre for Unaccompanied Minors in Greece. These girls, originally from Somalia, either experienced forced marriage in their home country or fled to escape impending marriages. The study employed semi-structured individual interviews to gather in-depth insights. The findings reveal interlinked issues of poverty, GBV, the social construction of childhood, and the psychosocial dimensions underpinning the culture of forced marriage. The study also highlights the influence of cultural principles and beliefs in African societies.

**Keywords:** forced marriage; gender-based violence (GBV); child marriage; poverty; unaccompanied minors; Africa

## 1. Introduction

Forced marriage is widely recognized as a form of domestic and child abuse and a grave violation of human rights [1]. While arranged marriages are a customary practice in certain cultures, the transition from voluntary participation to coercion—whether physical or emotional—constitutes a clear form of abuse. Research indicates that women are more likely than men to comply with parental wishes regarding marriage due to social pressures, while men are often influenced by societal constructs of pride and masculinity. However, both genders can be subjected to emotional manipulation and coercion [2]. Despite this, girls face disproportionate

harm, as forced marriage severely impacts their access to education, employment opportunities, and personal and financial autonomy.

For many refugee women, forced marriage represents a key factor in their decision to flee their home countries and seek international protection. These women may be escaping coercive marriages or seeking to avoid marriages arranged without their consent. In Somalia, the absence of a legal minimum age for marriage, combined with societal norms, allows for the legalization of child marriage, with some girls as young as ten being married off.

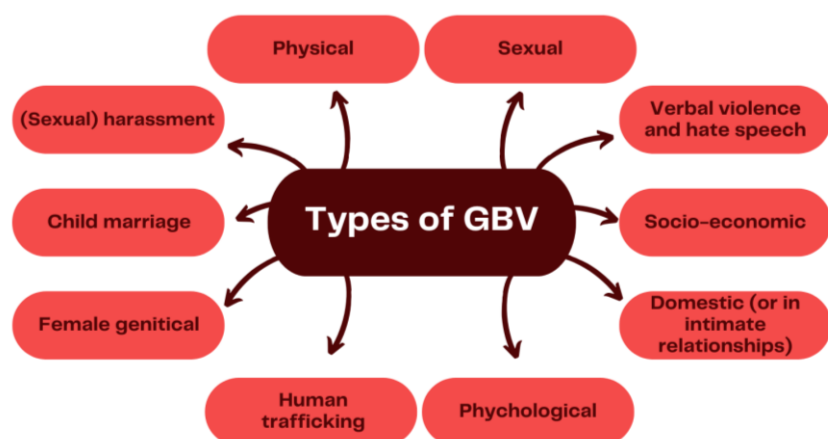
This paper examines the phenomenon of child marriage, highlighting its status as a recognized form of gender-based violence and exploring its impact on human rights and children’s rights in the context of Somali refugee girls.

## 2. Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) primarily refers to violence targeted at women and girls, encompassing a broad spectrum of harmful behaviors, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse (See **Figure 1** for the different types of gender-based violence) [3].

This pervasive practice is one of the most widespread human rights violations globally, transcending social, economic, and national boundaries. The United Nations recognizes GBV not only as a critical human rights issue but also as a global health and development concern, necessitating comprehensive policies, public education, and action programs worldwide [4]. Despite its gravity, GBV remains underrecognized as a human rights violation in many parts of the world.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), GBV ranks as the fourth leading cause of death for individuals aged 15–44, with over 1.3 million fatalities annually, accounting for 2.5% of global mortality [5]. It is estimated that one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence during her lifetime [6]. Additionally, one in five women suffers sexual abuse during childhood [7].



**Figure 1.** Types of gender-based violence.

### Forced marriage in Somalia

Somalia is among the countries with the highest levels of gender inequality, though data capturing recent trends remains incomplete [8]. Forced marriage is

deeply rooted in Somali tradition, often practiced as a means to forge alliances between neighboring tribes. These alliances typically aim to secure access to vital resources such as pastures and water or to consolidate peace agreements [7].

