

# The Role of School Meals in Underdeveloped Countries

## The Relationship between Reducing Child Marriages and Improving Women's Educational Status

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### Abstract

One of the marriage-related problems for women in underdeveloped countries is child marriage, particularly in the poor regions of sub-Saharan Africa, where GDP is low, child marriage and sexual violence against women have become major problems. It has been observed that child marriage hinders girls' educational opportunities, and that pregnancy and childbirth by minors after marriage pose significant risks to their immature bodies.

Schooling is a highly effective way to reduce child marriage. However, the problem of children dropping out of school in the middle of the school year is becoming an issue. One of the reasons cited is financial issues, such as an inability to pay school fees. In addition, children who work and earn money may not be able to attend school because their income is reduced by attending school. In such cases, even if they are free or food is distributed at school, the child may not be able to receive an education.

However, provision of food is difficult to implement and sustain. One way to support continued school attendance is through school lunches.

Therefore, this paper will focus on school lunches, which are highly effective in keeping students in school, and will discuss the role that school lunches play in underdeveloped countries. There are several benefits of schools preparing food free of charge, such as increasing educational opportunities, combating hunger, improving malnutrition, and paving the way for employment and economic self-sufficiency. The study argues that these benefits of school meals also have a positive impact on the decline in child marriage.

### 1. Child Marriage - Current Situation and Problems

Child marriage refers to marriages between people under the age of 18; it constitutes a violation of children's rights. In addition, pregnancy and childbirth of girls in such marriages carry a high risk of death, and many girls drop out of school as a result of child marriage and childbirth. In addition to the maternal impact, infants born to mothers in their early teens have a high mortality rate, which is also problematic. There are 115 million child marriages in the Sub-Saharan Africa region.

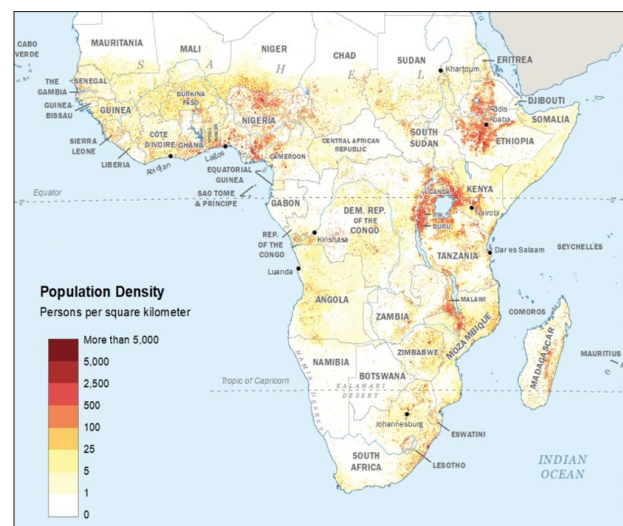


Figure1: Sub-Saharan Africa region (World and Regional Maps Africa, 2024)

According to UNICEF in 2019, that figure is second only to South Asia's approximately 280 million, although the number of child marriages in South Asia has been on a downward trend (UNICEF, 2019). However, in Sub-Saharan Africa, one out of every three children under the age of 18 is

in a child marriage. Child marriage reduces women’s opportunities for education and social advancement.

In Zambia, a country in southern Africa with a high rate of child marriage, many children face poverty and are unable to go to school. Girls are forced to marry or work, and even if they have dreams, most are unable to fulfill them. A young girl named Gertrude lost her mother and grandmother and now lives with her aunt Fanes. She dreams of becoming a teacher in the future and wakes up early in the morning to clean the garden, make tea for her family, and wash the dishes after breakfast. After school, she helps her aunt work in the fields, but faces a difficult situation when the harvest is low and food is scarce.

Maslain, 18, is a high school student living in Zimbabwe, near the capital city of Harare, who was raised by her grandmother after her parents divorced. According to a survey conducted by international NGO PLAN INTERNATIONAL, 72% of girls in Zimbabwe attend school, but only about 33% feel they can attend until graduation, mainly due to the high cost of education.

Maslain also had difficulty attending school at times, but was able to attend high school with PLAN INTERNATIONAL providing 75% of the \$105 tuition fee and her grandmother covering the remainder. The current situation is that without such assistance, some children find it financially difficult to attend school (PLAN INTERNATIONAL, 2017).

Schooling is one way for women to obtain jobs and independence in the future, and it is very unfortunate that women are losing educational opportunities because they are forced into child marriage for economic and social reasons.

