Dreaming of a Better Life

Child Marriage Through Adolescent Eyes

Editors: Gina Crivello and Gillian Mann

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Notes on contributors

Sairana Ahsan is Program Manager-Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) at CARE Bangladesh, addressing the SRH needs of adolescent girls and women in emergencies. Previously, she worked as a Research Fellow at the BRAC School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka. She has an MSc in Public Health from the University of Bedfordshire, UK with a Commonwealth Scholarship. Her career focus and research interests include sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), women's health, gender, adolescent health, sexual and reproductive health in education, and visual representation of research and knowledge.

Ambroise Aladji-Weka has worked in the field of communications, digital media, IT, and project management for more than 15 years. As a consultant for WiLDAF-AO, he manages the creation of publicity materials. He worked closely with stakeholders and collaborators and oversaw the production of the infographic 'Early Marriage in Mali, Niger and Togo: Data from Studies in Local Communities' presented in this volume.

Jean-Paul Akakpo-Ahianyo, PhD, is a Lecturer in the Sociology of Education and a Researcher at the Demographic Research Unit at the University of Lomé, Togo. He supported the monitoring and evaluation activities and reporting of the Togo component of WiLDAF-AO's research on early marriage in Mali, Niger and Togo.

Raia Azmi is a Research Fellow and junior faculty at the Master of Public Health programme of the BRAC School of Public Health, BRAC University, and holds MBBS and MPH degrees. Her research interests include child marriage, persons with disabilities, adolescent health, gender, and sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as implementation research, and monitoring and evaluation.

Subas Biswas is a Senior Research Fellow at the BRAC School of Public Health, BRAC University. He has Master's degrees in Botany, Development Studies, and Public Health, and focuses on gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights, marginalised community empowerment and development. His expertise is in designing research and interventions, including developing Behavioural Change Communication and implementation.

Francis Bravo is an anthropologist from the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. He holds a diploma in Youth Studies and Policies in Latin America from the Latin American Faculty for Social Sciences, FLACSO, Argentina. Currently he is an Assistant Researcher at the Group for the Analysis of Development (GRADE). He supported the YMAPS study in Peru, undertaking the fieldwork component and contributing to data analysis.

Oumoul Khaïry Coulibaly-Tandian holds a PhD in Social Anthropology and is an Associate Lecturer at the Higher School of Applied Economics, Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar. She specialises in gender issues and the management of development projects, and is the coordinator and principal researcher on an action research project on access to justice for rural women and girls who are victims of sexual violence in Senegal and Mauritania.

Gina Crivello is a Senior Researcher with Young Lives, University of Oxford, UK, where she leads the research on gender, adolescence and youth. She is co-Principal Investigator of the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) funded by IDRC. Her current research explores the interrelated schooling, work and marriage trajectories of girls and boys who grow up in poverty and their support needs as they transition to adulthood.

Nicole Gbedeba Dagawa, a lawyer by training, is a Communications Assistant at Women in Law and Development in Africa-Afrique de l'Ouest (WiLDAF-AO), and has eight years of experience in the field of development and women's and girls' rights. She has a Master's degree in public law from the University Félix Houphouët-Boigny.

Fatou Diop Sall is a social anthropologist at the University Gaston Berger (UGB) of Saint Louis, Senegal, where she is the President of the Gender Committee. She is a member of the Certificate of Advanced Studies at the Graduate Institute (IHEID) teaching team in Geneva, and the Coordinator of the Gender and Societies Research Group (GESTES). Fatou is also the Team Leader of the 'Kick it like a girl: women in the African public space' project, and is currently conducting research on child marriage in West Africa.

Atavi Mensah Edorh is a statistician with international and national experience who specialises in the processing of quantitative data. He supported the programming, processing, presentation and analysis of the statistical data in the research led by WiLDAF-AO on early marriage in Togo.

Koffi Ludovic Ehouma, PhD, is a Lecturer in the Sociology of Health and a Researcher at the Institute of Anthropological Development Science (Institut des Sciences Anthropologiques de Développement) at the University Félix Houphouët-Boigny in Abidjan. He is the Head of the Pedagogic Unit for Science, Societies, and Development Studies (Unité pédagogique Sciences, Sociétés, et Développement).

Hugues Fonzan is a Senior Graphic Designer, responsible for the creative, artistic and technical aspects of WiLDAF-AO's publications. He developed the design, icons and visual elements of the infographic 'Early Marriage in Mali, Niger and Togo: Data from Studies in Local Communities' presented in this volume.

Kath Ford is the Programme Manager of Young Lives, based at the University of Oxford. Before joining Young Lives, Kath worked for 14 years as a Governance Advisor at the UK's Department for International Development, leading on a broad range of policy areas across Africa and Asia, including violence against women and girls, democracy and local accountability, security and access to justice.

Nikki van der Gaag is an independent gender consultant, a Senior Fellow at Instituto Promundo, and, until January 2019, was Director of Gender Justice and Women's Rights at Oxfam GB. She has been working with Young Lives as a consultant for 10 years, including a period on the Young Lives International Advisory Board.

Zeinaba Kane is a Lecturer in the Department of Legal Engineering at the University Alioune Diop in Bambey, Senegal, and a Research Associate in the Laboratoire Groupe d'Études et de Recherche Genre et Société (GESTES) at Gaston Berger University. She has a PhD in Legal Engineering from the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in Dakar. Her specialised teaching includes modules on environmental rights, governance and land law. She has contributed to scientific studies on climate change, the rights of local authorities, gender-based and migration-related violence, and other subjects.

Poonam Kathuria is the Founder-Director of the Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives (SWATI). Poonam has over 20 years of experience working on the prevention of gender-based violence, women's empowerment and leadership. Her work involves project design and management, situation analysis, action research and capacity development to promote the rights of women and girls.

Gillian Mann, a social anthropologist, is co-Principal Investigator for the four-country Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS), and is also Head of Research and Evaluation for Child Frontiers and a Research Associate for Young Lives. Her work is focused on bridging the divide between academic and policy- and intervention-oriented research on issues related to children's well-being and protection.

Seama Mowri is a development sector professional with varied experience in project management, qualitative research and strategy consulting. She has a Bachelors degree from the University of Toronto, Canada, majoring in Economics and a MBA from the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) in Bangladesh. She is interested in the framing of women's empowerment and how that intersects with gender roles, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and economic development.

Oliver Mweemba is an anthropologist who works as a Lecturer/Researcher in the Department of Health Promotion and Education, School of Public Health at the University of Zambia. He is the co-Principal Investigator of the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) in Zambia.

Subhalakshmi Nandi is Director (Policy) at the Asia Office of the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). She has over 16 years of experience in policy advocacy, coalition-building, research and practice in the field of gender and development in South Asia, primarily on issues of women's work and labour rights, and the political economy of violence.

Sabina F. Rashid, PhD, a medical anthropologist, is Dean and Professor at the BRAC School of Public Health, BRAC University. She is the Principal Investigator of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) funded research project 'Preventing early marriage in poor urban settlements in Bangladesh'. Her areas of expertise are ethnographic and qualitative research. Her research focuses on gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights, sexuality and the well-being of adolescents, young women and men, marginalised populations, human rights, urban poverty, governance and health services.

Vanessa Rojas is a PhD candidate at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain. She has a degree in Anthropology and a Master's degree in Political Science from the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. She is the Coordinator of the qualitative component of Young Lives Peru, and led the qualitative YMAPS research in Peru. Currently, she is an Adjunct Researcher at the Group for the Analysis of Development (GRADE).

Ghausia Rashid Salam is a writer, feminist and researcher, and was a Research Associate in the SRHR department at Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre, where they worked on issues such as feminist movement-building, women and youth's access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and child and early-age marriage. Currently, they are pursuing an MA in Power, Participation, and Social Change at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK.

Farida Shaheed, the Executive Director of Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre, Pakistan's first feminist organisation, and founder of Women's Action Forum, has promoted gender equality for more than three decades. Widely published and the recipient of several international and national awards, she combines research, grassroots work and advocacy. The UN's first Special Rapporteur on cultural rights (2009- 2015), she was a member of the National Commission on the Status of Women (2016-2019), and is Treasurer of Dastak, an independent women's shelter.

Navsharan Singh is a Senior Program Specialist in IDRC's Governance and Justice Program, based in the Asia Regional Office, New Delhi. An expert in women's and human rights in South Asia, her wide-ranging experience addresses sexual and reproductive health, the informal economy, sexual violence and impunity, feminist jurisprudence, and women's political participation and economic rights. She holds a PhD in political science from Carleton University and Master's degrees in Economics and Political Economy.

Renu Singh is the Executive Director of Young Lives Research to Policy Centre, India, and has been the Country Director of the Young Lives longitudinal study since 2010. A trained Montessorian, special educator and educational psychologist, she previously ran a school in Dubai, was Director of the School of Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Delhi, and was Director, Technical Support, Research, Monitoring and Evaluation, at Save the Children. Her research interests include gender, inclusion and early childhood education.

Rafia Sultana is a Research Associate at the BRAC School of Public Health, BRAC University. She has Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Social Anthropology. Rafia focuses on qualitative research and her research interests are gender and diversity, public health, creative media and the visual representation of research.

Ramata Molo Thioune is currently a Senior Program Specialist and oversees research in IDRC's Governance and Justice Program focusing on West and Central Africa. Her areas of expertise and interest include citizen security, gender-based violence, women's social, political and economic rights, land governance, access to justice, and inclusive governance with a special interest on women and youth. She has coordinated the consolidation of IDRC supported work on EFCM.

Marie Reine Toudeka is a Research Assistant at the Demographic Unit of the University of Lomé, Togo, and holds a PhD in Sociology. She was involved in the qualitative data collection and wrote the reports for WiLDAF-AO's research on early marriage in Togo. Her research interests include gender disparities and the status of women.

Preface

Navsharan Singh and Ramata Molo Thioune

Child marriage has received increased global attention over the last 40 years, with women's rights advocates, human rights defenders and social development practitioners determinedly advocating for policy and action to prevent child and early marriages, arguing that they violate human rights, women's rights and the rights of the child. These arguments have been underpinned by international laws, treaties and conventions such as the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Child marriage has also gained prominence on international development agendas. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which define global development priorities until 2030, include target 5.3 to 'eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations' (under SDG 5, to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'). Over 190 countries have adopted the SDGs and committed to ending child marriage by 2030.

Most countries with a high incidence of child marriage have also legislated for a minimum legal age of marriage, making child marriage a criminal offence, and there is wider acceptance that early marriage causes harm to the physical, psychological, social and economic well-being and development of girls and women. Boys and young men are also affected in some settings. Such marriages often change the trajectory of children's and young people's lives in profound ways and can cause physical harm, especially when girls are forced into sexual relations without free and full consent, or with insufficient knowledge.

Yet according to estimates, globally each year 15 million girls are married as children. Evidence also suggests widespread violations of human rights and statutory laws in many of the countries where child marriage is common. Furthermore, many countries have pluralistic legal systems, and customary law and practice often contradict and override national law, making enforcement difficult.

Why is this practice continuing despite the laws, conventions and evidence of harm? What explains the tenacity of child marriage and how do we understand it? Is it only the 'backwardness' of the communities in which the practice is widespread? A deeper examination of these questions points to the social and cultural practices and normative structures that define the lives of women and girls, and men and boys, which are continually invented and reinvented to produce such outcomes. The rigidity of these social and cultural practices is reinforced by specific larger political economic structures that support unequal gender power distribution and patriarchal norms.

However, evidence from IDRC-supported work on similarly entrenched issues such as sex-selective abortions, son preference, female genital mutilation and gender-based 'honour' crimes demonstrates that traditions are not cast in stone: they are made in history and, since they are made, they can also be unmade. That is to say, change is possible: attitudes can be changed, girls and women can be empowered to become agents of change and exercise agency through resistance, and viable pathways to address the practice of child marriage can be developed and scaled up through a better understanding and the right mix of effective programmes, policies and political will. This lesson has been extremely valuable in IDRC's work on ending child marriage.

IDRC's Governance and Justice programme on preventing and ending child marriage builds on feminist historical, sociological and political literature which indicates that early and child marriage is a phenomenon associated with the structural subordination of women and girls and acquires different meaning in different social and historical contexts. Feminist scholarship points to a long history of subordination of women and girls in terms of control over their bodies, sexuality and labour, and how girls and women become the bearers of community honour and social norms. Lessons are also drawn from IDRC-supported work in conflict contexts where young girls are married to protect them from the risk of sexual violence perpetrated by the aggressor to humiliate the community. Evidence shows how the institution of marriage is used to uphold patriarchal social morality and social anxiety over the unbridled sexuality of girls, and justified as a deeply rooted practice which has been part of a religion or culture for generations. Whether the practice is cited as cultural or religious, it is rooted in unequal gender power relations, exercised through the control of girls' and women's sexuality.

The Governance and Justice programme contextualises child marriage within a rights and justice perspective, with a focus on gender-based violence. The work supported by the programme was developed to illuminate the connection between early and child marriage, gender-based violence, and unequal gender power relations in society in specific contexts. The learning from each context is varied and the trajectories of change are also diverse, pointing to the need for contextual understanding of how child marriage is articulated within specific socio-cultural and economic structures. Particular to this initiative has been framing the problem not entirely in terms of measuring change through age indicators, but also on how structural factors that sustain the prevalence of child marriage are shifted. This work builds on insights from scholarly literature but takes an action-oriented approach, investigating social and policy pathways for bringing about positive transformative change in response to, and to tackle, this sensitive and persistent issue.

Introduction

Gina Crivello and Gillian Mann

This book showcases evidence and new learning from an international suite of research projects on 'Early Child and Forced Marriage' supported since 2015 by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada. IDRC's support was motivated by the global commitment to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.3, that calls for the elimination of child marriage and other harmful traditional practices by 2030. Together, these studies contribute evidence from observational and intervention research both about what matters in the families, relationships, communities and wider environments affecting marriage choices for, and the subjective experiences of, girls and boys; and about what works to delay and prevent child marriage, and empower girls and families.

As the editors of this book, and co-Principal Investigators of the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study, one of the projects funded by IDRC in this suite of studies, we took an inclusive approach that gave all projects within IDRC's child marriage programme the opportunity to contribute material. Compiling the volume involved working bilingually across English and French and bringing together intervention programmes with observational studies. We invited a variety of chapter formats: the result is a combination of traditional contributions, photo essays, expert interview transcripts and infographics. The collection spans multiple country and regional contexts – Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire, India, Mali, Niger, Pakistan, Peru, Senegal, Togo and Zambia – and offers a window into the diverse drivers and manifestations of child marriage in different settings.

The range of research projects also brought variation in the language and concepts used. Rather than impose uniformity, authors were encouraged to use their preferred concepts, including: 'child marriage', 'child and early-age marriage', 'early and young age marriage' and 'early or child marriage'. Authors sometimes use these related concepts interchangeably to refer to any formal marriage or informal union where one or both parties are under 18 years of age.

The book is divided into four themed sections. Although most chapters explore more than one theme, they are clustered according to those that resonated most strongly and to the unique contribution that each has to make. It is our hope that the volume offers new learning and fresh insights to anyone who picks it up, including researchers, policymakers, programme and service providers, community-based and non-governmental organisations, multilateral agencies and others.

Theme 1: Adolescent girls' agency and roles in marital decision-making

Campaigns to eliminate child marriage typically underscore female victimhood and girls' lack of choice when they marry before the age of 18. However, the three chapters in Theme 1 highlight the complexity of adolescent girls' agency and roles in marital decision-making and suggest that more nuanced approaches are required. In different ways, all of the projects featured in this book share a concern with girls' agency, consent and choice with respect to whether, when and whom to marry, and all of the interventions were premised on a goal of girls' empowerment. All of the projects are responding to the persistent reality that many girls who marry before they are 18 years old continue to have little say in the matter, and, moreover, they are subsequently disadvantaged in the power relations that characterise their marital households. There is emerging evidence that the current generation of adolescents is exercising greater choice in their marital decisions, but that their choices might also carry certain risks, for example, weakening family support for couples who elect to marry informally or cutting short girls' and boys' schooling. The inclusion of projects from differing social and geographic settings reveals that the indicators of agency and empowerment can be difficult to extrapolate in contexts where girls have limited life alternatives, and where they are not seen and do not see themselves as autonomous agents who act in the world, independent of others.

The first chapter in this section, by Mowri and colleagues, uses ethnographic, qualitative and survey evidence from urban Bangladesh to argue for a wider rethinking of consent and coercion in the context of child marriage. The authors contend that the rhetoric of child marriage is too often framed in binary terms of 'love' versus 'arranged' marriages, based on simplistic understandings of consent, and propose instead a continuum of consent that better reflects the social reality of constrained choice. They point to the need for greater attention to the contexts in which consent is negotiated, and argue that in the urban informal settlements they studied, consenting to marriage is almost never free of degrees of socio-cultural obligations, persuasion, control of female sexuality, and threats and pressure exerted by different actors.

The next chapter, by Shaheed and Salam, describes the Humsathi intervention study in rural Pakistan that had 'unlocking girls' agency' as a key objective. The authors describe the challenges and successes of implementing 'adolescent friendly safe spaces' as a methodology to strengthen both girls' agency and intergenerational support for delaying child marriage. In this context, there are many constraints on girls' agency, with young female bodies policed through control over girls' mobility, dress, behaviour and aspirations. The norm is for marriage decisions to be made for girls, sometimes at the time of birth, and refusals by girls or their families to follow through risk damaging complex family relationships, honour and alliances. The intervention was effective in building girls' capacities within a wider network of support to delay their marriages. A common theme emerging in this chapter and others is the need to break the culture of silence surrounding young female bodies, which undermines girls' self-confidence and agency.

Indeed, 'Breaking the Silence' is the title of the chapter by Rojas and colleagues, looking at young female experiences of informal marriages, cohabitation and pregnancy in Peru, where rigid gender norms, the control of adolescent sexuality, the social stigma of premarital sex and economic conditions combine to limit adolescent girls' choices. The authors describe

how, most often, the desire for independence and material security, unintended pregnancy and the need to escape violence or abuse in the family home motivate adolescent girls to move in with their boyfriends, opting for an informal union rather than a formal marriage. They argue that schools have a crucial role to play in educating girls and boys early on to question prevailing gender roles in society so that children and young people are able to envisage, and have the confidence to pursue, a different route from that which leads to early cohabitation and parenthood.

These chapters and others show that interventions based on empowerment approaches appear to be most effective when they involve multiple stakeholders in girls' lives and when they work to change both individual capacities as well as wider systems of power. Moreover, it is important to operationalise how concepts like 'agency' and 'empowerment' are used and measured in specific contexts, and to invest in longitudinal research to capture the results and impacts of interventions over time.

