



**ROBERT F.
KENNEDY
HUMAN
RIGHTS**

SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

**HUMAN RIGHTS
DEFENDERS WHO
ARE CHANGING
OUR WORLD**

**SONITA ALIZADEH: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION
AND CHOICE**

SONITA ALIZADEH

(SHE/HER/HERS)



Sonita Alizadeh was born in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in 1996. She was only 10 when her family tried to sell her into marriage, though the arrangement fell through. In 2010, her family walked hundreds of miles to Iran to escape the Taliban. Initially, she couldn't attend school but eventually received a basic education and discovered a passion for writing and music. It was dangerous to speak out and illegal for women to sing, but she wrote her first rap song nonetheless.

One by one, Alizadeh's friends were forced to marry older men. At 16, she was again told she would be sold into marriage. In protest, she wrote the rap "Brides for Sale" and made a YouTube video that went viral. Through rap music, Alizadeh tells her story and spreads the word about the impact of child marriage. A documentary about her life, "Sonita," premiered in November 2015.

Sonita Alizadeh lives in New York, where she is a student at Bard College, Class of 2023. She continues to serve as a passionate activist, sharing the stage with heads of state, Nobel laureates, and changemakers. In 2020, she addressed the United Nations about child marriage and education for girls.

INTERVIEW WITH SONITA ALIZADEH

BY HUNTER COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS CHARLOTTE SOEHNER
(12TH GRADE) AND TAMMUZ FRANKEL (11TH GRADE)

Conducted August 27, 2016, over Skype from California and Hunter College High School in NYC. A huge thank you to Benafsha Tasmim for her help with translating.

CHARLOTTE & TAMMUZ: Why do you think rap is a powerful tool for social change?

SONITA: People listen to lyrics, they pay attention. When I was in Iran, I think I was 14 years old, I was looking for ways to share my feelings with other people. As a refugee, as a child laborer and as a girl. Actually first I tried pop music but my message was too much to fit into a pop song. Then I tried rap music and I found it one of the best ways to share messages. So rap made me feel good. For me, it was a way to tell my story to other people and explain the real impact of child marriage. I think that sharing messages through rap can change attitudes and behaviors.

C & T: Child marriage is such a widespread global problem. How can we begin to address something of this magnitude?

S: I realize that many people don't know about child marriage and its harmful impacts. This practice has been going on for a long time. So, in order for change to happen at a larger level, community work, education, and policy change need to happen at the same time. Governments need to address ending child marriage through law — and commit to enforcing those laws — but the real shift happens at the local level, from the bottom up, person-by-person, family-by-family, community-by-community.

C & T: What do you believe the role of human rights education, like the RFK Human Rights Speak Truth To Power, has in combating child marriage?

S: It is important for people to learn about their rights. Child marriage violates fundamental human rights like education, equality, health and freedom

from violence. Many people don't think about it this way and don't understand how awful it is for girls. Human rights education can help people and communities understand problems more clearly and understand why it must stop. And it can even help girls themselves realize that they deserve more and that being forced to marry is against their human rights.

C & T: In your song, Daughters for Sale, you rap the lines “Let me scream out, scream out/ I'm tired of the silence”...what to you is the importance of reclaiming silenced voices?

S: It is important for every member of a society to have voice and be heard. This is the way societies grow and improve. When 50 percent of society is silent, this is not possible. I have so many friends who have so many things to say but they are afraid to talk. They just want to know what they can do and how they can share their stories. The lyrics are about this idea, at a very personal level. They are about what it's like to not be heard or valued. It makes you want to scream. Everybody has something to say. Every woman counts. But with every voice silent we lose a world of possibility.

C & T: In a lot of interviews we have seen of you, you've talked about how your mother was married at age 13 and that early marriage is all she knows. We know that you love her very much. We are wondering...what do you think is the role of compassion in creating change?

S: Yes, my mother was a child bride and didn't meet her husband until the wedding day. By marrying me at a young age, she was simply repeating the cycle. I can't hate my family for trying to sell me because I understand why they were doing it. When I look at

the root of the problem and see that it comes from lack of understanding instead of lack of love, I can approach its solution with care and compassion instead of bitterness and anger. I can see it is about teaching families and communities other ways and creating new opportunities for girls. This is a better way for lasting change. It is hard to solve problems with bitterness and anger. These problems are human, so we need to approach the solutions with humanity and compassion.

C & T: One of your lines is “my voice that is the voice of my generation.” Have you found support from Afghani and other Middle Eastern women of your own generation? Is there a significant generational gap between perceptions of child marriage?

S: I think that many teenage girls are like me. They want to bring positive change. Many young people have contacted me asking me what to do, because they want to support a positive change. That’s why I wanted to focus on youth, because they are determined to bring change. I believe that if the older generation is made aware of the harmful impact by young people, they will change.

C & T: Do you have a favorite memory or experience from your work as an activist? Where do you get your inspiration and energy?