**2. Current Food Situation in Underdeveloped Countries - Acute Food Insecurity**

Approximately 345 million people in the world today are acutely food insecure. Acute food insecurity refers to the inability to obtain sufficient nutritious food and is a situation in which people face threats to their daily lives and livelihoods. It is centered in Africa, where poverty has been a major problem, but now food insecurity is also an issue due to conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and other countries (JAPAN FOR UNHCR, n.d.). In addition, PLAN INTERNATIONAL has pointed out that food insecurity is deeply related to gender issues (PLAN INTERNATIONAL, 2022). Because of the new Corona virus pandemic of the new Coronavirus, an increasing number of students have been unable to access school meals since the beginning of 2020, despite the existence of the school lunch system. According to World

Vision, African countries have made efforts to make school meals available for distribution on a national basis. As a result, more than 65 million children would have had access to school meals by 2019, but with the closure of schools due to the pandemic, school meals also stopped, once again creating a situation where children are unable to secure adequate nutrition. In addition, even if starving children were able to go to school, they were not able to learn what they were taught because they attended classes with empty stomachs (World Vision, n.d.).

**3. The Impact of School Lunch Programs on Women and Children**

In underdeveloped countries, child marriage, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced labor, child labor, and other practices that impede human rights have been observed, especially among women. As a result, while many women are deprived of educational opportunities there are examples where their human rights and freedoms are protected through school lunches even in these regions.

One girl in Sierra Leone, located on the western side of Africa, is faced with poverty and gender inequality; she cannot afford to go to school or even eat a daily meal. However, parents receive money through forced marriages and child marriages that allow them to make ends meet, or to reduce the number of people in their families to provide for. Most sacrifices are made by girls under the age of 18, given the current situation of male dominance.



**Figure2:** Sierra Leone (World and Regional Maps Sierra Leone, 2024)

First and foremost, these conditions eliminate opportunities for girls’ education, increase the rate of child marriage, and create a negative cycle of inability to escape from poverty.

The family of a student called Fatmata Kamarand have three daughters who attend school, but sometimes skip dinner when food is scarce. On such occasions, they stay together until the children go to bed and discuss the situation.

The only food they eat is mangoes cooked in palm oil, which are abundant in the area. During the off-farm season, many children are unable to obtain adequate food. School lunches provided by the UNWFP World Food Programme are the only source of food for many families. However, the country's economic stagnation, plummeting currency, and the impact of the Coronavirus are exacerbating hunger, and the crisis in Ukraine, in particular, has increased the price of food and fertilizer, thereby putting a strain on household budgets.

Under these circumstances, many families are forced to cut back on meals or choose the type of food they eat. School lunches are an important means of bringing children to school and supporting their education. Fatmata also volunteers at a school for her own daughters and is grateful for the burden on families that school lunches help to relieve. In Sierra Leone, for example, the price of rice, a staple food, has risen more than 40% this year, and fish, a favorite of Fatmata's family, has become more expensive. More than half of the population is eating less or restricting food within the family. In extreme cases, behavior such as frying everything in palm oil is observed. For many parents, including Fatmata, UNWFP school meals are very important. It is of great assistance because it consists of cereals, legumes, and fortified vegetable oil and provides one-third of the minimum daily calorie requirement (Wamala, 2022). School meals are one of the best ways to solve food shortage problems.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL notes that in its own survey, more than 120 million more women than men were food insecure. The study also pointed out the disparity in food in households in five African countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, men are served first and women and girls are served last. They receive smaller portions and are less well nourished.

The region is also in a state of extreme poverty, with about 40 percent of the countries in the region below the international poverty line, those living on less than US\$1.90 per person per day, in 2015. However, the distribution of school lunches can be expected to partially burden families and avoid malnutrition. Furthermore, it can encourage children to go to school because they can get food. Doing so can also be expected to reduce child marriages and increase the acquisition of knowledge through education. Moreover,

if the knowledge gained in school can be used to obtain a job in the future, it can help address poverty and break the cycle. Outside the African continent there are examples of places where school lunches have made it possible for students to attend school. Laos, located on the Indochina Peninsula, is one of the poorest countries in Asia, and Keo (20 years old in 2020), who lives there, was saved by school lunches. She is a member of the Akha ethnic group, born and raised in Loang Namtha in the north.



Figure3: Laos (The World Fact Book, n.d.)