Theme 2: Daily lives and experiences of married girls and boys and young people

Theme 2 brings together three contributions related to the daily lives and experiences of married girls and boys and young people. Despite laws and policies that prohibit marriage for girls and boys in many settings, marriage is nevertheless understood by many children and families alike to be the best available means of protecting girls from abuse, exploitation and maltreatment in the home, pregnancy outside marriage, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and sexual violence in the community. It is also a way to preserve a girl's reputation and her family's honour and to provide her, and by extension her family, with improved material, economic and social circumstances. It is a mechanism to solidify bonds between families and to ensure community survival and social cohesion, especially in times of crisis. Moreover, marriage and family formation are widely considered essential steps in the transition to adulthood and the full performance of women's and men's socially expected gender roles. Child marriage flourishes in contexts characterised by economic insecurity, limited opportunity, inadequate and insufficient basic services, and uncertainty about the future. The everyday reality of life in these circumstances often leads families, including adolescent girls and boys themselves, to choose marriage as the most viable life option.

In their photo story depicting the lives of six adolescent girls and young women in the urban slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh, Sairana and colleagues provide a much-needed window into the diverse experiences of girls in this setting, and the constellation of personal, familial and social factors that promote or deter marriage for individuals. Among those profiled are two married girls, Rekha and Rupa, both 16 years old. Their narratives highlight their varied routes to, and experience of, marriage: Rekha chose to marry in order to improve her difficult and risky living situation, and Rupa went against her parents' wishes to elope with a young man six years her senior. Although Rekha regrets getting married and the sacrifices and pressures it has involved, marriage has posed fewer barriers to Rupa, who has enrolled in university-level studies and is active in the community. In placing these girls' stories alongside one another, and alongside those of their unmarried peers, the authors remind us of the complex webs that

shape personal experience as well as the importance of understanding their heterogeneity, including among married girls.

Mann and Mweemba also use a photo story to profile the experiences of married children and young people in Zambia, presenting photographs taken by Bridget, an 18-year-old divorced mother, to explore the broad question: 'What is it like to be a mother or father?'. Through Bridget's images and the accompanying narrative, we learn about her daily life, and her goals, priorities and challenges. Like the accounts provided by young married girls, boys, and young women and men in Bangladesh, Bridget's story demonstrates the multifaceted and complex circumstances that surround young marriage, parenthood and divorce in contexts characterised by poverty and inequality.

Both Sairana and colleagues, and Mann and Mweemba, focus on girls' experience of marriage, parenthood and divorce. The insights they provide are enriched when placed alongside those of married boys and young men. Growing attention to the experiences and perspectives of young males in research on child marriage has revealed the prevalence of the practice among specific groups of boys and young men in different settings. In their chapter, Biswas and colleagues report on their study among adolescents growing up in informal settlements in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and focus on societal attitudes towards masculinity and gender roles that influence marital decision-making among boys and their families. In these environments, often characterised by poverty and limited social and economic mobility, being married is a way for boys and young men to demonstrate that they are a 'real man'. Their narratives reveal the complex and often overwhelming challenges that young husbands face in these circumstances.

Theme 3: Child marriage on the continuum of sexual and gender-based violence

The two chapters that comprise Theme 3 reflect on the relationship between child marriage and sexual and gender-based violence, based on studies in Senegal and India. Following the thematic thread set out in Theme 1, these chapters employ a sexual and gender-based violence lens to contest issues around consent and agency in early, child and forced marriages.

Like many of the other IDRC-supported studies, the chapter by Coulibaly-Tandian responds to the fundamental lack of marital choice faced by girls and young women in Senegal. She argues that child marriage is socially accepted rape because those under the age of 18 are considered unable to freely consent to marriage or to sexual relations within marriage. The chapter discusses an intervention study in the Kolda region, where child marriage continues despite Senegal's strong national legal and policy framework designed to reduce the practice. The main aim of the intervention was to empower girls and women to improve their access to justice and to facilitate their collaboration with strategic allies within the community to strengthen the relations and support systems around them.

Similarly, the core aims of the kNOw Fear intervention study in rural Gujarat, India, were strengthening girls' and women's leadership and confidence, and building enabling environments that reduce their risk of sexual and gender-based violence in public spaces. In their chapter, Kathuria and Nandi describe the feminist methodology developed through

kNOw Fear to strengthen local political systems and break the silence and stigma around public space sexual violence against girls and women in rural areas. Tackling social fears around the sexual harassment of girls and women in public is hugely important, they argue, because these fears drive families to pull girls out of education and to push them into the home and early marriage.

Theme 4: Policies and programmes to reduce child marriage in different settings

Theme 4 explores insights and findings related to policies and programmes to reduce child marriage in various settings. Several of the IDRC-supported projects were intervention studies: most employed an empowerment focus in which girls and women are conceptualised as central agents in the reduction and elimination of child marriage in their communities. Theme 4 brings together four chapters on this important topic.

As part of its goal to develop effective and sustainable interventions to eliminate child marriage in rural communities across Mali, Niger and Togo, Aladji-Weka and colleagues examined statistical evidence and locals' views of the causes and consequences of the practice. The project infographic included in this book outlines the range of personal and contextual features in the lives of girls, families and communities that motivate child marriage in these settings, and highlights the wide range of possible responses in different situations and circumstances, where in every locality a locally specific package of information, services and support needs to be developed and carefully implemented. Working in this way enabled WiLDAF-AO and colleagues in each country to build on community members' views, motivations and initiatives, and highlights the importance of engaging, supporting and working within existing structures and networks to combat child marriage.

Elsewhere in West Africa, using a social justice framework which seeks equal rights for all citizens, regardless of age, gender, place of residence, or economic or social circumstances, Diop Sall and colleagues ask why, despite strong laws in both Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal prohibiting marriage under the age of 18, the practice still prevails. To answer this question, the authors explore the differential impacts of policies across rural and urban areas in these two countries. Ultimately, they argue that although a number of initiatives are underway, these tend to be poorly coordinated, unevenly rolled out across rural and urban areas, and not sufficiently targeted to those most in need of support and sensitisation. The authors contend that real and sustainable change in Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and beyond requires systematic public policy to drive the development and coordination of multisectoral interventions to combat child marriage at the national and local level.

In Togo, as in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, child marriage is common, especially in rural areas. In their interview, Akakpo-Ahianyo and colleagues explain why the Lamma-Tessi and Tamongue regions have the highest prevalence, and describe the interventions that they designed and implemented to reduce the rates of marriage in several communities. These activities focused on equipping girls and women with improved knowledge about the negative consequences of child marriage, and on practical skills to raise awareness and advocate on behalf of themselves and their peers. The interview points to the importance of developing

policies, services and programmes that build on the strengths and developing capacities of young people to connect with, and establish alliances with, each other, adults, religious leaders, keepers of tradition and others in order to ensure lasting change.

The final chapter is an interview with Renu Singh, who describes her experience of using longitudinal data and census analysis to influence a landmark 2017 judgment of the Indian Supreme Court that ruled that every husband who has sex with a minor wife is committing rape. She points out that although India has strong laws relating to rape, up until this point, marital rape had not been included, even in cases where the wife is underage. Reflecting on her experience, Singh highlights the importance of sustained interactions with policymakers, and of being flexible and responsive to political opportunities as they arise, through the provision of evidence in formats that are easily accessible to policymakers.

All of the contributions touch on multiple important and overlapping issues. Space does not permit the authors to do justice to the breadth and richness of the findings, outcomes and impact of their projects, and readers are encouraged to follow-up and read further project outputs. It is our intention that the new evidence and insights in these chapters will together deepen understandings of the experiences of girls and boys and young people who marry, the predictors of and motivations for child marriage, the wider implications of child marriage on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and of ways to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and gender inequality. Moreover, based on this collective evidence, our aim is to demonstrate not only the importance of employing nuanced and context-specific approaches to all efforts to reduce and eliminate child marriage, but also the inter-relatedness of this issue and many others that children and families contend with across the globe.

THEME 1:
Adolescent girls' agency and roles in marital decision-making

Binary Framing of Consent and Coercion of Child Marriage

A Critique

Seama Mowri, Rafia Sultana, Subas Biswas, Raia Azmi, Sairana Ahsan, and Sabina F. Rashid

BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Correspondence: seama.mowri@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The rhetoric around child marriage continues to be framed in binary terms, with the difference between 'arranged' and 'love' marriages hinging on the concept of consent.[1] The context in which consent is constructed, however, remains less explored. 'Lack of consent' is a very hard concept to define. Most studies tend to focus on the support for, and history of, victims of non-consent (Abu Amara, Guiné, and Hamel 2013) rather than seeking to define it, since the research concerns women who report being the victims of forced marriage. Overall, the concept of consent has been left relatively undefined and understudied. It is important to rectify this and collectively agree to what constitutes affirmative consent, so we can truly know how far theory and practice coincide, and whether genuine consent is truly possible within the institutions of poverty and marriage.

In this chapter, we examine the socio-cultural construction of consent, especially with regard to early or child marriage,[2] and the intersecting structural inequalities that constrain particular groups of young women in the urban slums of Bangladesh. As Nicole-Claude Mathieu (1985) rightly pointed out, 'giving in is not the same as consenting'; similarly, our analysis of 65 qualitative interviews with adolescent girls and young women also suggests that consenting to marriage is almost never free of degrees of socio-cultural obligations, control of sexuality, persuasion, pressure, threat and force from different actors.

We explore a range of situations where young women yield to social pressures and consent to marriage. However, 'pressure' in this context is not necessarily limited to violence or intimidation, but rather marriage as a norm that cannot be challenged. The girls attribute their early marriages and lack of alternatives to circumstances 'beyond their control'. The affection and trust that they felt for their parents prevented them from labelling their obligations as coercion. On the other hand, there are cases of girls who claimed to have been 'forced to consent' to marry their boyfriends who would have otherwise 'committed suicide'. These narratives warrant contextualisation to determine the consent–coercion continuum.

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1   In the context of slums, a love marriage between two consenting partners (minors or not) is usually the result of some form of courtship (or meeting in secret to escape the disapproving eyes of parents and peers), stemming from the need to gain social acceptance in order to continue.

2   Human rights discourses define 'child marriage' as marriage involving a spouse under 18 years of age (Bunting 2005; Bunting, Lawrance, and Roberts 2016). This definition carries with it the notion that persons under this age are unable to give informed consent regarding their future. Here, we use the terms child marriage and early marriage interchangeably, both indicating marriage under the age of 18 years.

2. Background

2.1. Arranged marriages, love marriages and 'somewhere in between'

Child marriage remains pervasive in South Asia, where more than half of all such marriages occur (ICRW 2013). In spite of well-meaning laws, the high incidence of child marriage in southern Asia is one of the greatest human rights challenges for the development of the region. A dangerous combination of entrenched poverty and customs, deeply embedded in patriarchal societies, continue to fuel the harmful practice of early marriage, particularly of girls. Economic constraints, customary laws, culture and tradition often trump national policies and legislation, and prevent existing education programmes from effectively keeping girls in school.

Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world (UNICEF-UNFPA 2017). Although the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh is 18 years for girls, the 2007 Demographic and Health Survey showed that the median age at first marriage for females aged 20–24 was 16.4 years (NIPORT 2010). This is despite the fact that child marriage is punishable under Bangladesh's Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017). However, the penalties are weak, with only imprisonment of up to one month or a fine equivalent to roughly US$12.50, or both (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2017).

2.2. Consent is not binary

Mathieu (1985) emphasised the fact that women are led 'to a bogus form of consent' since they are subjected to numerous pressures to which they 'submit' rather than truly consenting, creating paradoxical situations in which the dominated give the impression of willingness. Moreover, consent to marriage tends to be loosely bounded by constraints and values that are embedded in a system of social norms wherein consent becomes an entirely relative notion; extracting consent and the variety of processes leading a person to 'submit' and outwardly 'consent', and even express a 'wish' to get married, in an environment of strong social coercion (Abu Amara, Guiné, and Hamel 2013) . It is often seen that even if violence is the most palpable and identifiable manifestation of the coercion behind consent, it is also far from being the only means of applying pressure. Social norms contribute to the creation of a hierarchy between the young women and their families, and their internalisation affects women's ability to express their wishes and to make sure that they are respected.

2.3. Women's agency and decision making in oppressive contexts

Young women are often considered to exercise agency 'within constraints', referring to the idea that they operate within a particular hierarchy of power relations (Bell 2007). The context of young women's constraints will vary within and across different spheres, such as parental, social, cultural or economic spheres. Klocker (2007) distinguishes between 'thick' and 'thin'

agency, where thick agency refers to those within a broad range of options and thin agency to the decisions and actions that are made in highly restrictive contexts (Murphy-Graham and Leal 2015). In addition, three other types of agency are often mentioned in the literature. First, there is the conception of agency as subtle or oppositional agency, whereby greater emphasis is placed on the ability of a person to exert influence over their own life by showing resistance to other controls (Bell 2007). The second type is 'little' agency, or agency as accommodating where girls act in a way that is expected of them, often out of necessity or for survival. Third, there is the notion of opportunistic agency. This idea is based on the concept of 'judicious opportunism' introduced by Johnson-Hanks (2005). Opportunistic agency is defined as a response to the limited choices girls may have and seizing any chance they get. Opportunistic agency is shown by girls who chose marriage as a way out of their unfortunate circumstances. Girls in this case had often made a sudden decision to marry because they wanted to take a chance to find happiness and/or a better life and future in general. Johnson-Hanks found that young women who plan for their future, in particular with regards to marriage and fertility, often take advantage of whatever opportunity arises (Murphy-Graham and Leal 2015). This concept can help us to understand why young girls sometimes decide to marry in a context of uncertainty about other options that may be available to them in the future. According to Robinson (2009), diverse forms of female agency are manifested in the gender orders that are common in a society. In this chapter, we illustrate these types with case stories from our field research.

3. Approach

This chapter draws on data from a larger mixed-methods study, in which fieldwork was conducted from 15 March 2016 to 12 January 2018, in two urban informal settlements in Bangladesh: Bhashantek in Dhaka and Shantinagar in Chattogram. Urban informal settlements are deprived spaces, usually illegally established, with informal governance, crime and insecurity, and limited access to formal education, information and health services. These sites were chosen because they are two of the largest and oldest informal settlements situated in two of the largest cities in the country.

For the study, girls and boys aged 13-19 years were considered as adolescents and those aged 20-24 years were considered young women and men (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2016). Early or child marriage was defined as a marriage of a girl before the age of 18 years (UNICEF 2017). Respondents who were unmarried at age 18 or after were considered as people who will have a 'delayed marriage'. Boys were considered to be married early if they were below 21 years old at marriage, where 21 is the legally permitted age of marriage for boys in Bangladesh.

Sixty-five qualitative interviews were conducted with adolescent girls and young women between the ages of 13-24; of these, 30 were married early. Qualitative data were generated through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews, using separate guidelines consisting of open-ended questions formulated on the basis of a literature review and stakeholder consultations. We also took into consideration the way in which these

marriages were experienced and described by the women. After the open question 'Can you tell me about your marriage?', follow-up questions elicited information on the degree of consent, such as: 'What did you feel when you got married?', 'Who made the decision that the marriage would occur?', 'What kind of support did you have (if any)?' and questions exploring life before and after marriage. The guidelines were pretested then adapted and applied iteratively throughout the study. Respondents were purposively selected: adolescents as well as young men and women on the basis of age and marital status, and parents of adolescents were selected to speak about early marriage practices within their community. After transcription and verbatim translation of interview recordings, coding was done using Atlas Ti, followed by a thematic analysis.

4. Results

Out of the 30 women who married early, only five conveyed that they had wanted to get married at the time and had a choice in who they married. Twenty-five did not initiate their marriage, reporting that they 'wanted to get married, but later' or that they 'did not want to get married, but were obliged to do so because of family pressure'.

We have attempted to categorise the typologies[3] of consent leading to early marriage, but, in reality, the reasons are not distinct and overlap or intersect in different ways (which is why the numbers in Table 1 do not add up to 30).

Table 1. Typologies of consent leading to early marriage

Type of consent	Reasons	No. of women
Consent derived through psychological pressure (intimidation, guilt) as well as physical and emotional threats of violence	Lack of family support	3
	Blackmailed, fear of stigma and shame	2
Reluctant consent	Obligation towards caregivers	7
	Only rational choice to escape poverty	1
	No consent (respondent was unaware of her upcoming marriage but also not in a situation to resist it)	3
Enthusiastic consent	Fell in love and eloped	3
	Fell in love and convinced family to agree	2

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3   The categories are merely expressions of aspects of a continuum between consent and coercion. They do not represent a neatly boxed typology but rather the attributes and traits of each situation, which may overlap at times or be distinct in some cases.

4.1. Combination of psychological pressure and the threat of physical violence

The forms of coercion mentioned by respondents consisted primarily of emotional blackmail and psychological pressure in the form of intimidation and the creation of feelings of guilt. The moral pressure exerted was enough to compel consent. Sharmin (20), a girl who married early, said that her current husband had initially offered her courtship which she refused. After that her father-in-law came to her house to request that her family approve the marriage. Sharmin wished to continue her studies and did not want to get married. But her grandfather insisted that he was getting old and would like to see Sharmin married before he died. The grandfather even made up stories of Sharmin and the boy engaging in pre-marital physical intimacy, telling them to her mother. Her mother was alarmed, and then persuaded her father to agree to the marriage. Although Sharmin did not want to get married, she was unable to discuss her preferences with anyone as the shopping and arrangements for the marriage ceremony had already begun. She said,

> "Though my parents said you have 15-20 days till your marriage to decide but, in between, they were going ahead with the plan. By the time I mustered the courage to say 'No', things had already gone too far: all the bazaar and wedding arrangements were done. Only one week was left. And they said that if I call off this marriage, it will be very difficult to find another marriage proposal."

Many of our respondents reported that they didn't want to get married but were subjected to family pressure obliging them to do so. Among them, some were victims of emotional entrapment and others 'abducted' by their prospective husbands. The one common feeling shared by all respondents was that they felt that they had had no control over the situation.

A girl who married early from the Dhaka slum said:

> "My parents asked me to sever ties with him [boyfriend], as they could not accept the relationship … When I told him [boyfriend] that my parents will never accept you, he became mad. Day after day, he would plead with me not to leave him; once he cut his hand and showed me blood, another time he banged his head on the wall and showed me the bandage. He said he will not stop, that he will give his life but will not be able to live without me, and asked me to elope. I felt scared, but I also thought maybe he really loved me and will commit suicide if I leave him. Then I said, okay, let us elope and get married."

Another girl who married early, named Aruna (19, Dhaka), shared her horrifying story of being kidnapped by her boyfriend and held captive until she agreed to give consent. She said:

> "They [boyfriend and his friends] blackmailed me, saying my boyfriend will commit suicide if I refuse to marry him. And, if he committed suicide, my family and I will be taken to jail. My boyfriend also said that he would tell everyone that I eloped with him. Nobody would believe me if I said I didn't sleep with him, people will spread [the] rumour. So I didn't have any other option except to marry him."