This practice exposes girls to heightened risks of sexual, physical, and psychological violence throughout their lives. Research indicates that girls who marry at a young age are more likely to face abuse, including threats and physical violence, from their husbands compared to those who marry later in life. Furthermore, early marriage significantly disrupts girls' educational trajectories, limiting their access to learning opportunities and perpetuating cycles of poverty. This not only undermines the personal development of individuals but also hampers Somalia's broader economic progress and national development [9].

### **3. Unaccompanied minor**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines an unaccompanied minor as an individual under the age of eighteen—or the age of majority as defined by the asylum country's legal framework—who is not in the care of their parents, a guardian, or any adult legally or customarily responsible for their custody. This definition applies to minors who seek refugee status in their host country [10].

#### **3.1. Child marriage**

Child marriage, defined as the marriage or informal union of individuals under the age of 18, constitutes a violation of human rights that disproportionately affects girls in developing countries [11]. Despite global efforts to address the issue, child marriage remains prevalent in many regions, with an estimated 39,000 underage girls becoming brides each day [12]. Forced marriages, which often occur informally and lack official documentation, present significant challenges in obtaining specific and reliable statistical data. This lack of data complicates efforts to understand the problem's scope and develop targeted interventions fully.

#### **3.2. The social construction of childhood**

The social construction of childhood is a theoretical framework that examines how societies define and interpret the concept of childhood. This perspective posits that childhood is neither a universal nor a biologically determined phase of life, but rather a social construct shaped by cultural, societal, and historical contexts. The meaning of childhood varies significantly across cultures and periods, reflecting differences in social norms, economic conditions, and cultural values. The concept of childhood is fluid and dynamic, evolving in response to shifts in societal expectations and ideologies [13]. This framework challenges the assumption of childhood as a uniform experience, emphasizing its dependence on broader social and cultural structures.

## **4. Poverty and hunger in Africa**

### **4.1. Poverty**

Poverty remains one of humanity's most critical challenges [14]. Despite the world's vast natural and human resources, severe poverty afflicts millions, particularly in developing nations [15].

In Africa, poverty manifests as the deprivation of essential human needs within communities, including inadequate access to food, clean water, shelter, and nutrition [16]. This issue is especially acute in sub-Saharan Africa, where a significant portion of the population lives in extreme poverty [17].

Poverty is defined as the condition in which individuals or communities lack the financial resources to meet basic living standards and remains a significant challenge in many African nations [18]. The World Bank defines poverty as living on less than US\$1.90 per day. People living in poverty are typically characterized by low income and consumption levels, alongside limited access to clean water, adequate housing, nutritious food, proper healthcare, and quality education, among other essentials [19]. The average poverty rate in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) stands at 41%, indicating that the number of poor people in the sub-region has increased from 278 million in 1990 to 413 million in 2015 [20].

Poverty in Africa is persistent and multidimensional. According to Dabalén and Dang [21], three out of five of Africa's poor are chronically impoverished, meaning they remain poor for several consecutive years. This reflects a deep-rooted structural problem, caused by a lack of resources, limited access to public services and infrastructure, and scarce income-generating opportunities. These challenges are often linked to the geographic location of the poor, which creates a "geographic poverty trap" [22], and the need to protect against income shocks, which leads to what is known as the "risk-induced poverty trap" [23].

The remaining two out of five poor Africans experience transitory poverty, indicating that households and businesses are often in highly unstable environments with limited means to cope. African households are more vulnerable to various risks than those in other regions and exit from poverty is fragile, with many relapsing back into poverty. One particularly destructive factor is the risk of physical insecurity and conflict, which can pull people back into poverty, including those who were previously better off. This cycle of poverty tends to persist, especially in fragile states, where poverty reduction is slower [20].