While many ethnic minorities in Laos have literacy rates of around 70 percent or higher, the literacy rate among Lao women is only half that, around 35 percent. The UNWFP began supporting school lunches in 2002, and about 50,000 children in the northern part of the country grew up eating school lunches. Having never eaten breakfast at home, Keo went to school hungry, but her teacher gave her snacks so she could see how hungry she was and doing so would allow Keo to concentrate on her classes. The teacher also noted that Keo's parents encouraged her to go to school because she was able to receive rice and canned fish there and that the support of the UNWFP was very helpful to her family. This support also increased the number of other children attending school especially girls (WFP, 2018). In addition to child marriage, other problems include so-called rape, sexual violence, and female genital mutilation. In areas where drought is progressing or where food is difficult to obtain, women may be subjected to sexual violence on the long road to water and food. However, with provision of school lunches, women do not have to take time and risk long trips to obtain food, and from this perspective, women's human rights can be protected as well (PLAN INTERNATIONAL, 2022). However, as for natural disasters such as droughts, climate change is a major factor at issue. There are vested interests

involved, and while it is important to develop lifelines such as water supply systems so that people can easily obtain water, this will not be a complete solution unless environmental issues are also resolved.

An example of someone who was able to get a job with UNWFP support, Julia attended school as a child growing up in South Sudan with school feeding support from the UNWFP. Although it was the norm in her culture for girls to be married at age 13, her father wanted her to continue her Studies, so after finishing secondary school, she moved to Malakal in the north of the country to pursue an IT degree at Upper Nile University. She obtained a job at the UNWFP's Maaban field office after college, which provided her a working environment.



Figure4: Maaban in South Sudan (Project, n.d.)

In this case, school feeding helped girls leave the culture of child marriage, and through education, become financially independent (WFP Editorial Team, 2023). If such a chain of events is created, many girls will have the opportunity to obtain an education and a job.

#### 4. The Relationship between Educational Inequality and School Lunch

Before the (Sustainable Development Goals) SDGs were established, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were set as goals to be achieved by 2015. These goals were compiled based on the International Millennium Declaration, which was adopted at the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, and comprised eight common goals for the international community to address in the field of development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019). According to the final UN report issued in 2015, the percentage of world population living on less than \$1.25 a day fell to 14 percent from 1990 levels, and the number of people

living in extreme poverty fell from 1.8 billion in 1990 to 836 million. The report also projected that the number of malnourished people in underdeveloped countries would be 12.9 percent from 2014 to 2016, compared to 23.3 percent from 1990 to 1992.

Also, in terms of net primary-education attainment in underdeveloped countries, the global literacy rate for young people (aged 15-24) is 93%, a gradual increase from 90% ten years previously. However, data from least developed countries shows that the literacy rate for men and women is 81% and 77%, respectively, meaning that roughly one in five people cannot read or write (United Nations, 2015). Along with these results, however, the study noted that the link between poverty and education shows that the poorest children are four times more likely to be out of school than the richest children. The figures above indicate that one of the causes of educational disparity is poverty. School lunches were adopted as one means to eliminate educational disparities and to encourage more children to attend school. UNWFP has shown in a 2012 study that school attendance and enrollment rates have improved as a result of the provision of school meals.

Specific figures include a one-year increase of 41 percent in school attendance in Ghana, 6.3 percent in Uganda, and 3.5 percent in Ethiopia (WFP, n.d.).

The sixth of the MDGs goals is to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases; many people were spared death due to the reduction of new HIV infections and antiretroviral therapy (United Nations, 2015). However, many of these sexually transmitted infections were formed in poor areas, partly because of a lack of knowledge about how intercourse spreads infection. If more children attend school because of school lunches they can receive education not only in major subjects such as math and history, but also in sexuality, thereby preventing new HIV infections, genetic transmission, and deaths. In addition, school also plays a major role in preventing chronic undernourishment and related diseases.

In addition to school lunches, the UNWFP also provides "take-home food" and "food aid in the form of cash and food vouchers" to encourage school attendance. The "take-home food" program provides food for the entire family after a certain number of children attend school, which also helps to support the family's finances. The "cash and food voucher school lunch support" is an initiative to introduce fresh food and increase food options by giving vouchers or cash to school in exchange for food and cooking it with local ingre-

dients (WFP, n.d.).