There are many reports across a variety of contexts of the abductor-future husband raping the abducted woman in order to make the marriage irreversible and shame the woman into

staying with him (Kiryashova 2005; Kokhodze and Uchidze 2006; Aminova 2003). Even if she is not raped following the abduction, her virginity will forever be questioned. Given the confines of the community, tradition and social stigma, the woman has little choice but to stay.

Anny (19, Chittagong) lost her father when she was young. Her mother was often away from their home for days at a time as she was working. Anny's relationship with her mother appeared to be strained, since every time she mentioned her mother it was to say that she had been scolded by her, was angry with her, or beaten by her. After one of her regular arguments with her mother, Anny ran away with her boyfriend, Jony. Initially, Jony agreed to marry her, but later, when he found out her uncle had filed a police case against him, he was scared and asked her to go back home. She felt disgraced to return. At this point, one of her neighbours, Ibrahim, stepped in and helped her to safety. He asked her to marry him after he had helped her, and, when she told him that she felt pressured, he began crying because he did not want to be humiliated in front of his friends. Anny felt even further coerced to consent after Ibrahim had cried in front of her.

In this case, Anny's decision to elope with Jony had less to do with wanting to marry him and more to do with wanting to move away from her mother. Similarly, when she was hurt by Jony, her decision to marry Ibrahim had more to do with hurting Jony (and to some extent, her mother too, since her mother was opposed to the marriage) and less to do with the fact that she actually wanted to marry. Anny's response to the lack of support from her family was arguably an emotional and stubborn consent to marriage.

4.2. Marriage believed to be a rational response to existing poverty and lack of personal freedom within the family

Individual and group interviews with adolescents revealed that girls living in households with relatives or step parents usually had no agency, no control over money, and sometimes experienced verbal and physical abuse prior to marrying. Many of the girls were said to believe that "maybe the life in their husband's house will be different". Four out of 30 married adolescent girls expressed that they chose marriage as it was the only rational choice to gain social status and a way out of poverty.

Ayesha, a 16-year-old girl from Dhaka, has been married for nine months. As an orphan from birth, the responsibility for Ayesha's care was passed on from her grandmother to an aunt, then a cousin, and eventually a husband. The potential suitor was Ayesha's distant cousin. "I heard that he loved me",' she said. "I was so desperate to get married and have a home that I said yes to him. I did not think of anything else." When asked how she felt during the ceremony, Ayesha replied, "I wasn't given time to think. My uncle kept saying, 'we all want the best for you, why do you have to think?' I finally consented but I told them I did not wish to wear makeup or pierce my nose". Ayesha's apparent consent was rushed and uninformed. Her decision to marry was borne out of the fact that she realised she was a burden to the extended family. She had no house to call her own and it did not matter to her who she was marrying. The little agency she had and exerted was in the form of refusing to wear makeup and a nose-ring, which is considered a sign of a bride.

4.3. Coercive power of socio-cultural norms

Consent is constructed in the context of power imbalances and gendered norms that inform socially and culturally constructed codes of behaviour enforced through a range of notions. One of our respondents, Runa (26), shared her experience in this regard. She said that she had reluctantly agreed to marry since it was her mother's dying wish. She had planned on saving up to build a house and to ensure her younger brother and sister were married before getting married herself. She also did not want to marry her husband since he was old:

> *"He looks old and dumb, but then my mother told me 'if I die, who is going to want to marry you? I will have peace after death if I can get you married before I die.' So my brother convinced me, 'Get married now, mother doesn't have much time to live, and we don't have a father.' Then my maternal uncles talked to my mother and also convinced me to get married. Then, what to do, I stopped protesting."*

Often, in the absence of explicit threats, many coercive forces go undetected – the consent which has to be given to the marriage need not be enthusiastic consent, even reluctant consent is consent.

The same reasoning applies to unmarried adolescent girls from poorer households who were considered more vulnerable to threats of harassment, rape and violence, and even more so in the case of families with daughters who were considered very pretty (i.e. fair, slim and tall). In incidents of harassment and rape, it was reportedly common to blame the girls for being too visible or mobile and therefore deserving of the violence. As a result of this helplessness, girls feel the pressure to consent to marriage as soon as they reach adolescence to protect their family's reputation.

4.4. Uninformed consent: enthusiastic but too young to understand the gravity of decisions

Six out of 30 young married respondents shared their regrets about having consented to affairs inevitably leading to marriage far too early. They said they were too young to understand what they were getting themselves into. One of our respondents named Farzana, who was married at 16 years of age and was living in Chattogram, said that her current husband had been notorious for having multiple girlfriends in their area. She initially did not like him at all, but after a few years, when he came back from working in Oman, she started to have feelings for him. Her husband asked her mother for her hand in marriage, and her mother strongly refused at first, since she knew about his 'bad habits' (he took drugs and alcohol, and ran a sex work business). But over time, he was able to convince the mother by promising to take Farzana's brother abroad with him. Farzana's father did not know anything about the marriage, it took place secretly in the presence of her mother, her maternal uncle and aunt, and some of her husband's friends. Farzana is convinced her "husband used an amulet to make me fall in love with him", since she doesn't like him anymore, but was somehow blinded by feelings at the time. Even her claim of being under the influence of a spell to rationalise "getting married on impulse" indicates that she was too naïve and immature to understand the seriousness and consequences of her decision.

Similarly, Ayesha, a 17-year-old girl in the Dhaka slum, regretted getting married in haste. She said that she never realised the magnitude of responsibilities that came with being a wife. "I had never seen a wooden stove before getting married, but I needed to cook on that stove now. I never cooked or washed clothes before [getting married]; now I have to do all that and more." One of the greatest impacts of her marriage was the loss of her independence. "I could go to my cousin's house whenever I wanted to go. I used to visit Dhanmondi Lake every afternoon with my aunt. But now I don't have that independence. I want to visit her, but I can't." In addition to Ayesha's loss of freedom, she now faces pressure to have a baby. "My husband and in-laws want me to have a baby as soon as possible", she said. "They do not think of my age and that I am only 16."

5. Discussion

Studies have long recognised the variety of pressures on women to marry, including poverty, pregnancy, and social norms and expectations that underpin the patriarchal structures of their culture, religion and state (Vaitla et al. 2017; Yount et al. 2016; Greene et al. 2015; Naveed and Butt 2015; Verma, Sinha, and Khanna 2013; Mahmud and Amin 2006; Chowdhury 2004). The stories shared are only comprehensible if we take into account the system of constraints with which they are associated, so that the lack of financial and educational resources, as well as the women's youth and norms relating to gender, all combine to create an environment forcing them to desire marriage because there are no other alternatives. The accounts given by these women resonate strongly with previous studies on consent. Feinberg (1986) discusses a concept of 'total burden of coercion', where the total burden reflects the experiences of the individual, so that any decision about whether or not coercion has taken place is forced to acknowledge how pervasive, frightful, unwelcome and/or intense any pressure is, in order to determine whether or not the proposal coerces. Feinberg's approach is particularly relevant because, as we have demonstrated, it is within a range of constraints, both articulated and unstated, that particular groups of adolescent girls and young women in Bangladeshi slums exercise their agency in determining, to varying degrees, whether or not to marry, their choice of marriage partner or the timing of the marriage.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the meanings and manifestations of coercion in matters of marriage for different categories of adolescent girls and young women in the urban slums of Bangladesh, looking at their decision-making processes in the context of the structural factors that constrain them and create specific opportunities for action. We have argued that adolescent and young women's experiences of coercion in matters of marriage are not linear nor straightforward, but messy and enmeshed in the micro world of social and cultural expectations, gender norms and pressures, communities and family relationships and expectations, emotions and insecurities, and the political economy all overlapping with

one another. The messy world of poverty and deprivation and the continued pressures on adolescents and young women need to be acknowledged in addition to how this influences the meanings of consent, coercion or, at times, something in between. In so doing, we can begin to abandon the binary conception of consent and coercion. Women's experiences of coercion in matters of marriage are not coherent, explicit, identifiable or distinct from their experiences within other structures of inequality. Only by addressing these structures can there be a lasting solution to the problem of violence against women.

Acknowledgements

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Unlocking Girls' Agency

Lessons from the Humsathi Interventional Study in Pakistan

Farida Shaheed and Ghausia Rashid Salam

1. Introduction

In 2005, following the deadly Kashmir earthquake and a rapid needs assessment with displaced women in Pakistan, Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre, along with project partners,[1] piloted the concept of 'safe spaces' for women as a disaster relief response. Following the floods of 2011, we set up women friendly spaces (WFS) to facilitate women in coping with the disaster and the heightened gender-based violence that resulted from it. As the interventions expanded to encompass knowledge on rights and leadership, including training in communication and advocacy, the spaces became springboards for women's empowerment and the nesting ground for self-organised action groups such as the 'Purple Women' (*Jamuni Aurthein*).[2]

Four of the original WFS, one in each province of Pakistan, continue to the present day, each operating in a different socio-cultural environment. Shahdadkot in Sindh province is a rural agricultural district, with a feudal social structure. Jaffarabad in Balochistan is located in the most deprived province; it is classified as an urban area but is characterised by a tribal social structure. Muzaffargarh, a peri-urban area in south Punjab, is the most conservative setting. Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province is a mixture of rural and urban, but still plagued by the influence of the 2007 Taliban occupation, manifesting in conservative socio-cultural norms and religious clerics promoting sexist ideas. Women across these settings faced resistance, and even violence, when they began to demand their rights, underscoring the need to develop male allies to support emerging women leaders.

In 2015, Shirkat Gah expanded the WFS to include adolescent friendly spaces (AFS) for girls under the new Humsathi ('fellow-traveller/friend') project. The impetus was Shirkat Gah's 2012 pilot study on child and early-aged marriage (CEAM) (Sarosh 2012), and witnessing first-hand the devastating impact of CEAM on girls' health and their negligible say in decisions about their marriages. This chapter reflects on our efforts to increase girls' agency by bringing them into the AFS and, by building allies, to reduce gender inequality in the communities where the interventions took place.

Earning a community's trust is a challenge for all grassroots change agendas. Consequently, our WFS and AFS staff are always selected from the community itself – some with previous experience in our projects and others new to Shirkat Gah's work. Under Humsathi, in each district, an AFS coordinator and a male focal person were appointed to work with adolescent girls and boys, respectively.

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1   Sungi Development Foundation and Omar Asghar Khan Foundation.

2   *Jamuni Aurthein* derives from the purple chador women were presented with after acting to protect and promote women's rights that became a brand for their collective action. The chador had a common logo, and a name chosen by women in each province in each corner ('Sisters' Group' in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 'New Dawn' in the other three). Two or three women would go to houses in their neighbourhood/village where they had heard of domestic abuse or an impending child marriage to intervene; they also donned the chador to go to the police station.

By 2015, the WFS were well known to the community, but opinions were mixed. To some, these were centres for learning that benefitted women, whether teaching practical skills (e.g. sewing or computer) or providing them with new knowledge about their rights. To others, they were places where women were 'corrupted', so they were seen as a social threat. At the time, many women frequented the WFS, but girls visited infrequently due to the strict monitoring and severely restricted mobility of this age group of females.

Building on its learning with WFS, the Humsathi project aimed to develop a transformative model to overturn the practice of CEAM and promote an enabling social and policy environment by engaging with girls, boys and community actors to deepen their understanding of CEAM and address its drivers. This understanding derived from an initial literature review and baseline research in the four project sites, and continued to evolve throughout the project.[3] The chosen model was to build the capacity of unmarried girls (aged 13–20 at the start of the project) to become their own advocates to resist CEAM by unlocking their agency, understood as an ability to speak up for oneself and take rights-seeking actions. The programme sought to catalyse girls' agency through the following:

1. Providing a safe space for girls to gather, gain new knowledge and skills, and practice leadership and communication skills, while giving and receiving peer support.

2. Facilitated by the AFS, forming groups of 15-member female youth cohorts in each district who were the core of project interventions.

3. Creating and harnessing energies of similar-aged male youth allies (also in 15-member cohorts) and among parents, especially mothers, and striving to involve multiple people from the same families in interventions.

The model was effective. Endline research showed that the vast majority (78%) had intervened to prevent CEAM – almost four-fifths of the girls (79%), 85% of participating mothers and 69% of involved males. As self-advocates, one-third of the girls acted to delay their own marriages. Humsathi's 91% success rate in preventing CEAM (179/197) demonstrates that with the right interventions, community-owned changes are possible.

This chapter highlights what we have learned from the Humsathi project and the changes achieved for adolescent girls. Next, we outline some of the key drivers, maintainers, enablers and triggers of CEAM in the communities where the interventions took place. Then we describe some of the interventions, highlighting the particularly effective 'apron activity' involving girls and mothers, and efforts to build allies. We conclude with lessons learned and promising next steps building on this work.

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3   A total of 260 people from the four districts participated in the baseline FGDs: 59 unmarried girls (aged 12–17 years), 70 married women (aged 25–60 years), 71 unmarried boys (aged 15–24), 60 married men (aged 23–60+). Participants were selected from villages close to the WFS with a view to facilitate subsequent accessibility for young girls. Although efforts were made to select people with no previous contact with Shirkat Gah, some participants had been involved or knew of Shirkat Gah's work. In parallel, in-depth interviews were carried out with government officials such as police officials, marriage registrars, and Union Council secretaries, as well as public and private sector health practitioners.

2. Child and early-aged marriage drivers, maintainers, enablers and triggers

Throughout the course of the project (2015–2018), on-the-ground findings revealed a complex intermeshing of drivers of CEAM; that is, factors or conditions that directly perpetuate the practice. These findings came from two primary sources: the baseline focus group discussions (FGDs) with different groups, and monthly meetings with the male and female youth cohorts in each district. The latter comprised training and awareness-raising sessions to catalyse discussions on the drivers of CEAM and its impact, using a variety of tools (e.g. infotainment videos). Case studies documented both successful and unsuccessful attempts to delay CEAM, providing further insights. We also found maintainers, factors and actors that help keep the practice in place, as well as enablers, that is, factors and actors that may not proactively promote CEAM but allow such practices to continue. Finally, there were triggers: developments or conditions that precipitate CEAM.

2.1. Drivers

A key finding is that the strongest driver of CEAM is not monetary poverty, as frequently cited in the literature and stated by parents (Tristam 2019; Naveed and Butt 2015; Loaiza and Wong 2012; Mumtaz, Warraich, and Imam 2012; Nour 2009). Humsathi's baseline research and subsequent documentation activities found **very few instances in which CEAM has a direct causal link to poverty** – too few to establish a pattern that would confirm this as a main driver. Indeed, in one community, baseline research revealed that marrying girls off early was a symbol of affluence, showcasing that the family had no need to save up for the marriage. CEAM therefore occurs in wealthy households as well as worse-off ones, contradicting the idea that poverty per se drives the practice. Poverty was, however, commonly mentioned as a reason. Upon probing, this emerged as a 'poverty of choice' (Sen 1999). Although some people complained about girls' expenses, such as clothing and cosmetics, the poverty of choice related to a weaker ability of the poor to resist the real drivers of CEAM: that is, the imperatives of maintaining form or face in profoundly patriarchal societies through adherence to **socio-cultural norms deeply embedded in the family and community**.

The concept of girls being a moral and financial burden (*bojh*) was the chief reason cited for CEAM due to poverty. Parents are often under pressure from family or community members to marry daughters early (Qureshi and Shaikh 2007) because to keep a daughter at home, especially post-menarche when she is perceived to have attained maturity, is considered dishonourable. In this context, poorer households face significantly greater pressure from both family and community, and are more fearful of the consequences of breaking the rules, such as taunts and stigmatisation.[4]

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4   Our study did not come across any cases of girls or women being used to settle scores and feuds, recorded by others in Pakistan (Hodgkinson 2016; Girls Not Brides n.d.).

In particular, patriarchal gender norms promote a narrative of girls being merely 'transients' in their natal homes who 'rightfully' belong to their future marital families. In tandem, Pakistan's particular expression of patriarchal norms stigmatises women's gainful employment. Discounting all the female work of household maintenance, nurturing/care, reproduction and contributions as unpaid family labour, girls come to be considered unproductive household members. As a result, while sons are valued as future breadwinners and the means for continuing the patriarchal lineage, investing in girls is seen as wasteful, benefitting only another (marital) family. Hence, girls are denied an education and access to healthcare (Qureshi and Shaikh 2007; Ali 2000; Shaheed et al. 2016; Sarosh 2012). Patriarchal control is exercised through the **imposition of notions of family honour**, a stand-in for controlling female sexuality. From a young age, female bodies are policed through control of mobility, dress and behaviour to avoid any possibility of tarnishing their reputation and hence marriage possibilities. Control silences girls' voices. Daughters come to be perceived as a moral and economic burden, one that parents are eager to divest themselves of as soon as possible.

What became strikingly clear through Humsathi was the manner in which family elders use marriages to further their social capital – a phenomenon that undergirds CEAM. Since girls' contribution to the family welfare is discounted and they are prohibited from earning cash incomes, their primary value for the family patriarch, and the reason for such stringent control over their behaviour and sexuality, is in **the transactional value of arranging a marriage that forges, cements or expands social capital within kinship or community**. This leads to a wide array of commonplace **harmful cultural practices and traditions** that help to drive CEAM. Exchange marriages or *watta-satta* (where two persons from one family marry two persons from another), betrothals at or prior to birth (*pait-likhi*) and settling feuds or debts by giving away girls in *swara* are all common practices (see Box 1).[5]

Such arrangements are almost impossible to break off because doing so risks rupturing family and community ties. The dynamics that came to light in the case studies documented during the course of Humsathi were incredibly complex. In one *watta-satta* case, a girl's paternal aunt (*phuppi*) had refused to marry her daughter to the girl's maternal uncle as arranged. The girl's mother arranged her brother's marriage elsewhere. This offended the aunt who told her brother (the girl's father) that to punish his wife for arranging her brother's marriage, he should "marry your daughter to my son instead". The father was willing to do so to please his sister, but his wife and daughter refused. As a result, the aunt no longer visited their house. In another case, parents who married their daughter without consulting the maternal grandfather had to pay him a 'fine' of 250,000 rupees (roughly US$2000) because this was to have been his prerogative. Significantly, no groom had yet been decided upon, but it was a matter of who holds power; in this case, it was a maternal, not paternal, grandfather who claimed power over the transaction. Breaking off a family-arranged marriage threatens family honour. The role of marriage in social capital is an aspect that is rarely, if ever, considered in strategies to eliminate CEAM and requires further investigation. This is especially true in societies where the state-citizen relationship is relatively weak, obliging citizens to rely on social networks to negotiate everyday life.

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5   Inter-family marriage practices such as *watta-satta* and *pait-likhi* are increasingly recognised as drivers and it is estimated that 34% of married 16–17-year-old girls are married to a first cousin on their father's side. See Girls Not Brides n.d.; Naveed and Butt 2015.