S: Most of my memories of my life are not very good. They are of friends getting married young, not very pleasant. A memory that makes me happy

and hopeful was when I found out how many people wanted to help me bring change. When I was living in Iran, I didn’t know that there were people who cared and were working to end child marriage. That made me feel not alone on this journey, that there were so many who want to join. That was the most pleasant.

I am inspired by all the people already working for change. I think that we have to believe that anything is possible. I have a notebook that I call my Dreams Book. In it, I put pictures of the things I want to do and create in my life, even when they seem impossible. First I imagine it, then I make a picture of it on paper, then I talk about it like it is real, then I work very, very hard for it. That is the most important part. So many people around the world are working very, very hard to create change --not just me -- and this is very inspiring. Knowing that I am not alone keeps me going. My vision for the world gives me the energy I need to keep working: a world where every girl is allowed to reach her full potential, make her own choices, and live the life she chooses for herself. The image of that world in my mind inspires me and makes me determined to play my part in bringing positive social change. I am inspired every day to change this world for women and girls.

C & T: Thanks so much for your time!

S: Thanks so much for caring about child marriage!

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND CHOICE

LESSON GRADE LEVELS 9 TO 12

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

- **ARTICLE 3:** Right to life, liberty, and security of person.
- **ARTICLE 16:** Right to consent to marriage.
- **ARTICLE 19:** Right to freedom of expression.
- **ARTICLE 26:** Right to education.

TIME REQUIREMENT

One to five 40-minute lessons with additional time for work beyond the classroom.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How does child marriage reflect both circumstances and priorities within a society?
- What does Sonita teach us about the power of an individual to change her own story and influence new cultural practices?
- How can art and music function as a catalyst for defending and promoting human rights?

OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will:

- Understand the impact of child marriage.
- Expand their knowledge of the cultural, economic, and social constructs and circumstances that underlie child marriage.

COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.4
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.5
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.7
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.9
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.5
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.9

CONCEPTS

- Children's rights
- Girls' rights
- Human rights
- Coercion
- Freedom of choice

VOCABULARY

- Arranged marriage
- Child marriage
- Coercion
- Consent
- Culture
- Cultural norms
- Forced marriage
- Human trafficking
- UN Sustainable Development Goals

NOTE TO TEACHERS

- Child marriage is an issue all over the world. While we most often hear about child marriage in connection with countries, religions, and cultures not associated with Western societies, students need to understand that child marriages occur everywhere.

ANTICIPATORY SET

CHILD MARRIAGE FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

“IF WE RESCUE ONE GIRL FROM THIS TRADITION, WE HAVE RESCUED THOUSANDS OF OTHER GIRLS THROUGH HER EXAMPLE TO THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY.”

- Ask students to write what their goals are for this year, both academically and personally. Then ask them to consider the kinds of support they need to try to achieve their goals (financial, emotional, time, etc).
- Tell students they will be learning about child marriage through the eyes of a young girl their age whose only goal as a teenager was escaping marriage and getting educated.
- Role-play activity for students: Pretend you are about to be forced into marriage at your current age. Describe the thoughts and feelings you might have when your parents tell you. What are you worried about? Afraid of?

- **GUIDING QUESTIONS:** How are you being educated now? Where are you living now, and with whom? What are your roles and responsibilities now? How might all of that change if you were forced to marry? Discuss your feelings about your parents as they are planning to have you married. In what ways might they be complicated?
- On September 25, 2015, UN member nations adopted a set of goals to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all as part of a new sustainable development agenda. Each goal had specific targets to be achieved over 15 years. Have students read through the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) with particular attention to Goal 5, gender equality, and consider the following question: Why do you think child marriage is included as part of the Sustainable Development Goals?

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1

- Ask students to read Sonita's biography and interview excerpts.
- Ask students to watch [“Brides for Sale”](#) (3:49)
- What does the video say about the value of children, and of girls in particular? Why do you think she is bruised? Why do you think she has a barcode? Ask students to consider why a society might uphold such a practice. Have students brainstorm about this.
- **INITIATING ACTIVITY:** Distribute a blank world map. Have students list the places where they think child marriage happens.
- Read the [Council on Foreign Relations \(CFR\) child marriage information guide](#). As students read, they should answer the following questions:
 - Where does child marriage happen most?
 - What are the major factors that contribute to its prevalence?
 - What is the effect of economics on the problem of child marriage?
 - How do cultural norms impact child marriage?
 - What is the toll of child marriage on a society?
 - What are the ways in which the global community has tried to stop child marriage?
 - How does the Council on Foreign Relations information guide align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals?