In 2013, 29% of Africa's poor resided in fragile and conflict-affected areas—a figure projected to rise to 43.6% if current trends continue. Addressing poverty in these regions is crucial for any effective poverty-reduction strategy in Africa. Recent progress indicates that global efforts to fight poverty are beginning to show promising results, with notable declines in the number of people living in extreme poverty in some impoverished areas. However, significant concerns persist, as the world's poorest populations remain concentrated in developing countries [20].

According to Beegle and Christiaensen [20], three key factors have contributed to the slower pace of poverty reduction in Africa:

*"High Fertility and Population Growth: While Africa's gross domestic product (GDP) growth has been strong in recent decades (with some exceptions in recent years), economic growth per capita has been slower compared to other low- and middle-income regions. Higher fertility rates and faster population growth in African countries have resulted in much lower income per person.*

*Poor Initial Conditions: Africa's relatively modest per capita household income growth has not led to as significant poverty reduction as seen in other regions, primarily due to the high initial levels of poverty. Limited access to assets, public goods, and services, combined with a lack of good income-earning opportunities for a large portion of the population, restricts many people's ability to benefit from and contribute to economic growth. In many African countries, poverty itself, rather than inequality, is the main barrier to poverty reduction.*

*Composition of Growth: The structure of Africa's growth has hindered faster poverty reduction, particularly due to the heavy reliance on natural resources and the underperformance of agriculture and manufacturing sectors."*

## **4.2. Hunger**

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines chronic hunger as a prolonged insufficiency in daily caloric intake required to sustain a healthy and active lifestyle. According to Adeyeye et al. [16], the minimum daily energy requirement per person is set at 1800 calories. The issue of hunger is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where the growing global population is expected to surpass food production capacity in the coming decades. This imbalance is projected to have the most severe consequences in developing regions, especially SSA, where hunger remains a significant public health crisis. Factors such as rapid population growth, inadequate food production, and socioeconomic inequalities exacerbate hunger in the region [24]. Notably, a 1% increase in population correlates with a 0.081% rise in hunger, while a 1% increase in income is associated with a 0.08% reduction in hunger [24]. These findings emphasize the importance of enhancing economic conditions in SSA to mitigate hunger effectively.

Malnutrition, a direct consequence of hunger and food insecurity, is also linked to broader systemic issues, including conflict. Evidence indicates that war significantly exacerbates food insecurity, compounding the challenges faced by vulnerable populations.

The FAO further defines food security as a state in which all individuals have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life [25]. Conversely, food insecurity denotes inconsistent or inadequate access to such resources, impeding normal growth, development, and overall well-being [26]. In 2017, one in four people in SSA were undernourished, representing a third of the global population suffering from chronic hunger. Alarming, projections suggest that by 2030, Africa will account for 90% of the world's poorest population [25]. Malnutrition is particularly prevalent among children, with nearly half of South African children under five classified as malnourished. Female-headed households, disproportionately affected by income, social status, and education disparities, experience higher rates of food insecurity and malnutrition [25]. The primary drivers of food insecurity in SSA include socio-economic factors, climate change, poverty, and systemic inequalities [26]. Moreover, research indicates that pregnant women

married before the age of 18 are nearly four times more likely to experience malnutrition compared to those who marry after 18 [27].

Food insecurity also has profound social and psychological implications. Meyer et al. [26] found a strong association between food insecurity and intimate partner violence (IPV). Men unable to fulfil their traditional role as providers often resort to IPV as a means of asserting control within their households. In Tanzania, a region heavily impacted by food insecurity, IPV rates are significantly higher. Hatcher et al. [28] report that 48.4% of partnered men had committed IPV, and 61.4% were food insecure. Their findings highlight a twofold increase in IPV likelihood in food-insecure households, underscoring the broader societal impacts of food insecurity on mental, physical, and social well-being.