Box 1. Fauzia's story, showing the complexities of socio cultural customs

In 2018, Fauzia was 17 years old, the fifth of nine siblings (six sisters and three brothers). Her father is a mechanic and her mother is a homemaker.

"In my family and larger *biradari* [clan], girls are married at 14 to 15 years old … three of my older sisters … were married at 13 or 14 years.

My family practices exchange marriages [*adla-badla/watta-satta*], as well as marriage in exchange for money. Two of my sisters were betrothed prior to birth [*pait-likhi*] and, when my mother married, my maternal grandfather [*nana*] also took two *pait-likhi*.[6] That's why one of my sisters was married to my maternal uncle's [*mamun's*] son and another was married outside family relatives [*ghair khandaan*]. The sister who married outside the family was given in exchange for Rs. 30,000, and two *pait-likhi*; so if she has a daughter, she will have to give that child to my father [to decide the child's marriage].[7]

In my family tradition if there is no boy [eligible for marriage] within the family, then the maternal grandfather can give his granddaughter's hand in marriage to whoever he pleases.

Generally, both parents make the decision about their children's marriages, but it's our mothers who try to arrange a good marriage for us because they are concerned about our future well-being.

My *nana* who took two *pait-likhi* when arranging my mother's marriage, was actually giving Mother away in *pait-likhi* too. Similarly, my *khala* [maternal aunt] was also married in *pait-likhi*. Now, *khala* decided to arrange her daughter's marriage with my brother instead of my *mamun's* [maternal uncle] son, so my mother arranged my marriage with my *mamun's* son.

[I] was 16 years old when I was engaged to my maternal cousin [*mamun's* son].

But I had been given in *pait-likhi* to my maternal grandfather who told my maternal uncle, 'this is my *pait-likhi;* my granddaughter was my responsibility, but she has been given to you … You must now pay me in exchange for her marriage to your son.' So my maternal uncle paid my maternal grandfather Rs. 100,000.

When marriages are arranged, the girl has no say. She has to accept her parents' decision and stay silent. When my maternal uncle came to set the marriage date, my mother asked him to be patient and wait till I had turned 18 years, and then we'll decide a date … I had told my mother that I did not want to get married … [M]y father was furious! He said that my mother should not have made this request, and when a marriage is settled within the family, then there shouldn't be any need to wait to set the date. But my mother told him that if he argued too much, she'd file a report with the police. She used the law to scare my father. Now, we're waiting for me to turn 18, and then my parents will set the wedding date with my maternal uncle."

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6   This means that by taking *pait-likhi*, only he can decide the marriages for two of his granddaughters.

7   The language used in these stories is important; the child's physical custody will not be given to the father, but the decision of where the child is married belongs to the girl's father. But to understand the complexities of marriage customs, we have translated them literally to convey the ownership over women's lives, bodies and decision-making ability.

Religious actors contribute to the practice of CEAM. Clerics reportedly use Friday sermons to extol the virtue of marrying girls at young ages (and children more generally) to fulfil a religious obligation. In some areas, missionaries and local clerics reportedly conduct door-to-door visits to both ascertain which families had unmarried post-menarche daughters and tell men that it is wrong to keep their daughters at home (meaning unmarried). There is increasing social pressure to conform, so that when men gather in and around mosques those with unmarried daughters are frequently singled out and asked why their daughters are still at home.

2.2. Maintainers and enablers

Some elements move from maintainers to enablers or the reverse, but it is useful to distinguish these as far as possible for conceptual clarity and in terms of future strategies.

The **law is both a maintainer and enabler.** Inadequate laws help maintain CEAM and poor implementation enables infractions. In Pakistan, the situation is complicated by different legal ages for marrying in different provinces. In Sindh, recent legislation[8] (revised the minimum age of marriage for Muslim girls to 18 years, the same age as boys. In other provinces, the original Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO) applies and the legal age of marriage is 16 years for girls and 18 years for boys.[9] Moreover, the MFLO was not extended to Swat until 2018, the last year of the Humsathi project, enabling child marriage at any age.[10] Until recently family laws regulating the age of marriage for Hindus and Sikhs did not exist either.[11]

Cultural beliefs purporting to be religious dictates hold sway among the communities, bolstering CEAM**.** A common belief that emerged in FGDs with the community and in monthly youth cohort meetings was that if a girl attains menarche, it is *haram* (religiously forbidden) to eat any food she cooks; or that parents cannot perform religious pilgrimages without first marrying off their daughters. Other menstruation-related beliefs included that, come Judgment Day, every menstrual cycle a post-menarche girl spends in her natal home will be counted as a murder committed by her parents, or that her parents will have to drink her menstrual blood. There was no evidence linking these beliefs to any religious instruction or actors in any project site, yet they were widely held by community members, particularly the older generation, to be religious gospel.

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8   The Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act 2013 – Sindh Act XV of 2014. Available at http://rtepakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The-Sindh-Child-Marriages-Restraint-Act-2013.pdf (accessed 4 December 2019).

9   Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010, powers devolved to provinces, including family law matters. Recently, a bill raising the legal age of marriage to 18 years in the federal capital territory failed to be passed.

10   Swat was previously governed as part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas where the MFLO did not apply, until its merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

11   Hindu marriage laws were only passed in 2016, and were not yet operative. Sikh marriage law has only been passed in Punjab province. Although few non-Muslims participated in the Humsathi project, a Sikh youth cohort member in Swat pointed out that the lack of legal proof of marriage creates an entirely different set of problems for the Sikh community: young couples have difficulties getting hotel rooms.

There are a variety of enablers. On the state, or supply side, poorly informed and untrained marriage registrars lack knowledge about legal provisions. They commonly conduct and register marriages without asking for proof of age through legal documents such as birth certificates or identity cards (issued at 18 years old), relying instead on the word of parents or community elders. On the demand side, communities have little understanding of the importance of birth registration, and the births of many children, especially girls, remain unregistered.

In addition, some clerics were found to be promoting the idea of *shara'i nikah,* that is, a marriage verbally solemnised by a cleric without a marriage contract. Such marriages have no legal status, but are accepted. Religious sanctification of CEAM enables the practice to continue and simultaneously makes it difficult to oppose, particularly when such sanctification is forwarded by religious clerics who are deemed to be authorities. Given that undocumented marriages are widespread in Pakistan, this has fewer repercussions than might be expected; the process for rectifying the status is fairly simple, albeit unknown to most citizens. However, as an 18-year-old father of two in the project and his 17-year-old wife discovered, this type of union complicates the issuance of official documents, such as birth certificates and national identity cards – the former are a requirement for school admission and the latter for virtually all services.

2.3. Triggers

The basic trigger for CEAM is puberty. The onset of menarche is seen as a sign of sexual maturity; parents fear that girls will engage in 'immoral' sexual activity, which can range from simply talking to boys on the phone[12] to fears the girl will 'run off' with a boy, bringing disgrace to the family. In some cases, supportive mothers hide menarche from their husbands for as long as possible, to protect their daughters from getting married too early. In parallel, parents associate substance abuse in boys with the onset of puberty, and a desire to curb drug abuse or sexual misconduct can trigger early marriages for boys.[13]

Only occasionally did sudden adverse circumstances – such as the death of the earning male member or the primary woman of the household, or a gambling debt – trigger early marriages.

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12   This is why mobile phones are frowned upon, and girls generally do not have access to them.

13   The research found that boys were also married at an early age. The research on the early marriage of girls related to the project's focus on girls as their own advocates. Exploring the early marriage of males is beyond this chapter's scope.

3. The process of change: implementing adolescent safe spaces

The project model was premised on existing knowledge of the (dis)empowerment of girls. This included Shirkat Gah's pilot study on the practice of CEAM which examined the extent to which girls have a say in decision-making about their own lives (Sarosh 2012) and a study of the effect of restrictive gender norms on girls as young as 7 (Shaheed et al. 2016), leading to severe social and physical restrictions on girls, as well as the enforcement of gendered stereotypes and roles (Mumtaz, Warraich, and Imam 2012; Rajwani and Pachani 2016). Restrictions on mobility prevent girls from socialising and accessing recreational outlets, obstructing peer connectivity. When girls talk to their mothers about their health, particularly for reproductive health issues such as menstrual cramps, they are reprimanded and instructed not to discuss such shameful matters. This is because going to a doctor for reproductive health matters is perceived as legitimate only for married girls/women for pregnancy-related matters. Mothers fear social censure and community gossip casting aspersions on an unmarried girl's character if she is taken to a doctor. Hence, girls not only lack information, but are deprived of sources of knowledge about their own health. Unable to socialise and connect with their peers, girls cannot discuss shared problems and find solutions together.

Restricted mobility and denial of the right to education and healthcare undercuts girls' already negligible decision-making regarding their health, education and marriage. Education, an ardent desire of many girls in the project, is impeded by the lack of safe transport to access schools outside neighbourhoods or villages as the public spaces traversed are deemed unsafe, and the absence of facilities at schools, such as toilets or boundary walls, is a barrier. The combination of economic and safety concerns makes many parents reluctant to send their daughters to school after puberty.

CEAM is therefore the outcome of societal control over female bodies, sexuality, and reproductive ability. The challenge of making girls their own advocates to end CEAM pivoted around unlocking girls' voice and agency for themselves and their peers. This, we decided, was best served by giving girls a place of their own through the AFS that would also enable them to bond and create an empowering collective identity.

Initially, girls were extremely reluctant to engage with Humsathi interventions; disempowered and lacking self-awareness, they were initially unable to articulate their problems. It took a year to build the girls' self-confidence sufficiently to transform them into self-advocates – a period in which they learnt about their rights, CEAM and reproductive health.

Later, they gained important skills for leadership, such as analysing problems and public speaking, and had opportunities to practice skills in internal monthly meetings and to exercise them in public settings. This culminated in the girls presenting their self-articulated demands to high-level national policymakers.[14]

As the least empowered family and community members, girls require strong, reliable allies. These were identified as boys/male youth and mothers. Boys were not allotted a dedicated space in the same way that girls were, as their greater mobility allowed flexibility in arranging intervention activities with them. Nevertheless, boys were provided the same sessions and opportunities as the girls, except for the reproductive health apron exercise discussed below. Even without a dedicated physical space, the male youth coalesced into a supportive cohort for each other, and for girls. Finally, to overcome the stranglehold of taboos, silences and myths around female reproductive health, mothers were invited to participate in much of the same learning as the girls at the AFS.

Baseline research highlighted the disempowerment of adolescent girls and boys alike prior to the Humsathi interventions: both lacked an ability to articulate their problems as well as allies able to supply accurate knowledge or support. From an early age, both are conditioned to accept the inevitability of marriage; girls, however, have no say in the matter. Boys have greater decision-making ability in their homes as current or future breadwinners, but their decision-making regarding marriage is also limited (Naveed and Butt 2015; Nasrullah et al. 2014).

Crucially, girls and boys lack knowledge about puberty and reproductive health. For girls, this means that the culture of silence surrounding their body instils fear and uncertainty, undermining self-confidence. They turn to their peers or older sisters for advice, who generally are similarly misinformed. The 'echo of silence' (Ahmady 2016) is amplified by the absence of family allies. For girls, this includes mothers. In the baseline discussions, girls repeatedly stressed being scolded for expressing their needs or talking about their reproductive health, and being taunted for speaking privately with friends even at home.

The situation is not too dissimilar for boys. In Jaffarabad, boys shared in baseline discussions that they hesitate to speak to their fathers due to fearing their ire, and being publicly berated or even beaten. For boys, burgeoning sexuality signifies the beginning of puberty, but as they lack knowledge about their reproductive health, they are sexually frustrated and, in some cases, ask parents to arrange their marriage. In the absence of healthy recreational outlets, some boys turn to drugs and alcohol abuse. Parental desire to curb such behaviour can precipitate the early marriages of sons.

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14 The National Dialogue on Ending Child Marriages, held on 29 June 2018, included senators, parliamentarians, chairs of the National and Provincial Commissions on the Status of Women, and other top officials from various ministries and departments.

3.1. Interventions in the AFS

Key project interventions consisted of monthly meetings, training events, and awareness-raising sessions on reproductive health and marriage laws; theatre performances on the negative impacts of CEAM; birth registration campaigns involving the youth cohorts; awareness-raising sessions in schools and communities using infotainment videos; and public events such as open mics as opportunities for girls to exercise voice and leadership.

Coincidentally, a Shirkat Gah project (*Sakhi*, *Mein Sukhi*, or SMS) on female reproductive health was running in parallel to Humsathi at the same sites with the same youth cohorts and their mothers. It was through SMS that we saw how learning about the health risks associated with CEAM inculcated deep empathy in women for their daughters. This encouraged women to stand up for and protect their daughters from suffering potential health complications or violent marital homes. Shattering the silence around girls' reproductive health was pivotal in unlocking agency. It was also a challenge, as girls initially struggled to overcome ingrained taboos to communicate with each other, their mothers and the AFS coordinators.

An activity with unexpectedly transformative results was the apron activity. This activity uses a cloth apron developed by the Chetna Organisation in India. This eight-flap apron depicts the female reproductive system, where each flap describes different parts and functions. It is a useful tool in running reproductive health sessions for diverse audiences, and is generally met with enthusiasm especially among women and girls, who otherwise have little access to information about their reproductive system. The facilitator wears the apron while talking about different parts of the body. The interactive activity not only stimulates an open discussion, but enables women and girls to take turns looking closely at each flap, learning to recognise different parts, such as the ovaries, on their own.

The activity was expected to create awareness about reproductive health, menstrual cycles and puberty; increase girls' and their mothers' awareness and self-confidence; and loosen strictures impeding girls' access to reproductive health information, facilities and service providers. These expectations were met, and, according to reports in the monthly meetings, it was specifically after the apron exercise that girls started speaking to their mothers openly about their reproductive health needs and that mothers agreed to take them to doctors. The knowledge so inspired girls that they started sharing it with others, including trailblazing the formation of peer learning circles in schools after convincing their teachers and principals. This action by the girls encouraged the project to formally approach schools to replicate their model. Learning about their reproductive health system was crucial as girls "never learnt about our body parts in this manner. Even in schools they don't tell us about such things",[15] or "because teachers skip over chapters in their biology textbooks on the reproductive system".[16] "Gaining reproductive health knowledge" was an important motivator for other girls to join the AFS.[17]

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15 FGD with female youth cohort, Swat 2018.

16 FGD with female youth cohort, Swat 2018.

17 Endline FGDs with female youth cohorts 2018.

What was unexpected was how unlocking agency for reproductive health unlocked agency in other areas, such as education and the right to choose when and whom to marry. Girls reported asking to be allowed to pursue post-primary education. One girl who had dropped out of school had re-enrolled. Girls began to speak openly to their mothers about not wanting to marry either at that point in time or to marry someone of their own choosing. Mothers supported girls' decisions, becoming interlocutors between girls and their fathers.

An assumption in designing the Humsathi project was that the lack of legal awareness and poorly implemented laws play a significant role in perpetuating CEAM. Although the baseline research made it clear that deficiencies in effective legislation and legal awareness were secondary to the imperatives of adhering to socio-cultural norms, laws remain essential for bringing about change and as a framework for holding duty-bearers accountable. Legal knowledge proved to be an effective deterrence to CEAM. In Sindh especially, where the legal age of marriage for girls is now 18, women and girls use their new legal knowledge to prevent CEAM; one woman threatened her husband with a police case to stop her daughter's marriage. In Punjab, a woman threatened to report the family to the AFS who would register a police case. The gap between women and legal recourse was bridged by the presence of the AFS and its staff, as well as the legal awareness and knowledge of their rights gained during project sessions.

3.2. Creating a supportive peer network

The AFS was open to all the girls and women in the community. But a crucial project component was the creation, in each district, of a female youth cohort from among the girls attending the AFS and a corresponding, albeit slightly older, male cohort of those engaged in the project. Each cohort had approximately 15 members. As key participants in project interventions, cohort members became change-makers and leaders in their respective communities, sharing their new knowledge with other youth. Most significantly, the cohort's peer support system gave youth, especially girls, the courage and confidence to oppose CEAM. For girls who are often referred to as 'the centre girls', the AFS and youth cohort were symbiotically linked. Without allies, new skills and knowledge would not have translated into practical actions. As one girl put it, "If there is any issue, we take an entire *baraat* [a marriage procession] with us [and] tell them, look I'm not alone, there's an entire group with me".[18] Finding common ground with other girls, and understanding they were not alone in their problems, generated solidarity and a desire to collectively find solutions for their problems. A number of mothers echoed similar sentiments about strength in numbers.

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18 FGD with female youth cohort, Jaffarabad 2018.

3.3. Building allies in families

Initially, in all four sites, girls were not even allowed to go to school if they were not escorted by a male relative. A strategic reason for working with adolescent boys, particularly from the same families, was to facilitate permission for girls to frequent the AFS by using leveraged family support. Additionally, understanding the drivers of CEAM and attendant circumstances would benefit from insights into the dynamics of power and control from a male perspective. It was equally important to help young men understand both their role in maintaining the status quo and their potential to alter socio-cultural contexts by becoming allies in the struggle to end all forms of violence against women and girls, especially CEAM. Through deliberate project design, male youth cohorts included brothers and cousins of the female youth cohort. This made it easier for girls to be part of the youth cohort and facilitated change.

Building the capacity of girls is necessary but insufficient when their socio-cultural environment is not conducive to an assertion of rights. It is imperative to institute changes within families, so that, when girls feel able to be their own advocate, they have the necessary space in the home and community to do so, reducing the risk of a backlash. While mothers are often the secondary enforcers of restrictions, after fathers or older brothers, they are also the chief line of communication for daughters in the family. Girls turn to their mothers regarding health matters and education needs and, crucially in the context of CEAM, it is through mothers that girls are likely to learn of potential marriage proposals. Thus, the key family actor to aid girls in changing norms regarding CEAM is the mother. Mothers involved in interventions learned side-by-side with their daughters. This enhanced women's knowledge and opened up previously blocked channels of communication, leading to intercessions with male family heads and changed family dynamics, because:

> *"Before, only the wife would speak up so he [the husband] would not give any importance to what she had to say. But now, daughters and sons are saying the same thing so men are forced to think, and realise that all of them can't be wrong. Because we all speak up collectively, he understands that we must be right."*[19]

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19   FGD with mothers, Muzaffargarh 2018.

4. Conclusions

The model underpinning the Humsathi intervention programme succeeded in bringing about substantial changes that were beyond our initial expectations. Many girls transformed into self-advocates, as one testified: "Before, I could never leave my home, I couldn't talk, I was scared of speaking to anyone and would start shaking. Now look at me … [a] girl who not only speaks for her rights, but has fought for the rights of other girls in her family".[20] Everyone has spread knowledge and key CEAM messages, starting with friends, schoolmates and families, and through peer learning groups initiated in public and private schools. Mothers have become champion allies, supporting their daughters and intervening to educate and prevent CEAM among relatives and neighbours. Male youth have also acted to prevent CEAM and spread the word.