ACTIVITY 2

- Break students into groups to study the following maps (listed below). For each map, students should answer how the map relates to the background they read in the prior activity.
 - What new information does it present?
 - To what extent do the maps reveal commonalities between countries in which child marriage presents a huge problem?
 - Can you identify any patterns that emerge across the maps?
 - What additional questions about child marriage come to mind as you look at these maps?
- In their groups, ask students to compare and contrast two countries from different regions of the world. Each group should use the resources listed below, or find their own, to do some additional research about these countries. Some examples of information students could find include: economic data (per capita income, poverty rates, etc.), educational data (literacy rates, schooling rates for girls vs. boys, etc.), and health data (male vs. female life expectancy, infant mortality rate, etc.). Ask students to consider how this information helps in understanding about the causes and consequences of child marriage.
- Ask students to brainstorm approaches that could be used to reduce the incidence of child marriage. After this, each group should review the policy options listed in the CFR guide and determine which policy or combination of policies would be most effective in the areas they studied and why. Students will present their results to the class. Conclude the activity by having students consider ways they, as young people, could further this goal.
- **MAPS**
 - <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/child-marriage-map/387214/>
 - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/where-child-marriage-happens/>
 - <https://www.womanstats.org/newmapspage.html>

ACTIVITY 3

- In groups, students will be assigned one of the personal survivor accounts from the [Girls Not Brides website](#).
 - Prompt for the group activity: Who is the story about? How old was the bride? What were the circumstances of her child marriage? How did her life change as a result?
 - What is the impact of child marriage on girls, their families, and communities?
 - Prompts for the whole class to consider: What do these stories have in common? Where do they diverge? How do they reveal the scope of this problem?
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ASSESSMENT 1

- Students will use an art form with which they are comfortable to express their ideas about Sonita's story and add their voice. They could create a song or video, write a poem, or paint or sketch. Students can include a connection between the problem and a potential solution/ideas for how to promote Goal 5.3.
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ASSESSMENT 2

- Students can return to the role play from the anticipatory set. Now that they have researched a specific country and know more about the causes, consequences, and possible solutions to child marriage, students should re-envision the initial imagined conversation with their parents. Is their response to their parents' initial demand for marriage different? How so? How do they imagine their parents' response? Ask them to write the exchange between a child and a parent about a proposed child marriage.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

Since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, many other international documents—also called treaties, covenants, resolutions, or conventions—have been drafted to develop these rights further. Countries commit to protect the rights recognized in these treaties by ratifying them, and sometimes a specific institution is created within the UN to monitor their compliance.

Here are examples of relevant international documents:

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (CRC)

- **ARTICLE 13:** Right to freedom of expression.
- **ARTICLE 14:** Right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.
- **ARTICLE 28:** Right to education.

CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN (CEDAW)

- **ARTICLE 16(1):** Right to freely choose a spouse.
- **ARTICLE 16(2):** Child marriages shall have no legal effect.

INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS (ICCPR)

INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL RIGHTS (ICESCR)

For more information, visit the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' website: www.ohchr.org.

BECOMING A DEFENDER

- Write a letter to any of the individuals/agencies listed below. Share your thoughts and feelings about child marriage and explain why you believe it must end. Make your argument relevant to the person or organization receiving the letter by using information and facts you have learned. Send your letter. Email a copy to Sonita at: connect@sonita.org so that we may add it to our advocacy efforts.
 - Sonita, Parent, Family member, Community leader, Elected official, United Nations
- Share your thoughts and feelings about child marriage in a creative art form (a drawing, painting, poem, photo, song, story, etc). Share it with your class or community to teach them about early child marriage. Then send it to Sonita at connect@sonita.org so that we may add it to our ongoing advocacy efforts.
- To end child marriage, we need to ensure that governments enact and enforce laws against this abusive practice. Stand with Sonita and declare the right for girls to choose if, when, and to whom they marry by signing [our solidarity petition at Global Citizen](#). Through this petition, we can all stand in solidarity with Sonita and the millions of girls affected by child marriage around the world.
- [Girls Not Brides](#) is a member-based organization of over 600 groups working to end child marriage. Look at the map and list of members and reach out to an organization that interests you, either close by or far away, to find out how you can get involved.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

GIRLS NOT BRIDES

<http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/>

Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of more than 600 civil society organizations from over 80 countries committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfill their potential.

UNCHAINED AT LAST

<http://www.unchainedatlast.org/>

Unchained At Last is the only nonprofit in the U.S. dedicated to helping women and girls leave or avoid arranged marriages and rebuild their lives. Unchained also is the only nonprofit in the U.S. dedicated to creating social change to end forced marriage in America.

THE ATLANTIC

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/child-marriage-map/387214/>

Article with map about where legal/illegal child marriage exists and the role laws can play in the perpetuating or stopping the practice.

USAID RESOURCES

https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2155/Child_Marriage_Vision_Factsheet.pdf

In-depth resource guide by USAID. Probably best for teachers. Excellent infographics, glossary, use of ecological model, and program examples.

CLINTON FOUNDATION (VIDEO)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6hKneYjubs>

Clinton Foundation: Child marriage stands in the way of girls' education.

TAHIRIH JUSTICE CENTER

<http://www.tahirih.org/who-we-serve/forms-of-violence/forced-marriage>

The Tahirih Justice Center is a nonprofit organization in the U.S. that serves women fleeing violence. They have a special program for ending child marriage in the U.S.

COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

<https://www.cfr.org/interactives/child-marriage#!/child-marriage>

An extensive guide including information about causes and consequences of child marriage, maps and charts, case studies.