Persistent hunger and malnutrition in SSA remain intrinsically linked to poverty. Globally, nearly 795 million individuals suffer from chronic undernourishment, with a disproportionate burden borne by SSA due to entrenched poverty and inequality [25]. In addition to socio-economic disparities, rapid population growth and environmental challenges, including climate change, further exacerbate food insecurity in the region [24]. While the FAO envisions food security as universal and consistent access to safe and nutritious food, this ideal remains unattainable for many in SSA, where one in four individuals were undernourished as recently as 2017, accounting for a third of the global population suffering from chronic hunger [26].

## **5. Materials and methods**

This study aimed to investigate the phenomenon of forced marriages, particularly focusing on its implications as a violation of human rights, with a specific emphasis on children's rights. The research sought to provide an in-depth understanding of forced marriage among unaccompanied minor refugee girls from Somalia residing in an Accommodation Centre for Unaccompanied Minors in Greece.

A qualitative research design was adopted, employing purposive sampling to select participants who met the specific inclusion criteria. The sample consisted of twenty unaccompanied minor girls aged 16–17, who had either been subjected to forced marriage in their country of origin (Somalia) or had fled Somalia to escape impending forced marriages. This sampling method ensured that participants had relevant experiences, aligned with the study's objectives.

Data collection was conducted through individual, semi-structured interviews, each lasting 30 to 60 min. This approach allowed participants to express their thoughts and experiences in detail while allowing the researcher to address key research questions systematically. The interviews explored the participants' personal experiences with forced marriage, the socio-cultural factors contributing to the practices, and the challenges they faced both before and after fleeing their countries.

The interview guide, developed based on existing literature, was designed to capture both the subjective and objective aspects of forced marriage. It included open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect on their personal

histories, current circumstances in Greece, perceptions of forced marriage, and the support systems they accessed after fleeing Somalia.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. For minors, assent was also secured alongside parental or guardian consent, as required. All interviews were conducted in a safe, confidential environment, with participants explicitly informed on their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences.

To ensure the ethical integrity of the research, qualified psychologists were present during all interviews to address any psychological or emotional distress that might arise. Additionally, professional interpreters facilitated accurate communication, ensuring participants fully understood the questions and expressed themselves without language barriers.

The data collected from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights. The process began with the transcription of interview recordings, followed by multiple readings of the transcripts to identify potential themes. These initial codes were forwarded to the primary researcher for further refinement. In the second stage, both the primary and final researchers reviewed the initial codes collaboratively, ensuring that the diversity of the data was preserved while consolidating overarching elements into higher-order subthemes. The research focus informed this step on the experiences of forced marriage and its impacts on participants' lives.

In the third stage, the primary and final researchers analyzed the data to identify illustrative quotes aligned with the overarching themes. Subsequently, the themes underwent a thorough review, refinement, and definition process, culminating in the final naming of each theme. Once the themes were finalized, the report's write-up commenced, guided by the finalized thematic structure.

This approach ensured a rigorous and systematic exploration of the data, maintaining fidelity to participants' voices while drawing out meaningful patterns and insights relevant to the research question.

Triangulation was employed by cross-checking findings with relevant literature to enhance the validity and reliability of the study's conclusions. These methodological steps ensured a robust and ethically sound approach to exploring this critical issue.

## **6. Results**

The research findings underscored critical issues surrounding gender-based violence, the social construction of childhood, and the psychosocial dimensions of forced marriage within the context of Somali culture. These findings were interpreted through the lens of cultural principles and deeply rooted beliefs. Simultaneously, the study illuminated the objectification and "commercialization" of the female body, often justified by appeals to cultural traditions, religious practices, and notions of honor. Such practices reflect the intersection of societal norms and systemic inequalities, revealing the complex interplay between cultural heritage and the perpetuation of harmful practices (See **Figure 2** for the most used words and phrases in the testimonies).

The analysis produced four themes.

### **6.1. Patriarchy and decision-making in forced marriages**

Family as the decision-maker: In Somalia, decisions regarding marriage are made exclusively by male family members, such as fathers or other male relatives, with no regard for the desires or opinions of the girls involved.