However, change has required struggle. From this, we have learned that:

- Mere reasoning (whether on the basis of health risks or the benefits of continued education for girls) has not always convinced family patriarchs (or matriarchs), and a number of advocates resorted to deploying threats (of running away, eloping, hunger strikes, and reporting matters to the police or AFS) when they were not being listened to.

- Irrespective of the specific reasoning that resonated with particular families, the combination of the AFS, male and female cohorts, and the mothers' participation were the linchpins of the intervention's success, and the multiplicity of voices articulating the same messages was critical.

- Although the model is replicable, it will require a longer gestation period where community trust has not already been built (in this case, by the earlier WFS).

- All those engaged have committed to continuing their campaigns to end CEAM and other discriminatory practices, but the question remains how sustainable and energetic actions for change will be in the absence of the AFS and its staff. This is a question that can only be answered in the future.

More generally, the intervention study points to the need to:

- further investigate and understand the role of marriage in garnering social capital;

- impart reproductive health knowledge to unlock girls' agency;

- have a strong state narrative supporting delayed marriages and mass campaigns to debunk myths;

- adopt a multi-sectoral approach for ending CEAM.

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20   FGD with female youth cohort, Muzaffargarh 2018.

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Breaking the Silence

Why do Young Women in Peru Marry or Cohabit at a Young Age, and What are the Consequences?

Vanessa Rojas, Francis Bravo, and Nikki van der Gaag

1. The context in the region

'There is a silence, a political silence, a social silence that is changing little by little … it is almost as if we imagine that child marriage and early marriages are affecting only other regions, but not girls in Latin America and the Caribbean.' (Shelly Abdool, Regional Gender Advisor for UNICEF) (UN News 2018).

Latin America and the Caribbean is the only region in the world where the number of young women who are married or cohabiting has not declined in the last 10 years. In many countries, particularly in South Asia, where rates are often the highest in the world, the figures are slowly going down, but in Latin America and the Caribbean, on average, one in four young women have married or are cohabiting before they turn 18 (CNN 2018; UN Women, UNFPA and UNICEF 2018).

In Peru, cohabitation is more common than formal marriage, according to the 2017 census.[1] Young people say that they think cohabitation is less expensive and it is easier to end than marriage. They also believe that, in practice, there is very little difference between the two (Rojas and Bravo 2019).

There are three main drivers that make young people vulnerable to early marriage and cohabitation: poverty, location and gender. First, there is a clear link to poverty: data from the census and household surveys for 2017 show that 46% of married or cohabiting adolescents are from the poorest fifth of society, and only 1% are from the richest fifth. Second, there is a relationship to location: 67% of women who married or cohabited between the ages of 10 and 15 lived as children in a small town or in the countryside (Plan International and UNFPA 2019). Third, cohabitation affects young women more than young men; by the age of 19, 30% of young women were cohabiting, but only 7% of young men were (Favara, Lavado, and Sánchez 2016).

There are three further, significant drivers of early unions for young women: pregnancy, hope for a better life and the desire to escape violence or abuse in the family home. These are all underpinned by rigid social and gender norms that mean women still have little choice in their lives. Young women may get pregnant, or they may want to escape violent or repressive homes, and think that moving in with their partner will lead to a better life for them and their child (Plan International and UNFPA 2019; Greene 2019). Young women also hope to access a better quality of life through basic services and/or material goods and resources (Save the Children 2016). This is particularly true in lower socio-economic areas, where early cohabitation often begins due to pregnancy (Favara, Lavado, and Sánchez 2016; Del Mastro 2015; Gutiérrez 2006; Rojas, Guerrero, and Vargas 2017; Plan International and UNFPA 2019).

This chapter shows how all these factors drive young women into early cohabitation and marriage. It reveals what life is actually like for those who cohabit or are married, and how

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1   In urban areas, in 2007, the percentage of cohabitation was 23.2%, but by 2017 it had increased to 25.4%. A similar scenario occurred in rural areas, with the number of couples opting for cohabitation instead of marriage increasing from 28.6% to 31.9% (INEI 2018).

far the reality is from their hopes and aspirations. It also asks how this might be different if it were possible to change some of the entrenched gender and social norms that limit women's choices and constrain their lives. The chapter uses data from the 'Marriage, cohabitation, motherhood and fatherhood, and early parenthood in Peru' study, which was also developed in Ethiopia, India, and Zambia.[2]

2. Methodology

Qualitative information was collected through individual interviews carried out in 2018 with a subgroup of adolescents and young men and women from the Young Lives Peru longitudinal study. Respondents came from three different districts: an urban district in Lima, a peri-urban district in Piura and a rural district in the jungle of Junin.

Here, we concentrate on the experiences of three young women from different districts, who began to cohabit with their partners before the age of 18, in order to show the differences and similarities that marked their life trajectories.

3. Poverty, parental expectations, violence and discrimination: drivers of cohabitation at a young age

The three young women, Yanet, Clara and Yolanda[3] all grew up in poor families whose resources were limited. Two of them, from the peri-urban and rural areas, came from families whose main source of income was agriculture, while the third young woman's household, in an urban area, was mainly supported by the multiple jobs her mother could find, although, given the economic constraints they faced, the young woman and her siblings were forced to start working in their early teens.

When analysing the life trajectories of Yanet (urban area), Clara (rural area) and Yolanda (peri-urban area), we found that all three dropped out of secondary education before starting to live with a partner. Yanet started to cohabit at 14 years old with a 26-year-old man, while Clara and Yolanda started cohabiting at the age of 17, with men who were 22 and 25 years old, respectively.

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2   A longer country report in Spanish (Rojas and Bravo 2019) is available at www.ninosdelmilenio.org. (accessed 4 December 2019) The Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) is a three-year programme of comparative research examining young marriage and parenthood. YMAPS is a collaboration between Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over 15 years, and Child Frontiers, a consulting company that works in partnership to promote the care, well-being and protection of children.

3   All names used are pseudonyms.

The decision to cohabit, in all three cases, was linked to the poverty in which they lived, but also to the expectations that their parents had of them, to violent family environments, and, in Clara's case, to the discrimination she faced at school.

3.1. Poverty and violence

Yanet, who lived in Lima, explained that she dropped out of high school because she needed to work to support her family financially. Her work responsibilities left her very little time to study, and so she had low grades in school.

In addition to limited financial resources, there were high levels of domestic violence at home, including her father's violence against Yanet and her mother. While she was working, she got to know her partner and they started dating. When her father found out that Yanet was in a relationship, he threw her out of the house and told her to tell her boyfriend to provide for her. Yanet said that she did not know her partner very well but she felt alone and vulnerable, and believed she had no choice but to move in with him.

Interviewer: Was there something you didn't like about living at home?

My dad's blows; he hit my mom. I hated that. Because of my dad, my [youngest] brother now does drugs … I didn't plan to live with a partner at such a young age, but my dad drove me [to it]. He threw me out … and I had no choice, because where would I go?

3.2. Parental expectations

Yolanda dropped out of high school in her peri-urban community before starting to live with her partner. Her father's expectations played an important role in this decision. Yolanda remembered that her father always told her that he felt it was not worth investing in her education because, like the other women in the community, she would end up staying at home and taking care of the children. So Yolanda, feeling under pressure, chose to leave school.

Interviewer: Why didn't you keep studying?

[S]ince my dad was annoying me about the bus fare [to school], I dropped out, that's why I didn't continue to study … it was his opinion that I'm not going to finish, that I'm going to end up with a husband, that's why I stopped studying.

Her father's opinion had a big influence on Yolanda. She did not want to hear him complaining about how much money he was investing in her, and she also believed that her destiny was to end up cohabiting and raising children after finishing high school, just like other girls in the community. Without her parents' financial support, she was not able to continue with higher education. A few months after she dropped out of high school, she met her partner and started cohabiting.

3.3. Discrimination

For Clara, from a rural area, leaving school was linked not only to poverty but also to discrimination because of her ethnic *matsiguenga* origin (Indigenous people in the Amazon jungle regions of Peru whose primary language is Machiguenga). When she finished elementary school near her home, she had to enrol in high school in the city. This involved extra transport costs for her parents, and they did not always have the money. Sometimes she had to walk a long way, which was very tiring and discouraged her from going to school. Despite the distance and the financial constraints, she decided to enrol in high school. But once there, she felt discriminated against and mistreated by her classmates because of her Indigenous background. They called her *campa*, a pejorative word associated with being dirty and coming from a poor and/or Indigenous place.

> *"My classmates insulted me. That's why I didn't want to go. Sometimes they called me campa. That's why I got discouraged."*

As she felt uncomfortable with her peer relationships, and bearing in mind that being in high school cost her parents money they could ill afford, she decided to drop out of school. Her parents agreed because they needed her to work in the family fields. This was where she met her partner and fell pregnant, which led her to move in with him.

All three young women said that if they had not left school, they would probably not have started to live with their partners. In the context of poverty and social inequality, stereotypes about women's roles seem to typecast them as mothers and wives. This means that for the poorest families, there can seem little point in investing in a young women's education. In the case of young Indigenous women such as Clara, poverty is coupled with discrimination which acts to exclude them from the education system.

4. Is cohabitation an opportunity to improve young women's lives?

Young women may see cohabitation as a way out of poverty or an oppressive home, but, unfortunately, in countries with a predominantly *macho* culture such as Peru, such unions seem only to contribute to the reproduction of the inequalities that exist between men and women.

In the interviews with young women who started to live with their partners before the age of 18, it was interesting that they remembered that at the beginning of their relationships, they had been looking for more independence, protection and financial security than they had experienced in their family homes. Several talked about living in violent and repressive families, where they had very little capacity to make decisions about their own lives.

4.1. Improved material circumstances

While in cases like Yolanda's, young women actively tried to leave the family home due to oppressive relationships. In others, like Yanet's, they felt pressure to start cohabiting due to their parents' reaction when they became aware that they were having a relationship. Yanet felt she had no choice but to leave the family home, and the only option was to move in with the man she was dating: "When my father realised, he told him: 'It is your responsibility now. You will look after her, you will pay for her light, her water, feed her, dress her, because it is not free. Take her out.'" Despite the fact that she had never expected to start cohabiting when she was 14, she thought that living with a man who worked was good for her, as "he promised that he would help me finish my secondary education".

Other young women also said that moving in with a man was seen as offering a better economic situation than in their family home. One young woman in the rural community where Clara lives explained:

> *"He helped me, helped me in several things … he bought my clothes, my shoes … my dishes, my pots. He already had some money … He said: 'You will not have problems, I will provide for you … I will support you with your studies.'" (Daniela, Junin rural area, who started living with her partner at age 16)*

4.2. Independence

The strongest reason the young women gave for leaving home and moving in with a partner was the desire to obtain greater independence. As Yolanda pointed out, she ran away with her partner because her family was very restrictive and would not let her go out alone, much less have a romantic relationship:

> *"I was telling my mother that I was going to take a walk, [go to] dances, but they told me … no. How was I going to leave? As my dad sometimes gets drunk and so he annoys me …"*

Young women seek greater independence because, in their contexts, maintaining a loving relationship as a teenager seems to be forbidden by their families because they believe that these relationships run the risk of pregnancy. When Yolanda started to cohabit she thought: "Finally, I will have my own life". In reality, this did not happen, as Yolanda feels her partner is very jealous and controlling. For example, he decides what kind of clothes she should wear, and if she is able to go for a walk by herself.

As noted earlier, once the couple's relationship is made public, families often demand that their daughter moves in with her partner. Girls are only allowed to have sex if it occurs within a marriage or cohabitation, due to the risk of having a child. Families want to ensure that the man fulfils his role as provider for any children. This response is also linked to a *macho* culture that promotes male control over women's bodies and sexuality (Gutierrez 2006; Stromquist 2006).

Some things have improved for young women since their mothers' generation, but others remain the same. Young women go to school, at least until secondary school, while their mothers often did not. They have friends in school, mobile phones and use social networks

online, but they still cannot escape their families' control over what they do with regard to marriage and cohabitation.

5. The reality of social and gender norms in cohabitation

5.1. Gendered roles

Once they started cohabiting, many of the young women interviewed found that they did not have the freedom and ability to decide for themselves that they had hoped for. On the contrary, they found themselves involved once again in inequitable relations, where their partners – instead of their parents – make many of the decisions and exercise control over them and their bodies, in the context of a relationship dynamic that fulfils traditional gender roles.

In the three districts, we found that men and women think that once a woman moves in with a man, they are expected and required to take responsibility for all unpaid domestic work (doing the laundry, keeping the house clean, cooking, shopping and taking care of children), while their partners must provide financially for the new home through paid work. Yanet was working when she started cohabiting, and stopped when she got pregnant; Clara also stopped working in her family fields when she moved in with her partner. The following quote illustrates the view of some of the men we interviewed: "she [his partner] has to take care mainly of the house, the baby, what we are going to eat. She must take care of her pans, I will take care of my … car." (Cesar, taxi driver, peri-urban area).

There were several testimonies from women who indicated that the role of a good wife or partner was fulfilled when the woman did not neglect her responsibilities at home, meaning that they must "serve their husband, maintain a clean house and child". This is related to the cultural role attributed to women solely as caregivers of people and households. The provision of unpaid care services is one of the most crucial barriers to women's entry into the labour market. In Peru, for example, women spend 73% of their time on household chores and unpaid care during the week, while men only spend 26% on tasks related to the home (ILO 2019).

5.2. Decision-making

While men are generally the ones who work to generate income, they are also the ones who end up making the major decisions at home. Although many pointed out that they give the money to their wives because they think they are good at saving, young women said they only use it with their partner's approval. The women generally tend to make more decisions about the needs of their children (buying clothes, toys, etc.) or issues of daily domestic life, but men have a dominant role in greater decision-making, as illustrated in the following exchange with Yanet:

Interviewer: Who is it that makes the most decisions in your home? For example, when you receive something to … pay the electricity bill, buy clothes for someone … who decides?

He … yes, because he handles the money.

Interviewer: And for example, who decides what is cooked?

No. I do.

Interviewer: And your clothes? For your children? Does he buy them?

We go together to buy…we go to buy and I see. I am the one who chooses.

Interviewer: But he is the one who finally decides what is bought.

If we are going to buy or not? Yes, he does.

5.3. Power relations and violence

Unequal power relations can leave young women very powerless and isolated, and even at risk of physical violence, as shown in this discussion with Yanet:

Sometimes I want to go out alone or with my daughter [but] he doesn't allow me … when I say, "I'm going out", "no", he tells me.

Interviewer: But does he give you any reason?

No, he just says: "Don't you go out, we go out together."

Interviewer: And you agree with that?

Not with that … he once told me that my shorts were too short, that I am not supposed to wear them because I am with him. That's why I hardly wear them. (Yolanda)

A person who loves you will never forbid you from seeing your family. It is your family! Tell me, you see … a person who loves you will not forbid you. He [her partner] says "why do you want to go? To waste your time?" [when he went to visit his family] … he tells me "you have to cook, you have to do that, that is your duty". (Yanet)

This kind of excessive control and jealousy by their partners exposes these young women to both physical and psychological violence. For example, Clara had to leave her partner due to the abuse she received. It is important to highlight that she was only able to make this decision because she had the support of her family. Yanet, who started cohabiting at 14 with a man who was 12 years older than her, suffered violence from her partner oonce they began living together. She said:

"I sometimes defended myself, but the strength of a man is greater … I reported him, but I knew that I would survive all that …"

Although her partner does not currently beat her, she would like to leave him because she feels she is at risk of it happening again. But she also knows that it will not be easy. As she did not complete high school, it is difficult for her to find a job, and she therefore needs the money her partner gives her in order to cover her own needs and those of their three children.

6. What difference might education have made?

Reports on early and forced cohabitation in Peru (Greene 2019; Plan International and UNFPA 2019) as well as our research, show that, in both the family and community environments, life as a couple is still expected to reproduce unequal power relationships between women and men.

As we have seen in the three cases discussed here, the experiences of women who started to cohabit before they reached 18 are affected by multiple factors such as poverty, parental expectations, leaving school, and social and gender norms.

In order to understand what drives young women to cohabit or marry, we need to look at how these factors are related. For example, for a young Indigenous woman like Clara, cohabitation was a way to help her parents with their financial constraints (they no longer had to pay for her), but also because returning to school was not an option for her due to discrimination. Yolanda, who started cohabiting only three months after leaving school, felt her destiny was to end up married or cohabiting and looking after the home, husband and children.

All three young women believed that if they had continued school they would not have started to cohabit so young. Put another way: would these young women have had more say in their relationships and more control over their lives if they had completed school? While many studies show the positive impact of education on women's lives (Wodon et al. 2018), completing primary school and starting secondary was clearly not sufficient for the young women in the study to be able break the cycles of violence and control experienced in their family homes. Instead, they often ended up in similar, violent relationships.

Listening to the voices of these young women, and others who began living with a partner under the age of 18, forces us to look at inequality, poverty, and rigid social and gender norms as the basis of a problem that confines young women to a domestic environment and leaves them vulnerable to violence. As such, we need to think beyond laws and policies that prohibit cohabitation for minors. Laws are important, but seem to be insufficient to address this problem. In our view, education plays an important mitigating role. But from the onset of school, boys and girls should receive an education that helps them to identify and challenge gender inequalities in their daily lives (at home and in their communities), so that more girls and young women can recognise that participating in a relationship is not the only way to change their lives, and more boys and young men can understand and begin to address male power and privilege.

Young women and men who live in poverty need to hear another narrative beyond the one that states that a woman's place is in the home, and a man's role is to be the provider. The role of education is essential here, but not enough. Girls and young women also need to see development opportunities (such as access to post-secondary education) and men need to play a bigger role in the home and with children. The state too has a role in providing childcare, among other things, to increase women's opportunities to access the labour market. There is also a need to reflect on the meaning of masculinity, and the role of power and privilege, in order to raise awareness about inequalities. If not, gender inequalities, as well as potential violence between men and women, are likely to continue through the generations.

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THEME 2:
Daily lives and experiences of married girls and boys and young people

The Heterogeneous Lives of Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Urban Slums in Bangladesh

Sairana Ahsan, Seama Mowri, Subas Biswas, Rafia Sultana, Raia Azmi, and Sabina F. Rashid

*BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Corresponding author: Sairana Ahsan (prof.sairana@gmail.com)

1. Introduction

Child marriage is defined as any marriage taking place before the age of 18 years (UNICEF 2018). Around 720 million women worldwide were married before they were 18 years old (UNICEF 2014), of which almost 50% were in South Asia (UNFPA and UNICEF 2016a), where 1 in 2 women marry under the age of 18 (Plan Asia Regional Office and ICRW 2013). Child marriage is a violation of human rights and a deep-rooted phenomenon that reflects the vulnerability of adolescent girls in society, as they are often treated as a financial liability for the family (UNICEF n.d.). Poverty and illiteracy are the main drivers of child marriage and, although it has declined in the last 30 years, child marriage is still one of the foremost risks to adolescent girls' health and well-being (UNICEF n.d.).