### **5. Sustainability of School Lunches in the Future**

There are examples of how school lunches have been introduced into schools not only for nutrition, but also for economic revitalization and the income they bring to women. The Japanese food company Ajinomoto Co., Ltd. has initiated a school lunch project in Vietnam in cooperation with government agencies. Vietnam does not have a school lunch law, and there were concerns about unbalanced nutrition. To solve this problem, model kitchens have been set up and software has been developed, with the goal of supplying nutritionally balanced school lunches to approximately 1.43 million children by the end of 2022; the person in charge explained that Ajinomoto's products should also be used. To ensure that this will be sustainable into the future, the project has also trained nutritionists and established a nutrition course at the University of Hanoi, thereby helping to solve the fundamental problem by studying nutrients through education. The use of the company's products in school lunches is also expected to increase the number of consumers and stimulate the economy (Ajinomoto, n.d.).

The UNWFP is also committed to local production for local consumption. It contracts with local agricultural cooperatives to purchase foodstuffs at reasonable prices on an ongoing basis, bringing income not only to men but also to women. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) also provides agricultural training. In fact, at the Hanja Chafa Primary School in Ethiopia, school meals are prepared using crops from farmers within a couple of kilometers radius of the school (WFP, n.d.).

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) states that "160 million children in rural areas are out of school and forced to work for no pay" (FAO, n.d.). To overcome this situation, school vegetable gardens and school lunches can be used to increase the number of children who attend school, and the education they receive can be used not only for their growth, but also for the development of the community in which they will live. Ajinomoto's efforts will play a major role in the "long-term development of the community in which they live," as FAO states.

The reasons for this include the development of the country itself through economic benefits, increased life expectancy through nutritional education for children, and job security through securing educational opportunities, obtaining degrees, and acquiring specialized knowledge. These outcomes are important as obtaining a job and a stable salary

can break the negative cycle caused by poverty. In addition, the UNWFP initiative is not only a step toward mitigating poverty, but also reducing transportation and other costs through local production for local consumption, so school lunches can be expected to continue and there is no need to cut labor costs. Not only is this a solution to food hunger, but it is also expected to be sustainable.

On the other hand, Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia have experienced economic growth, and many families have emerged from poverty, so the probability of sufficient food supply for children is higher than before economic development. However, this has led to an increase in the problem of parents feeding their children as much or as little as they like, and the problem of children's nutritional status being unmanaged has increased. To ensure that children can eat a nutritious and well-balanced diet, UNICEF is working with local governments to provide training to midwives and nutritionists at health centers, who will then pass on their knowledge to other midwives and volunteers in their villages. They also pass on their knowledge to the children's parents and grandparents, and are working to solve fundamental nutritional problems among children (UNICEF, n.d.). If these activities are carried out in Africa, where there are many poor people, mothers who have not been educated about the importance of food and nutrition can acquire knowledge and be encouraged to feed their children adequately and send them to school.

### **6. Conclusion- The Role of Safety Nets in School Lunches**

School lunches have greatly contributed to solving poverty by preventing child marriages, increasing educational opportunities for children and women, and by partnering with local businesses. However, the challenge is that each country must be able to reproduce these processes as soon as possible to continue this activity in a sustainable manner, as it is currently based on support from organizations and other countries, who cannot promise how long they will assist. As already noted, school lunches play a major role in children going to school and receiving an education. From the viewpoint of preventing child marriage, if parents encourage girls to go to school for school lunches and food procurement, the family's food situation will be enriched and they will be able to reduce their food expenses and having to have their children for financial reasons I have amended this because reducing food expenditures is a financial reason i.e., this phrase is redundant and to reduce their food expenditures. Infectious, diseases such as AIDS can also be prevented

through education. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that even if food is available, there is a disparity in the amount of food within a family, but if school lunches are provided, they will be distributed equitably, and therefore, a certain amount of nutrition can be obtained equally. In addition, not only can child marriage be prevented through education, but more people can obtain jobs and can earn an income because school lunches bring more financial freedom to families and increase the likelihood that the country as a whole will be able to lift itself out of poverty. In addition, to ensure that students receive a proper education, WFP distributed cereals and vegetable oil only to students in South Sudan who not only went to school but also had an 80 percent attendance rate (WFP, 2021).

There are many examples in Sub-Saharan African countries, such as South Sudan and Sierra Leone, where school meals have enabled children to go to school. It is clear that school meals contribute to the formation of a social safety net, as they help girls avoid child marriage, enable distribution of food to distribute food to families, and, in cases like Vietnam, help people get jobs and influence the development of local businesses.

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