*“The family decides for us, and only men have power. You either marry, or you are thrown out of the house.”* (K, 2)

*“Boys are given everything; girls are worth nothing.”* (K, 4)

Marriage as a political tool: Marriage is often used as a political strategy to restore peace between clans, with girls being sacrificed for the “greater good”.

*“After a war, they choose girls from one clan to marry boys from the other clan.”* (K, 1)

### **6.2. Violence and coercion**

Physical and psychological abuse: Girls who are forced into marriage often experience severe physical abuse, sexual violence, and psychological trauma, inflicted either by their husbands or by their families to ensure compliance.

*“He raped and beat me. If I said no, he would beat me more.”* (K, 7)

Use of sedatives for control: The use of drugs to subdue women and prevent their escape highlights the extent of control exerted over them.

*“He gave me pills that made me sleep for two days. They do these so women can’t escape.”* (K, 9)

Consequences of refusal: Refusing a forced marriage results in extreme measures, including imprisonment, food deprivation, and severe mental and physical exhaustion.

*“They lock you in a small room with little food and water until you’re exhausted and agree.”* (K, 6)

### **6.3. Lack of institutional protection**

Absence of legal and institutional support: Women and girls in Somalia receive no legal protection, even when they report abuse. Authorities often reinforce patriarchal norms instead of safeguarding victims.

*“I went to the police after he beat me badly, and they said, ‘What are you doing here? Go back to your husband’.”* (K, 3)

Male-dominated authority: Decisions are made exclusively by men, leaving women powerless and dependent.

*“Boys get everything, while girls have no rights or choices.”* (K, 10)

### **6.4. Psychological impact and resistance**

Trauma and mental breakdowns: Forced marriages and the conditions surrounding them cause profound psychological damage, including anxiety, depression, and self-harm.

*“Girls who are imprisoned come out trembling, biting their hands and legs.”* (K, 5)



Relief through escape: For those who manage to escape, the newfound freedom brings a sense of safety and relief, despite the lingering emotional scars.

*“I feel happy, free, and... relieved.”* (K, 9)

This thematic analysis demonstrates that forced marriage in Somalia is deeply rooted in patriarchal systems, perpetuated by the absence of women’s rights, institutional support, and societal protections. The consequences for girls are severe, encompassing physical violence, psychological trauma, and loss of autonomy. Despite these challenges, many women aspire to freedom and autonomy, advocating for systemic change. Their call for an end to forced marriage and greater respect for women underscores the urgent need to address these deeply ingrained practices and promote gender equality and human rights.

Moreover, both marriage and its denial are followed by various forms of violence either in the same: *“They lock you in a tiny space and give you little food and water without seeing the sun, until you are exhausted and accept to get married. There is no choice. Either you die or you get thrown out on the street or you get married. Many girls imprison them until they change their minds and say yes...”* (K, 2) or to their families: *“My dad refused. She told them no; I’m not marrying her. They told him, ‘Think again, and we’ll talk again in 4–5 days. We’ll take it ourselves if we don’t take it from you’. I ran away and my father was taken by Al-Shabaab (an Islamist terrorist organization) and imprisoned. Since then, I don’t know where it is...”* (K, 5)

The gender binaries of privilege and rights and their identification with male domination are reproduced by the girls themselves as cultural elements, *“... The man will not respect you, because he paid for you and therefore you are his, his property. Secondly, he speaks, and you listen. He picks you up and uses you without asking you anything. When they want to have sex, they do. They don’t ask. And think about how difficult it is with FGM. Some people don’t accept a woman having surgery to ‘open up’ before sex. Do you understand what that means? What pain and what blood?”* (K, 3)

The psychological pressure of forced marriage is strongly reflected in the girls: *“I had a girl in the neighborhood, 14 years old, who had been imprisoned because she did not want to get married. As soon as they freed her, she had gone out and was shaking and biting her hands.”* (K, 10), and follows them on their way: *“For my parents I know that I have died. But as long as I live, I will never forgive them for what I went through because of them.”* (K, 8)