Adolescents represent almost 20% of Bangladesh's total population, of whom 14.4 million are girls (Ainul et al. 2017). Bangladesh also has the highest prevalence of child marriage within South Asia (UNFPA and UNICEF 2016b) and fourth highest internationally (UNICEF 2016). In Bangladesh, child marriage is not considered, by most people, to be a form of sexual violence which negatively impacts the health of adolescent girls due to an increased risk of early pregnancy (UNICEF n.d.). Studies in rural and peri-urban Bangladesh have identified poverty, rigid social norms, lack of education and earning opportunities, higher dowry for older girls, and parental fear of sexual violence as causes of early marriage among girls (Plan Asia Regional Office and ICRW 2013; Mahmud and Amin 2006; Chowdhury 2004). However, there remains a dearth of knowledge regarding what drives early marriage in urban areas, especially slums. To address this, a large mixed-methods research study was conducted between 2015 and 2018, which aimed to understand the phenomenon of early marriage in urban slums, followed by an in-depth exploration of selected cases. Overall, the study found that:

- The dynamics of child marriage in urban slums are heavily influenced by the interplay of personal, socio-cultural and structural factors.

- Poverty and lack of education are major drivers of child marriage.

- Young girls from poor, broken families seek child marriage as a way out of poverty.

- Girls from supportive or influential families exhibited strong aspirations to study and work, despite setbacks such as early marriage or early pregnancy.

- A major and emerging cause of child marriage was romantic relationships between adolescent boys and girls.

- Parents' decision-making around child marriage was driven by concerns over the safety and security of adolescent daughters, given the high prevalence of organised crime and sexual harassment in slums.

- The advent of the garment manufacturing industry has exponentially increased employment opportunities, especially for adolescent girls, as 80% of garment workers in Bangladesh are female (World Bank 2017).

- Increased work opportunities in urban slums provide girls and young women with prospects for financial independence, mobility, contribution to family life, technology use and more (Banks 2012; Rashid 2011).

- Adolescent girls' and young women's aspirations, needs and desires are also changing and challenging existing norms, which has created a shift in traditional marriage arrangements.

The life stories of young women who remained unmarried until 18 illustrate two main ways they react to, and cope with, new challenges. Some girls delay marriage because they aspire to pursue higher educational studies, work and have independent earnings so that they have a future that is not entirely dependent on a husband. In contrast, another group of young women do not consciously 'choose' to delay their marriage; rather, they see themselves as victims of circumstances with little hope for a better future. Their marriages are postponed for a myriad of reasons, such as being the sole earner of the family, an inability to afford the dowry or having unmarried elder sisters, that are beyond their control. Both sets of adolescent girls are subjected to shaming by the community, with rumours being spread that they are unfit to get married.

A palpable tension and conflict therefore exists between these girls' dreams and choices, and living their lives within the social norms and barriers of slums. This chapter draws on the in-depth accounts of six adolescent girls and young women (aged 13–24) from two urban slums in Dhaka and Chattogram, which shed light on the reality of adolescent girls' and young women's lives in the "poor" urban spaces of Bangladesh.

2. Overview of slums

UN-Habitat (2007) defines a slum household as a group of individuals who live under the same roof within an urban area that lacks durable, permanent housing, sufficient living space (not more than three people sharing the same room), easy and affordable access to safe water, adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet and security of tenure that prevents forced evictions.

The Census of Slum Areas and Floating Population 2014 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics states that 2.23 million people are currently living in slums across the country, and the number of slum dwellers has increased rapidly, by 60.43% in the 17 years prior to 2014 (BBS 2015). Dhaka, with a population of around 15 million, is one of the fastest growing cities in the world.

3. Methodology

This visual narrative chapter is part of a larger mixed-methods study conducted in two slums of Dhaka North City Corporation and Chattogram City Corporation that aimed to understand the phenomenon of child marriage in these slums, which were the largest in each city. Sixty-one in-depth interviews were conducted from March 2016 to March 2018 with married and unmarried adolescent girls and young women, aged between 13-24 years old.

We began by brainstorming our storyline for the visual narrative of the heterogeneous lives of adolescent girls and young women. A professional photographer was hired to take photographs of slum environments. We spent a week in our study sites to understand the environment and select respondents from our in-depth interviews for a follow-up interview where they further shared their lived experiences in slums. The stories were consolidated with photos for the visual narrative.

We elicited interviews with adolescent girls and young women who shared personal details and stories on sensitive issues. Stories were shared on the basis of mutual trust and confidence, and we have maintained confidentiality and respected respondents' privacy when sharing their narratives. The study received ethical approval prior to data collection from the Institutional Review Board of the BRAC James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka. Written informed consent was obtained from all study participants, including guardians in the cases of adolescent girls. Pseudonyms are used throughout and the images used do not contain the people in the stories.

4. Heterogeneous lives of adolescent girls

4.1. Unmarried adolescent girls

Sania: Choosing to be an electrical engineer

Sania is a 17-year-old adolescent girl who was studying in Class 9 when we met her. Despite feeling insecure due to living in the slum, she walks to school on her own as none of her schoolmates live close by. She shared that, compared to others in the slum, her family was better off financially as her mother was a senior operator in a garment factory and her father worked in a jute mill. She is the second of three siblings: her younger sister received a scholarship from BRAC and is currently studying in Class 6. Her brother is in Class 12 and works with their father in the jute mill.

After finishing Class 8, Sania wanted to do something different and chose to undertake vocational training in electrical engineering. She was initially admitted to beauty salon training, but was not interested in this career and wanted to join the electrical engineering training with her brother. Her mother was opposed to this, but Sania convinced her that the beauty care field would be filled with women and very competitive, which would not be the case with electrical engineering. In Chattogram, she would be one of the very few female electrical engineers. Her mother agreed and Sania received one year's vocational training in electrical engineering from a local NGO. The training was free and the NGO also paid for the cost of travel to the training. Later, she worked in Abul Khair Steel Mill for six months before starting Class 9. Sania outlined that:

> *"There were two technical training courses … for girls, the training comprised of nursing, beauty care, tailoring … and for the boys they had training on electrical and mechanical engineering. Then I thought that it's not fair for me to attend the girls' sessions all the time as everyone [girls] is doing it, I have to attend the boy's session because it seemed interesting."*

She wants to continue her studies and really enjoyed the experience of working at the steel mill.

Binthi: Choosing education over marriage

Binthi is a 22-year-old unmarried woman who had completed a diploma in architectural interior design from a local software firm in Chattogram. After doing some work with a software firm, Binthi started doing freelance work in 3D Studio Max on her own laptop from her house in the slum in Chattogram.

She lives with her family. Her father is a businessman who travels around the country for his business, and her mother is a homemaker. She has two siblings. Her older brother looks after the family business with their father, and her younger sister is in the first year of an undergraduate degree and is also unmarried.

Numerous marriage proposals have been received for Binthi since she was 12 years old. However, her family is more interested in education for the daughters than marriage. They have declined these proposals and supported Binthi finishing her schooling and graduating. They also supported her pursuit of a freelance career and bought her a laptop. The marriage proposals received more recently have been discussed with Binthi, to see if she would consider the prospective grooms. She has not yet responded positively to any of them, and shared that:

"My standard is … the guy needs to be a graduate … maybe BSc or Masters. When I was in Class 9, someone from the army came with a proposal, but my father said his daughter was still young and that I should wait. My mother prefers [me to be] educated and wants me to study … My paternal grandparents were [pressuring] us to accept the proposal, but we did not consider it since I was still in school."

4.2. Early married adolescent girls

Rekha: Absence of family support

When we met Rekha, we were struck by her bright, intelligent eyes and hopeful smile, but could not help but notice her bruises. Although only 16 years old, Rekha has been married for over nine months.

Rekha was orphaned from birth; she lived with her grandmother, who unfortunately passed away after a few years. Rekha was then sent to live with one of her paternal aunts, but this arrangement did not last long either as her uncle quickly grew weary of having to provide for another member in the household. Eventually, Rekha was sent to live with another aunt who, along with her son Arif, took her in with open arms. This happy period in Rekha's life came to an abrupt end when Arif, got married and his new wife felt threatened by having a young, unmarried woman under the same roof. Life became miserable for Rekha again, and she thought her only way out of this misery was to get married and move out. She was only 15 at the time. Rekha stated:

> *"My aunt found me a good suitor. Everyone from his family and mine were ready to go ahead, but the boy's mother and sister vetoed the wedding after learning I was an orphan."*

The prospective in-laws were concerned that their son would miss out on *Jamai-ador* (jamai meaning groom, and ador meaning pampering), the tradition of pampering the son-in-law with food, accommodation, dowry and other hospitality. Eventually, after the first proposal fell through, another suitor came along:

> *"I was so desperate to get married and have a home that I immediately said yes to the next suitor; I did not hesitate or think of anything else. It was only after I got married that I learnt being married comes with a lot of responsibilities, especially for the wife. I had never seen a wooden stove before getting married, but I need to cook on that stove now. I never cooked or washed clothes before, but now I have to do all that and more. On top of that, I get a good beating every now and then from my husband; I cannot sleep on my right side from the last beating I got from him."*

Rekha told us how her life changed after marriage and how she regrets getting married in such haste:

> *"I was independent before getting married, but now I no longer feel free. I lived for over two years with my aunt at her house in Dhanmondi. I miss her. I want to visit her, but I can't."*

In addition to Rekha's loss of freedom, she now faces pressure to have a baby.

> *"My husband and in-laws want me to have a baby as soon as possible. They do not think of my age, that I am only 16. My husband is unemployed and does nothing productive with his time, I am all alone in this world."*

Rekha's story is not unusual. She initially chose to marry because she felt she had no other options and wanted a better life for herself. Now, she is unhappily married, overburdened with household responsibilities and is likely to become an unwilling mother soon. At just 16 years old, she has lost her childhood and has been forced into becoming an adult, sacrificing her hopes and opportunities for a better future.

Rupa: Pursuing education and work despite early marriage

On her way to school and back, Rupa (16 years old at the time of this incident, 18 years old at the time of interview) would always be followed by a young man, an auto-rickshaw driver named Dipu, aged 21. He sent romantic proposals to Rupa through local shopkeepers and friends, who would vouch for him and describe how deeply Dipu cared for her. After rejecting Dipu for an entire year, Rupa changed her mind. Despite her initial reservations about the relationship, Rupa slowly warmed up to him:

> *"We never went out to the cinemas, he never looked at my face when he was talking to me, and I liked that very much. I thought he was a very shy and modest person."*

They would rarely see each other and, when they did, it was only briefly when Rupa was on her way to school in the morning. They talked on the phone when Rupa was able to borrow her mother's mobile, and the relationship continued in secret without her parents' knowledge. After a while, Dipu started pressuring Rupa to marry him. Observations and interviews with adolescents and community members reveal that rumours of romantic relationships spread rapidly in the slums. Rupa's case was no different. Once they learned of Dipu, Rupa's parents immediately opposed the relationship. Her father was an influential leader, and his reputation was at risk if Rupa married someone below their social status. Rupa was scolded and beaten for being involved with a man. She ended the relationship, but Dipu was not willing to let it go. He persuaded Rupa constantly to elope with him and after her last Secondary School Certificate exam, she agreed.

However, Rupa turned her situation around even though she had been emotionally blackmailed into early marriage by her lover at the age of 15. She continued to pursue her Bachelor of Business Studies at a government college in Dhaka. She is also working several jobs, including teaching at a BRAC pre-primary school and providing private tutoring to students. We met her twice; a year after our first interview with her, she had a two-month-old baby whom she nurses while preparing for her first year Honours accounting exams. In addition, she conducts programme activities for a local NGO which helps raise awareness on child marriage and violence against women. She is confident and financially independent. Her husband is exploring opportunities for labouring work abroad, and Rupa shared that she wants to ensure her own financial security without depending on anyone.

4.3. Young women who delayed marriage beyond social norms

Mou: Faces the pressure of earning and fending for her family

Mou is a 22-year-old unmarried woman who has worked 12-hour shifts, six days a week over the last nine years in Dhaka. After losing her father when she was only 13, Mou dropped out of school and used a fake birth certificate to begin working as a temporary employee at a local garment factory. Since then, she has been the sole earner in the family, looking after her mother and two younger brothers, who are now in Classes 5 and 8, respectively. She dreams to "one day buy land in the village and build a house for ourselves so we don't always have to live here", something she thinks her father would have done for the family, had he been alive.

Towards the end of our conversation, Mou talked about the type of traits she desires in a husband:

"I wish for a rich husband, so I wouldn't have to work again a single day of my life."

Mou's views were common among the few garment workers we interviewed. For girls working in garment factories, it was clear that the fatigue of working long hours and providing for their families catches up with them. Many were prepared to quit working once they found a rich husband and start living a domesticated, stay-at-home life.

Ruma: Faces the stigma of a failed marriage that she initiated

Ruma is a 23-year-old woman living in an urban slum in Chattogram. Her father is a day labourer, her mother is a homemaker and she has three siblings. Ruma got married at the age of 23; this is unusual, as in Chattogram slums girls are usually married off by 13–15 years of age. She discontinued her studies after Class 8, and started working as a garbage collector and then in a garment factory to support her family financially. Although she wanted to get married sooner, her parents were not proactive about it:

"I did want to get married earlier, but how could I tell my parents that. Can anybody tell their parents about their desire to get married?"

Her marriage was delayed due to her financial contributions to the family:

"Since my household conditions weren't financially stable, I didn't bother about my marriage … my parents needed the monetary support from us. So, they didn't think of marriage too much … I took it upon myself … and married the person I liked."

Her marriage quickly turned into a nightmare when her husband decided to get a divorce within six months. She feared that her husband was having an affair with a girl who lived nearby and confronted him about it, which escalated the divorce. She received no help from her family:

> *"I couldn't share these things with my family since I had gone off and gotten married on my own … they were already so mad at me."*

She tried to commit suicide twice; once when her mother badmouthed her would-be husband and the second time when her husband confirmed that he wanted to get divorced.

She went to the local club, where mediation is undertaken by local community leaders, in an attempt to secure justice, but was blamed for doubting her husband's loyalty. She is currently unemployed, living with her parents and awaiting a mediation or ruling for justice, which she thinks will involve returning to her husband and marriage.

Despite getting married at 23, which is considered delayed marriage in the slum context, and having the agency to choose her own husband and to get married, Ruma's subsequent struggle is something that can happen to anyone. There is no definite pathway to marriage that works, regardless of age, for those living impoverished lives in slums.

5. Concluding remarks

Child marriage is a feature of life for many adolescent girls in Bangladesh, including in urban slum communities. Yet the experiences and life paths of girls in these settings are complex and not homogeneous. Although some girls marry young, others wait to do so until they are over 18 years of age. Despite social backlash and stigma, more and more adolescent girls are choosing their needs and desires over the constraints set by existing patriarchal society. Whether it is to marry a boy of their choice or to not marry at all, many strong-willed adolescent girls are pursuing their goals, and overcoming community criticism and temporary setbacks in life.

However, it remains to be seen what the future holds for those who choose to delay marriage in pursuit of education and work. To date, most interventions aiming to tackle child marriage have focused only on prevention, and have paid little attention to the consequences experienced by those girls who do not marry. Programmes and policies need to expand to address this key oversight in order to develop appropriate interventions and support for all girls.

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Bridget's Story

A Photo Story of Adolescent Motherhood in Zambia

Gillian Mann and Oliver Mweemba

1. Introduction

In 2018, as part of a four-country study on young marriage and parenthood (YMAPS), 90 adolescent girls and boys in three districts of Zambia were interviewed about their experiences of marriage, separation, divorce and parenthood.[1] From the wealth of information gathered, six individuals were selected and invited to create photo stories of their lives. Participants were chosen on the basis that, when taken together, their accounts could combine to tell the diverse story of child marriage in these settings. One boy and one girl from each of the Kalulushi, Mazabuka and Katete districts agreed to be involved, and, in 2019, one-on-one photography and video sessions were held with each participant in their community and the research team member who had originally interviewed them.

This chapter presents a small snapshot of the overall photo story component of the YMAPS project. It focuses on the words and photographs that one female participant, Bridget, created about her experience as a young mother living in a peri-urban community on the outskirts of a large mining town in the Copperbelt region.

2. Methodology, methods and ethics

The study used a participatory qualitative approach based in part on the photovoice methodology.[2] A combination of drawing methods, photography and video was used to support participants to construct and share their experiences in a creative, visual medium. The emphasis was on helping young parents to reflect on those aspects of their lives that they wanted others to know about, and then to use their own images and words to develop, structure and produce a digital 'story' that they wanted to tell about themselves. Because this aspect of YMAPS was particularly focused on young parents, participants were asked to explore the broad question: 'What is it like to be a mother or father?'

2.1. Story generation methods

The photo story process was led by trained researchers using an individualised format. It began with a discussion about the project, the emerging findings from the earlier in-depth interviews and the issues that the researchers were trying to further explore and better understand. Participants were then instructed on how to use a small digital camera (on a

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1   The Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) is a three-year programme of comparative research examining young marriage and parenthood. YMAPS is a collaboration between Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam, and Child Frontiers, a consulting company that works in partnership to promote the care, well-being and protection of children.

2   Photovoice involves providing cameras to community members in order to visually represent different aspects of their lives (see Wang and Burris 1997; Jennings and Lowe 2013). Our approach was informed by the same goal, but was focused on working with individuals rather than a group, and supported adolescents in using photographs, as well as video and drawings, to construct narratives of their lives.

smartphone) and given some basic tips on how to take decent images. After taking and reviewing some practice photos during a short walk through the community, the participant was able to share and discuss with the researcher the different things, people and places that they would like to capture visually. The researcher and participant then worked together to explore the guiding question and made a list of the shots the participant wanted to capture, before going out again to take the pre-planned photographs. For places and people that could not be photographed because they were not locally accessible, participants were encouraged to represent these through drawings and then photograph the drawings. Each participant took about 12 to 15 photos, over a period of approximately 2 hours.

Researchers used a portable printer and printed copies for the participant to discuss in depth, and then to keep. Individuals were then encouraged to narrate and explain why each photograph was taken and what each was intended to mean or express. Participants decided the order in which they wanted to discuss and share the photographs, and could take more photos or change the photos that they had taken if they wished. Individuals who preferred to write a short script to read out aloud were helped to produce this. Participants' explanations were captured through a combination of written notes, audio recordings and videos (according to the participant's wishes and other factors, such as availability of decent lighting, privacy concerns, etc.). The total time spent discussing the photographs and videoing was between 2 and 3 hours.

