**Sierra Leone Faces Child Marriage Issue**

October 17, 2015

Voice of America

http://learningenglish.voanews.com/content/sierra-leone-faces-child-marriage-issue/3010446.html

The organization Girls Not Brides is a partnership of more than 500 civil **society** groups from over 70 countries. They are working together to end child marriage. Girls Not Brides reports that, in some areas, the rates of child marriage have risen sharply. It also says child marriage can increase during natural and humanitarian disasters. Now, the organization is urging governments worldwide to create policies and plans to end child marriage.

In Sierra Leone, the issue of child marriage is a growing concern.

Our story begins with a 16-year-old girl. She comes from a poor family in Sierra Leone. The girl started going out with a 30-year-old man because he was helping her financially. When she became pregnant, her stepfather told her to move out of the house and marry the man.

When the man discovered she was pregnant, he ended their relationship.

Mariama Munia Zombo says this kind of situation is all too common. She is a leader of the non-governmental organization Plan International Sierra Leone.

Poverty often leads parents to force girls to get married. When a girl is pregnant, it is seen as dishonoring the family so parents want her to marry.

Ms. Zombo says the Ebola crisis last year may have made things worse.

"There is a lot of **anecdotal** evidence that child marriage increased during the Ebola crisis, but no study has proven that child marriage actually increased," she says.

She adds that girls who marry at an early age are less likely to continue their education and are more likely to be abused by husbands. They are also more likely to have difficulties during pregnancy than older mothers. Sierra Leone has one of the world’s highest rates of women dying while giving birth.

Currently, the laws in Sierra Leone are conflicting. One law says child marriage is illegal. Another says that a girl under 18 can be married so long as a parent agrees.

The government is working on raising public recognition of the effects of child marriage through local community and religious leaders. But there is a long way to go for Sierra Leone and many other countries.

The group Girls Not Brides reports that about 15 million girls are married every year before they reach 18 years. It says that if no action is taken, 1.2 billion girls will be married as children by 2050.