Through the interviews, issues of objectification of the female body and its “commercialization” for reasons of respect for cultural traditions, customs, and religious beliefs, invoking honor, as one unaccompanied minor told us, *“When I entered Greece and was walking to reach the camp, I heard some men calling us and a pregnant woman. They told us, ‘Go back to Somalia. Because of you, because you come to Europe and talk about forced marriages, you get asylum, and we get rejection. Because of you we do not go to Europe’.”* (K, 10); *“...But consider that it’s not just parents who give money to marry us. They sell us for camels, cars or guns. Of course, what do you think? They exchange us.”* (K, 6)



reported in the literature to contribute to child marriage, as it affects the ability to resist unwanted marriage proposals [30]. Additionally, early marriage is frequently driven by families' desires to achieve economic and social security or to avoid the perceived shame of out-of-wedlock births. Within many cultural and religious contexts, early marriage is deemed essential, as women's value is traditionally tied to their reproductive roles.

What can be done to eradicate child marriage? Interventions show that legal and policy framework reform is a necessary but insufficient part of the response [31]. The most effective interventions empower girls by providing them with information, skills, and supportive networks, enhancing access to quality formal education, and offering financial incentives to encourage families to keep girls in school or delay marriage. It is equally important to raise awareness among parents and community members about the detrimental impacts of child marriage. Shifting societal norms to redefine the transition to adulthood without the need for marriage involves engaging in dialogue with influential religious and community leaders who play a pivotal role in shaping these cultural practices.

## **8. Conclusion**

The interwoven challenges of poverty, hunger, early, and forced marriage present some of the most pressing human rights and public health crises in Africa. This paper highlights the systemic nature of these issues, underscoring their roots in socioeconomic inequities, gender-based violence, and deeply entrenched cultural practices. Poverty and food insecurity not only exacerbate the vulnerabilities of women and children but also perpetuate cycles of marginalization, as seen in the prevalence of child and forced marriages in regions like Somalia.

Forced marriage, particularly among refugee populations, reflects the intersection of poverty, patriarchal norms, and the commodification of young girls as economic assets. These practices strip individuals of agency, deny them access to education and economic opportunities, and impose severe physical and psychological burdens. The testimonies of Somali refugee girls provide vivid illustrations of these practices' profound impact on individuals and their communities.

Tackling these interconnected challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Policies must address poverty and food insecurity through investments in education, healthcare, and sustainable livelihoods. Legal and policy frameworks must prioritize the eradication of child and forced marriages by holding perpetrators accountable while empowering girls and their families. Community-driven initiatives that engage local leaders, amplify the voices of survivors, and shift societal norms are also critical in dismantling harmful traditions.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of these interrelated issues, emphasizing the need for holistic, context-sensitive interventions. Addressing poverty, hunger, and gender-based violence is not only a moral imperative but also a prerequisite for sustainable development and the realization of fundamental human rights across Africa.

## 9. Limitations and future research directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of forced marriage among women and girls in Somalia, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was limited, focusing primarily on participants from specific regions or communities, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other regions or cultural contexts. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported narratives, which may be influenced by memory recall issues, emotional distress, or a desire to portray experiences in a particular way. Participants were selected purposively based on their willingness and ability to participate, potentially excluding individuals who faced extreme constraints or did not have the opportunity to escape forced marriage. Furthermore, despite the use of interpreters, some nuances of language or cultural expressions might have been lost during translation, potentially affecting the interpretation of the data. Lastly, discussing sensitive topics such as forced marriage, violence, and trauma poses ethical challenges and may limit the depth of information participants are willing to share.

Future research could address these limitations and explore new dimensions to enhance our understanding of forced marriage. Expanding the sample to include participants from diverse regions, countries, or cultural contexts could provide a more comprehensive understanding of forced marriage as a global issue, while comparative studies might reveal contextual differences and commonalities.

By addressing these limitations and pursuing these future research directions, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of forced marriage and create impactful interventions to protect and empower vulnerable populations.

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