Throughout the process of developing the photo stories, consent was sought and reaffirmed on several occasions. Bridget, whose story is presented in this chapter, consented to discussing her photos on film with her full face shown and gave permission for these videos to be shared with policymakers or any other concerned individuals. Her story, and those of the other five young people involved, are currently being made into 1–2-minute-long videos. Each participant will be able to suggest revisions to the videos, and will approve and consent to the sharing of the final products before these short films are made available outside the research team.

2.2. Ethical issues

This study raised a number of ethical challenges, particularly when viewed within a traditional research ethics framework. The photo and video story-telling approach shrunk the usually separate space between the private and public because participants brought some aspects of their private life and those of others into the public arena. To address this, researchers explained the purpose of the activity in detail and participants were asked to provide consent at several points within the project, including decisions related to revealing their faces and voices in photos and videos. Participants were also required to explain and seek permission from others before taking personal photographs or photographs of private property, including providing information about how the photographs would or could be used. Several options were made available to participants regarding the extent to which they wanted to reveal their identity, and all the participants' wishes were accommodated. All consent documents were translated into the participants' local language and detailed explanations were provided to those who were not literate, in the presence of a literate witness. The final protocol for the study was subjected to ethical review and approved by the University of Zambia Biomedical Research Ethics Committee in June 2019.

3. Bridget's story

Bridget is an 18-year-old mother to an 18-month-old boy named Bright. She dropped out of school in Grade 9 because her widowed mother was unable to afford the tuition fees for her and her seven siblings. A year later, at the age of 15, Bridget became pregnant and began cohabiting with her then 19-year-old boyfriend. During the year that they lived together, her boyfriend began drinking heavily and spending money on other girls and not on Bridget and Bright. The relationship was not a happy one. Eventually, the relationship dissolved and he left the community. Bridget and Bright, then three months old, moved back in with her mother. For a short period of time, Bridget's boyfriend returned to the community, and they attempted to live together again, but without success. When Bright was a year old, Bridget moved with him back to her mother's home again, where they both now live.

"This child impresses me in everything … even if you were upset, you will calm down by looking at him … He is Bright … What I can say is that I can do anything this child would want in life because he really impresses me. There are those that get pregnant and abort, but God blessed me and I now have this child. It is indeed a blessing to me."

"The reason why I took this photo is because I want my child to be educated and to start going to school and not be like I am: his parent, not going to school, no. I would not want him to pass through my life so he must go to school."

3.1. Livelihood and social support

"This is my parents' house where I stay. That is why we captured this house. The good part … is that we live here for free and it is better we live like this and the money which could have been used for rent … is used for something else."

"I asked my mother for a loan of 25 Kwacha [US$1.75] to help me buy this pot for making popcorn. Through selling the popcorn, I have been able to pay her back and to find money that helps me to do something for my child. A woman is not supposed to depend on her parents for everything or on the father of her child. She needs to be doing something that can help her. So as for me, I have chosen to … make popcorn using this pot …"

"The reason why I captured this photo of the bar is because I don't like anyone that takes alcohol … whether it is girls or boys, they all just drink and there is nothing they do in life … Whatever money they have, they go and use it on alcohol … I don't like life with alcohol because there is nothing in it."

"What made me capture this [photo of my] friend was because she assists me when I have problems. When I have a problem, I go and tell her about it and she helps me think through the process. She encourages me [in relation to the] good things in my life. Like my popcorn business – when money was stolen from me, and I told her that I was going to stop the business, she encouraged me and told me that is how business is. She impresses me."

Bridget wanted to include a picture of her mother in her digital story but her mother declined to be photographed. Bridget nevertheless wanted others to know that: "My mother is my inspiration. I love my mother very much. She has been there for me throughout my problems. She encourages me and helps me to know how to care for my child and to be a good mother. She also provides for me and my child and this makes me very happy."

"What made me take the photo of the church was because this is where I worship … Even if it is on Saturday, one has to go to church because we worship the same God. We go to worship when we sin but worshiping is not only about going to church. There are some that don't go to church and still worship from their homes. But a person just needs to go to church; that is how it should be."

3.2. Hopes and aspirations

"This is a local school. What made me capture this photo was because this is the school I went to. I wish to go back to this school, if I can find a sponsor. What made me stop going to this school was that I failed Grade 9 and then got pregnant … I took this picture as I want to go back to learn. I admire people who are in school."

"The reason I captured these school girls is because I would like to put on these same uniforms they are putting on because I admire a lot being at school … Even if I have a child, I have an interest in going back to school."

"If I had someone to support me to go back to school and get educated, nursing is the kind of job I would want to be doing. That is why I took a photo of this clinic. I didn't manage to capture a real nurse so I took a picture of the clinic as an example of the place I want to work and the job I want to have. If I started working as a nurse that would help me take care of my child, myself and my parents."

4. Reflections on Bridget's story

Bridget's story is unique, yet is also emblematic of the lives of many adolescent girls in the communities where the YMAPS study was undertaken. Like many children and young people in these settings, Bridget was raised by parents and other family members who love and cared for her, among a network of supportive friends and neighbours. Like nearly everyone in her locality, her family lives in poverty and struggles to cover the costs of most expenses that are not considered basic for survival. Resources for school fees and other 'extras' are often unavailable; when these expenditures can be made, they tend not to be reliably obtainable and are usually among the first to be stopped as a result of a household shock, such as when a family member becomes ill and requires medical care. Moreover, as girls and boys progress through school, particularly if they are struggling academically, some parents cease to see the value of investing in secondary education, and choose to stop making tuition payments in order to reallocate limited funds elsewhere within the household. For a wide variety of other reasons, boys and girls may also choose to stop attending school themselves.

In Bridget's case, when she was 15 and in Grade 9, her widowed mother was no longer able to pay school fees. In the absence of a sponsor, Bridget dropped out of school. Once out of school, she was unable to find paid employment. Without funds to support herself and her family, and few activities to keep herself busy, Bridget passed her time with peers in similar situations. She met a young man a few years older than her and began a sexual relationship with him. With little knowledge of contraception, and no awareness of local services, she became pregnant at 15 years old. Like many other adolescent girls in her community, she felt that pregnancy was something that 'happened' to her, a life event over which she had little or no agency; pregnancy, like so many things in her life, was something that she felt that she had to accept and live with. Although she initially sought a termination, the lack of safe access to abortions in the district led her mother to convince Bridget to move in with her boyfriend and raise the child with him. Bridget's life with her boyfriend was difficult, and many of her struggles took place behind closed doors. The financial challenges the young couple faced were very stressful, as were their arguments, which were usually about her boyfriend's increasing alcohol use and extramarital affairs. These difficult features of marital life were commonly reported by young males and females in all of the research communities (Mweemba and Mann 2019).

The decision to take her son, Bright, and move into her mother's home marked a shift for Bridget in that it led her to regroup and, with the help of her mother, to begin to think about the future that she wants for herself and her child. Likewise, many of the separated and divorced girls and young women who participated in YMAPS described feeling a greater sense of control over their own lives once they were no longer in unhappy marriages. Very often, the advice and practical support provided by parents, especially mothers, was a noted feature in girls' sense of their own well-being. Moreover, Bridget's perseverance and determination to do the best that she can for herself and her child is characteristic of many young mothers in these circumstances. In her photo story, she manages to convey her hopeful outlook and her sheer drive to achieve her goals, despite the formidable obstacles in her way.

The photo story method employed in this project, when used as a supplement to in-depth interviews and community-based research, enabled this personal vision to emerge and take shape according to the participants' own perspective. It offered a means of understanding individuals' experiences within the broader family and community context, and, in so doing, highlighted concepts and practices previously not seen (or noticed). When appropriately supported to use simple technology, young participants told their own stories, in their own way, with confidence and focus. They engaged in the task with enthusiasm and used their strengths to share what they wanted others to know about their lives. These benefits outweighed the challenges that accompanied the sometimes time-consuming nature of the work and, depending on the photos that a participant sought to capture, the need to seek consent from significant numbers of people. Although partial on its own, the photo story method is an important addition to a suite of qualitative methods such as those employed in the YMAPS study.

5. Conclusion

Bridget's story demonstrates the multifaceted and complex nature of the circumstances that surround young marriage, parenthood and divorce in contexts characterised by poverty and inequality. Young people like Bridget require support and enhanced services to attain their aspirations to live a full and happy life. These needs include access to quality and affordable education, safe and appropriate targeted economic opportunities, improved and expanded sexual and reproductive health information and services, violence prevention and response services, and social support. Equally important is the need to strengthen and augment the conditions in which young parents can see a place for themselves in their families and communities, and to build on that to imagine a desirable future for themselves and their children.

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Early Marriage among Adolescent Boys and Young Men in Urban Informal Settlements of Bangladesh

Subas Biswas, Raia Azmi, Seama Mowri, Sairana Ahsan, Rafia Sultana, and Sabina F. Rashid

BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

*Correspondence: subasbiswas@bracu.ac.bd

1. Introduction

Early marriage continues to be a major public health concern and a violation of child rights, particularly in developing countries.[1] Girls are disproportionately more likely to marry before the age of 18 compared to boys, and the vast majority of research, policy and advocacy on child marriage relates specifically to girls (Parsons et al. 2015; Patton et al. 2016; Svanemyr et al. 2015; Wodon et al. 2017). However, adolescent boys also marry early.[2] Although the prevalence of child marriage among boys and young males is lower than girls, in recent times, the global prevalence of early marriages among adolescent boys has gained some prominence. An analysis by the United Nation's Children Fund (UNICEF) reported that 115 million boys and men were married before the age of 18 (with one in five before age 15) (Gastón, Misunas, and Cappa 2019). However, in South Asia this rate is around 5% (Malhotra et al. 2011; Verma, Sinha, and Khanna 2013). The Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey 2011 reported that nationally around 4% of men aged 20-24 were married by age 18 (National Institute of Population Research and Training, Mitra and Associates, and ICF International 2013). However, boys residing in poor, urban informal settlements are more likely to marry early compared to the national average, with a study of informal settlements in Dhaka finding that around 46% of males were married before age 18 (Khan 2014).

Although the risks and consequences of early marriage differ for boys and girls on account of biological and social differences, the practice is nonetheless a human rights violation for children of both sexes. Similar to child brides, when boys marry early they also face many potentially negative health and economic consequences which threaten their well-being (Greene et al. 2015; Misunas, Gastón, and Cappa 2019). Adolescent boys who marry early experience an abrupt transition to adulthood with pressure to drop out of school and to assume new household financial responsibilities. This potentially impacts their job prospects, owing to being deprived of skills that continued education would have allowed (Gastón, Misunas, and Cappa 2019). Being young, they are often psychologically and socially unprepared to take on the responsibilities that come with marriage and fatherhood (Matlakala, Makhubele, and Mashilo 2018).

In spite of this, the vulnerabilities of adolescent boys in early marriages remain largely ignored in the development agenda, which puts more emphasis on the vulnerabilities experienced by girls and women due to the disadvantages the latter face with respect to gender inequality (*The Lancet* 2015). Boys' and young men's experiences and perspectives remain significantly less researched and overwhelmingly neglected by social interventions, policy and advocacy programmes (Greene et al. 2015).

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1   'Early marriage' is defined as any marriage or union between two people where one or both partners is under the age of 18 (UNICEF 2005). However, the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 sets the minimum age of 21 years for males and 18 for females for marriage in Bangladesh (Government of Bangladesh 2017).

2   We prefer to use 'early marriage' instead of 'child marriage' as 'child marriage' is heavily associated with girl's marriage in the Bangladeshi context. When a boy gets married before their legal age of 21 years, this is considered as an 'early marriage' rather than 'child marriage'.

This chapter examines early marriage among adolescent boys and young men based on data from a mixed-methods study carried out between March 2015 and January 2018 in urban informal settlements in Bangladesh, and focuses specifically on the role of societal attitudes towards masculinity and gender roles that influence marital decision-making among adolescent boys and their families (Levant and Richmond 2008). Analysis of boys' and young men's narratives shows just how important marriage remains to local understandings of what it means to be a 'real man', but also how a combination of poverty, lack of education, absence of secure jobs, and lack of information and support threaten the well-being of adolescent boys striving to become men through marriage in these contexts.

2. Methods

Data for this chapter were drawn from a larger research project that used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate early marriage in two poor, urban informal settlements in Bangladesh: Bhashantek in Dhaka City, the capital city that has the largest number of informal settlements in the country, and Shantinagar in Chattogram City, the second-largest city with the second-highest number of informal settlements. These spaces are characterised by deprivation, limited access to formal education and health services, informal governance, and crime and insecurity. Those who reside within these informal settlements commonly live in fear of eviction.

The larger study aimed to investigate the underlying issues that lead to early, child and forced marriages in the contexts of poor urban settlements, and involved adolescent girls and boys, young women and men, families and community members in surveys and qualitative interviews. This chapter focuses on data from 22 in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions (FGDs) with married and unmarried adolescent boys and young men aged 15-24, 13 in-depth interviews and four FGDs with parents, and 11 key informant interviews with community leaders.[3] Sampling for the qualitative research was purposive and aimed to achieve diversity across a range of respondents within this age group, including married and unmarried, working and not working, and in-school and out-of-school. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated and coded using Atlas.ti software, followed by systematic thematic analysis of the coded data. The remainder of the chapter focuses on two themes that emerged from the analysis: first, the factors influencing decisions to marry early, and, second, the consequences of marrying early for adolescent boys and young men.

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3   Written informed consent was obtained from all the interview participants. The ethical approval of the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the BRAC James P. Grant School of Public Health (JPGSPH), BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. All the names used are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

3. Findings and analysis

3.1. Factors influencing the decision of early marriage for boys

3.1.1. Boys' ability to generate a steady income

It is a common social expectation in Bangladesh, including in informal settlements, that males in the family will be the main earners and take financial responsibility (Haque and Kusakabe 2005; Kabeer 2011). Interviews and FGDs found that as soon as an adolescent boy or a young man had secured an income and was working, he was considered to have the financial ability to look after a wife and a household. Such gendered expectations were shaped by the local economic and social environments characteristic of these informal settlements. Families expressed their constant struggles to manage high living and food costs, given the scarcity of, and types of, jobs (rickshaw puller, day labourer, drivers' assistant, small vendor, etc.), uncertain wages and constant fear of eviction due to settlements having been illegally established on empty government land (Banks, Roy, and Hulme 2011). Many parents prioritised the need to meet everyday living costs over children's education, leading to many adolescent boys dropping out of school so that they could contribute to the family income. By the age of 17–19, some of these boys had managed to gain a steady income and were considered eligible by their families and community for marriage, despite being much younger than the legal age for marriage for boys (21 years old). Indeed, some working boys had felt ready to marry, and parents often started actively looking for marriage proposals for them. This early access to an income provided adolescent boys and young men with the feeling of being a 'real man' and the presumed means to support a spouse and family. Sujon, a 23-year-old boy from Bhashantek who married at age 19, said:

> *"I was already earning and supporting my family. I do not know if I was mature for marriage, but I thought, I could feed my own family like other married men, so I was ready. My parents were looking for a wife for me and I was eager to get married too."*

On the other hand, scarcity of jobs and low, inconsistent wages were cited as major reasons for delaying the marriages of boys and young men in these settlements, reasons specific to boys and young men and not to girls and young women, whose early marriages were less affected by their ability to generate an income. The average age of marriage for girls in such settlements was 15–16 years (according to data from the larger research study), whereas the average age for boys was 17–19 years. Those boys whose limited incomes made them ineligible for marriage in the eyes of family and community were typically found to be unmarried in their teenage years or married when they were older.

3.1.2. Marriage as a means of rectifying boys' history of gang activity and substance abuse

Individual and group discussions with boys and young men revealed that the informal settlements were rife with gangs, criminal activity and substance abuse. Some gangs were sponsored and protected by local political leaders. In a context of deprivation and limited opportunities, some boys looked up to these gang leaders and members as role models because of the money and power they wielded in the settlements. Some boys reportedly joined gangs and became involved in criminal activities, such as illegal trades (e.g. drug cartels, gambling) and drug or alcohol abuse. Some parents who were desperate to stop their sons from getting involved in such activities sought early marriages for them because they believed that marriage would bind them closer to home and their responsibilities to take care of a wife and household. Dipu, a 16-year-old boy from Bhashantek, spoke about his 18-year-old cousin, who had joined a gang:

> *"My aunt and uncle were very worried, as he was tarnishing the family reputation. People saw him doing drugs and drinking alcohol with gang boys. They are now looking for a good girl to marry him off. They said a good wife will keep him from going down the wrong path."*

Gang violence and the tendency for adolescents to get involved in gangs is very common in poor urban settings (Banks 2016). Therefore, family and guardians use the early marriage of their children as a strategy to keep them safe and maintain control over them (Rashid 2006).

3.1.3. Boys pursuing love relationships and marriage

Early marriages among adolescent boys cannot be explained solely by the precarious social and economic environments shaping and constraining their choices. Our study found that 'love' was a major motivator behind boys' pursuit of romantic relationships, often leading to early marriage. Boys were found to strongly pursue the girls they liked, for example, by acquiring their phone numbers and initiating conversations with them. Some boys regularly bought phone cards for their girlfriends, and mobile phones, Facebook and SMS were used to maintain relationships, thereby bypassing adult gatekeepers. Some tried persuading their parents to arrange early marriages. If the parents (the boy's, girl's, or both) refused, the young couple might threaten elopement or elope to compel their parents to arrange their marriage. In a few cases, boys were said to have emotionally blackmailed girlfriends who wanted to break up, threatening to commit suicide should the girls not agree to marry.

Faruk (age 18) from Shantinagar, who married at age 17, said:

> *"I loved her [his 16-year-old girlfriend] and wanted to marry her. Her family was better off than mine, and when her parents heard about us they asked her to stop seeing me. I said to her: I will die without you, you cannot leave me. I proposed we elope, and we did."*

An earlier study conducted in urban informal settlements in Dhaka with 153 married adolescent girls (aged 15–19) found that around half had love relationships with histories of elopement that led to their early marriages (Rashid 2006), a finding that is consistent with subsequent studies in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Greene et al. 2015; Koster et al. 2017; Verma et al. 2013; Yarrow et al. 2015).

3.1.4. Desire to engage in physical intimacy influenced by media and peers

The media appears to be influencing sexual awareness and desires for sexual intimacy among adolescents in informal settlements, although social taboos continue to surround premarital sex for adolescent girls and boys alike. Watching pornography has become increasingly common with boys' access to the internet using smart phones, and was said to increase their desire for physical intimacy, sometimes leading to early marriage to fulfil these desires.

A secondary-level school teacher from Bhashantek said:

> *"Adolescents now have access to smart phones and the internet. Boys use these to watch pornography on their own, as well as with friends. They know everything about adult relationships which we did not even imagine knowing about when we were young. Their desire for physical intimacy leads to all these love relationships and sex out of marriage. The technology is ruining them."*

Some adolescent boys said that they were exposed to accounts of physical intimacy and conjugal life by older peers in their workplaces, which stimulated their desires for physical intimacy and family life. Sadek from Shantinagar, who married at age 20, shared that:

> *"Outside of marriage, I will not always get to fulfil my sexual desires. It is a shame for me if people come to know about my premarital sexual relations. So many boys think it is better to marry a girl instead. Then no one will say anything."*

Increasing sexual desire is a common feature within the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Boislard, van de Bongardt, and Blais 2016). However, traditional, conservative Bangladeshi society does not accept sexual relationships outside of marriage, making marriage the socially sanctioned institution within which sex is permitted (Caldwell and Pieris 1999). Young men in our study spoke at ease about sexual desires and intimate relationships, whether or not they had sexual experience. They associated sexual activity with being '*aasol purush*' (real men) and a crucial source of masculine identity, irrespective of whether they were ready to take on the marital responsibilities of a household, spouse and children. In this respect, the availability and access to pornography is having a profound influence on adolescent boys' and young men's sexual attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (Owens et al. 2012; Rashid, Akram, and Anam 2012), and, within conservative Bangladeshi society, some boys believed early marriage was a way for them to fulfil their desires for physical intimacy.

3.2. Consequences of early marriage

Research and advocacy around early marriage has paid very little attention to the everyday struggles and consequences of early marriage for adolescent boys. Our study identified a variety of psychosocial and economic consequences, including social stigma and subsequent feelings of shame, frequent domestic disputes and unrest due to boys' lack of preparation for married life and the stresses caused by economic hardship.

3.2.1. Social stigma and subsequent feeling of shame

Although some boys were outspoken about their love relationships and the pressure they had placed on their parents to arrange their early marriages, the study also found that marriages resulting from rumours of physical intimacy in love relationships or elopement faced social stigma. Boys in these marriages were publicly ridiculed for getting 'married early because of eagerness to have sex' and for 'wanting to become adults at a young age'. Some married boys were taunted and laughed at by unmarried friends, causing them to feel ashamed. As a result, they evaded their peers and avoided accompanying their wives to public places, such as healthcare facilities (Griffith et al. 2016). For example, Yakub, age 20, from Bhashantek (married at age 16), said:

> *"When I went to the clinic with my wife for a pregnancy test, the sister [health care provider] told me, 'how did you get married at such a young age?' It made me feel very embarrassed. After that I did not go there with my wife anymore."*

Couples expecting their first child reported being subjected to taunts and insults because pregnancy was proof that they had had sex. Maruf from Shantinagar, who was married at age 20, said:

> *"I usually do not accompany my wife outside of our house. If I go outside with my wife, my neighbours point at us and make bad comments. This makes me feel ashamed."*

In another case, Brishty (age 15) and Zahid (age 16) had been in a love relationship for two years before rumours of them engaging in a physical relationship began to surface, causing their families to marry them off early to avoid community censure. Fearing the young couple were setting a bad example for other students, their school's headmaster did not allow them to sit their final exams.

3.2.2. Economic hardships and related stress

The study found that young men who married early often faced economic hardship, especially adolescents whose love marriages/elopement compelled them to drop out of school at a young age to secure an income to support their marital household. However, lack of educational qualifications and adequate skills created difficulties in securing a well-paid job in a context where such jobs were scarce and livelihoods uncertain. Many boys who married early were unskilled and had limited education so the jobs they secured were typically low-paid and difficult (e.g. public transport helper, manual day labourer). The responsibilities that came with early marriage cut short their opportunities for continuing their education and for acquiring the skills that might have improved their chances in the formal labour market, contributing to a vicious cycle of poverty. Moreover, the pressures on boys and young men who marry early to earn and assume responsibility for a family or household gave rise to psychological stresses, and economic hardships were a frequent reason for domestic disputes between young couples. Maruf (age 21) from Bhashantek was married at age 20, and was struggling to find a steady job. He felt ashamed as he could not fulfil the duties of an 'ideal husband'. Maruf said:

"I do not feel good since I am unable to give anything to my wife. I have no income and I have to depend on my father. But I am married, and when my wife asks for something, I cannot provide it to her. It is not always possible to ask [for] money [from my father] for me and my wife."

3.2.3. Domestic disputes, divorce and separation

Regular domestic disputes emerged as a common theme in our interviews with adolescent boys and young men in marriages, and, in several cases, such disputes led to separation or divorce. The pressures to earn enough to maintain a household were compounded by the birth of children and the transition to fatherhood, responsibilities that the young men rarely felt adequately prepared to take on at their age. Many felt that the difference between life before marriage and life after marriage was stark. Sujan (age 23) from Bhashantek had a long list of friends before his marriage, but after marriage the list became shorter as the need to work long hours greatly limited the amount of leisure time he had to interact with friends:

"Before marriage, I was always with my friends, enjoying life roaming here and there. I spent all my earnings doing all of this. But now, I need to earn more and do not have time to enjoy my life. I did not realise it would be like this. Now I regret getting married."

Many young men regretted marrying early, and the initial attraction they felt towards their wives sometimes dissipated with time and after childbirth due to loss of beauty or health of their wives, as perceived by their husbands. Sometimes young men sought extramarital relationships, or they suspected their wives of doing so. Disputes over money further weakened marital relationships and, unable to recover, led to separation or divorce.

4. Conclusion

This study highlighted the complex interactions between the material realities and the gendered norms shaping marital decision-making among adolescent boys and their families in poor urban settlements in Bangladesh. In this context, adolescent boys internalise the social ideal of what it means to be a 'real man', defined in part by becoming sexually active, economically productive, and a protector of household and community, enmeshed with men's socially constructed roles as husbands and fathers. Accessibility of information technology, the internet, global and social media, and networks have influenced male adolescence and youth in creating new ideas and opportunities, but also in changing masculine and social expectations and desire, sometimes negatively impacting on the lives of adolescent and young males.

Inspired by many socio-economic and cultural factors, many of the boys often decide to marry as a solution to their difficult lives in urban informal settlements. However, this can have many negative impacts; adolescent boys who marry early struggle to meet their newfound responsibilities, with early marriage often coinciding with early departure from school, leaving newlyweds with limited education and skills to navigate the job market. Despite their

vulnerability, the social stigma they face in early marriage and fatherhood often results in their foregoing help-seeking behaviours (Kågesten et al. 2016) with potentially damaging impacts on their sexual and reproductive health and well-being (Fatusi and Hindin 2010; Kato-Wallace et al. 2016).

Yet too often, boys and young men remain on the periphery of development research and interventions aimed to improve adolescent health and well-being (*The Lancet* 2015; Peate 2016). The evidence from our study clearly suggests that adolescent boys and young men need to urgently be brought into these efforts alongside girls and young women, and boys' experiences of early marriage should be acknowledged and reflected in national and global efforts to support the well-being of the current generation of young people.

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THEME 3:
Child marriage on the continuum of sexual and gender-based violence

The Consummation of Early Marriage as Sexual Violence

Analysis of the Relevance and Impact of a Strategy Based on the Law to Prevent Early Marriage in Kolda, Senegal

Oumoul Khaïry Coulibaly-Tandian

1. Introduction

West Africa is one of the regions most affected by child marriage. Of the 15 countries worldwide where the rate of early marriage exceeds the global average of 30%, nine are in West or Central Africa (UNICEF 2016).

In these societies, marriage, and the system of which it is part, is based on different forms of inequality which structure gender and intergenerational relations. Thus, the preferred marriageable age and the means of choosing a spouse reveal the way in which a family, clan or society conceptualises the role, structure and functioning of the family. The marriageable age can then be an indicator of unequal power relations and a means of maintaining control over women and reinforcing the patriarchal system.

Senegal is one of the countries where significant progress has been made in raising the marriageable age within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The country has engaged with a process of 'transition démographique'[1] [demographic transition] (Mondain 2004). National legislation (civil and criminal) also prevents girls from marrying before the age of 16, and the consummation of marriage with a minor of under 13 is a criminal offence.

In addition to the national legal framework, Senegal has also signed the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which sets the marriageable age for women at 18 years, even though that is not in accord with the national legal requirement.

Nonetheless, early marriage is still practised in Senegal, where 32% of women aged between 25 and 49 were married before the age of 18 (ANSD-EDS 2017). The problem is more serious in rural areas.

Kolda is one of Senegal's most rural areas with 73% of the population living in a rural environment. It also suffers from social exclusion in terms of access to basic social services. The services that do exist are poorly resourced and lack qualified staff. Villages are isolated and there is little or no transport between these remote areas and the sectoral administrative centres in the *commune*, *département* or region[2] where the scarce public services are located (RADI 2017).

Kolda is one of those regions where the number of early marriages is still high. In a sample survey of 330 women, 46 women (24%) had been victims of some form of sexual violence in all its forms. More than a third of these assaults (37%) stem from the forced consummation of an early marriage (RADI 2017). The scale of this phenomenon was confirmed by secondary data collected by La Lumière (2016), showing that among 100 children who come through their reception and accommodation centre in Kolda each year, 35% are victims of early marriage or of attempts to escape or break off a marriage. According to World Vision (2016), 68% of girls are married before the age of 18 in this region.

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1   According to the theory of 'transition démographique', which has shaped population control policies since the 1970s, societies cease to encourage high fertility and, therefore, early marriage, when mortality rates decline because of improved health care and as a response to urbanisation and modernisation.

2   Translator's note: '*commune*' and '*département*' are sub-regional administrative districts.

This article, therefore, aims to analyse the processes and results of an intervention model which tackles the problem of early marriage on the basis that its consummation constitutes sexual violence and that a strategy emphasising law and access to criminal justice is a means of preventing the practice. It analyses data drawn from the action research project[3] carried out by the NGO Réseau Africain pour le Développement Intégré (RADI) [African Network for Integrated Development][4] and financed by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Because a child cannot freely consent to marriage or to sexual relations, it follows that the consummation of early marriage constitutes a socially legitimised rape. This intervention model, which emphasises human rights, justice and legal empowerment as prevention strategies, revitalises and supplements existing approaches.

But in those societies where early marriage and its consummation are allowed, encouraged and even legitimised by communities within them, and where parents are the prime-movers, what are the strategies which can be deployed to highlight law and access to justice in combatting this phenomenon? What are the changes brought about by that approach and what lessons can we learn from it? This chapter attempts to answer these questions.

2. The content and approach of this intervention

This project used a participatory action research approach and aimed to help change the behaviours and social mechanisms which lead to early marriage. The model has three main pillars: (1) the inclusion of women and girls in a process of action learning and legal empowerment supported within an environment of strategic alliances; (2) the partnership between RADI and community-based organisations; and (3) the ongoing integration of the researchers in the intervention, rather than researchers merely collecting data and leaving active involvement to practitioners.

The model had three components:

- A **baseline study**,[5] which, among other things, enabled us to establish the prevalence of the consummation of early marriage (37% of the 331 women surveyed,[6] with an average age of first marriage within the 10–14 age bracket and peaking at 12 years) (RADI 2017).

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3   The 'Sexual violence and access to justice for rural women in West Africa: Mauritania and Senegal' project was carried out for RADI by a team of researchers (Dr. Oumoul Khaïry Coulibaly-Tandian, Dr. Fatma Lamesse-Diedhiou and Dr. Rosnert Alissoutin) and members of RADI (Dr. Dame Sall, Secretary General of RADI, and Salie Thiam-Labou, Legal Officer of RADI).

4   The project's primary objective was to help improve access to justice for rural women and girls who were victims of sexual violence and to help abolish the phenomenon in the Kolda region of Senegal and the Trarza region of Mauritania.

5   The baseline study in the Kolda region was carried out in December 2016 by a mixed team that included women leaders who were members of the target communities and representatives of local organisations.

6   Surveys were carried out in 24 villages in four *communes* across the three *départements* of the region: Bagadadji and Coumbacara (in Kolda *département*), Bonkonto (in Velingara *département*) and Ndorna (in Médina Yoro Foulah *départment*).

- The results were then used to set up a series of actions contributing to the **legal empowerment of women, girls and their communities**. The notion of empowerment is defined as a process which enhances a person's control of their life, ideas and the resources linked to power (Oxfam 2012).

- The process of legal empowerment was the goal at every stage of the project. There were, nevertheless, some 'milestone' phases and key activities.

2.1. The creation of Empowerment Committees

Three Empowerment Committees were set up, one for each *commune*. Their members were drawn from the main target groups (women and girls) and from their allies within the community. The latter are the traditional leaders who approve marriages and/or to whom families appeal if all efforts to persuade the girl to accept marriage have failed; teachers who are in constant touch with young people in schools and from whom victims can seek help; community organisations and women leaders; elected representatives; men who are the main decision-makers in families and key actors in the marriage process; and young boys, who are agents of change.

2.2. Training and capacity building within the committees

We focused on legal and judicial aspects and the development of horizontal leadership[7] among women and girls working with their peers and their communities. Regarding legal empowerment, we aimed to improve the knowledge base of committee members, particularly in terms of legal measures (civil and criminal) that could be taken at an institutional or community level. This was designed to increase their willingness to defy social norms and interact effectively with decision-makers.[8] We trained committee members in the existing legislation against sexual violence; this included early marriage, consummation of early marriage, and the moral and legal responsibilities of parents and local elected representatives.

However, since early marriage is regarded by communities as a means of maintaining tradition, reinforcing links between families and communities, and introducing girls to the value of their husbands' families, an approach which focuses primarily on the legal position is not readily accepted or easy to implement. Therefore, as well as discussing infringements of the law, we sought to highlight the most widely acceptable and finely nuanced legal issues, such as the registration of customary marriage which allows verification of the girl's age and confirmation that the consent of the future spouse has been obtained in line with Article 114 of the Family Code. We also stressed the consequences of early marriage in terms of their social, economic and health impacts on families.

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7   Horizontal leadership involves building the competence of local leaders so that they can then enhance the skills of other members of the community.
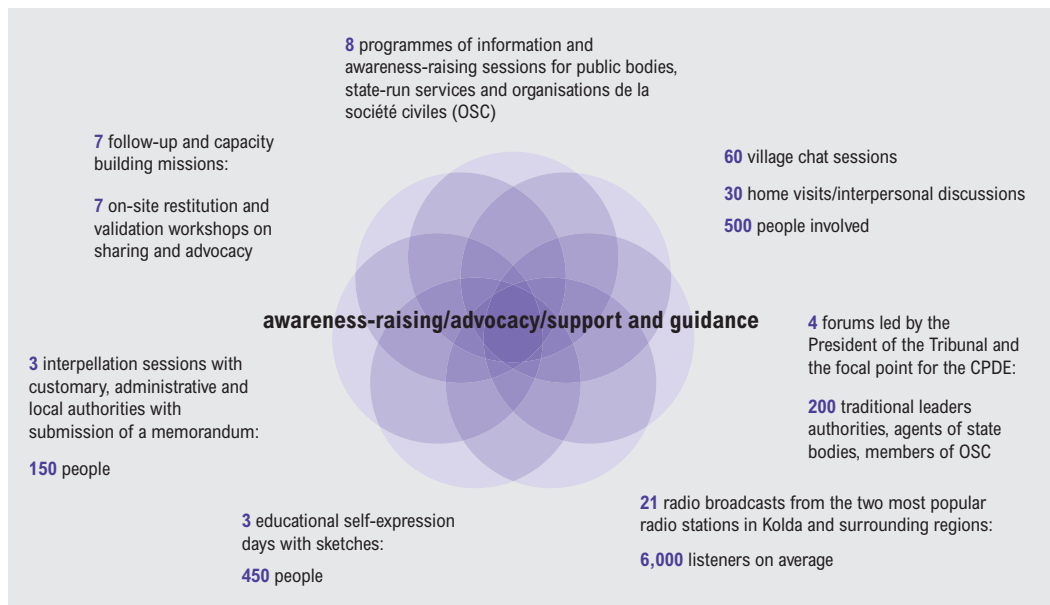
8   During the training, the different causes, consequences, victim profiles and obstacles to accessing justice for all known types of sexual violence were analysed, interpreted and widely circulated.

Once members of the Empowerment Committees had been trained, this approach also allowed their role to be extended in terms of disseminating this information and as a tool for reporting and caring for victims. Committees could use the knowledge and skills that they had acquired to lead the communications campaign linked to our project.

In addition, synergies were generated between different actions, notably within schools, through the Bagadaji girls' club against gender violence,[9] and the observatory against violence against girls in Ndorna secondary school, which was set up to encourage peer learning and enable these young girls to become agents of change. We also organised specific activities, such as educational self-expression days in schools, where we used sketches and chat sessions focusing on the causes, consequences and access to justice as a means of preventing sexual violence. Role models within communities were invited to Ndorna to speak about their educational journey and the success which they owed to education. The most talented pupils, particularly among the girls, were also given awards.

The **concerted actions of this community-based social mobilisation programme, the legal actors, and the Comité Départemental de Protection de l'Enfance (CDPE)** [The Child Protection Committee of the *département*] were crucial to the success of our strategy. Figure 1 summarises the different activities and the number of people involved in the communications campaign.

Figure 1: Types of activity and numbers of people involved

8 programmes of information and awareness-raising sessions for public bodies, state-run services and organisations de la société civiles (OSC)

7 follow-up and capacity building missions:

7 on-site restitution and validation workshops on sharing and advocacy

60 village chat sessions

30 home visits/interpersonal discussions

500 people involved

awareness-raising/advocacy/support and guidance

3 interpellation sessions with customary, administrative and local authorities with submission of a memorandum:

150 people

4 forums led by the President of the Tribunal and the focal point for the CPDE:

200 traditional leaders authorities, agents of state bodies, members of OSC

3 educational self-expression days with sketches:

450 people

21 radio broadcasts from the two most popular radio stations in Kolda and surrounding regions:

6,000 listeners on average

Source: RADI 2019, 'Rapport de consolidation des résultats du projet' [Consolidated report of project results].

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9   The creation of clubs for girls was an initiative supported by the UN Population Fund and developed by the Centre Conseil Ado (CCA), a guidance centre for adolescents. Its aims were to reinforce leadership for young and adolescent girls in the struggle against early pregnancy and child marriage, to promote education for girls and increase employability.

2.3. Evaluation of results

In our evaluation of the results, we were able to review the project and identify good practice, while also identifying the gaps in our approach and challenges we faced.[10] On the basis of these results, we have proposed an alternative model to allow access to justice for women and girls who are victims of sexual violence in rural Senegal.

3. Impact of the intervention and lessons learned

When we compare the data collected at the end of the project with the baseline situation, we can see that our approach, which was based on increasing the empowerment, inclusion and participation of women and girls, on building community-based strategic alliances, and on promoting collaboration between different actors, allowed us to develop and implement solutions which have had a strong impact on the prevention of early marriage.

3.1. Increased recognition that the consummation of early marriage is a serious form of sexual violence

Results show a significant difference between the proportion of respondents who consider consummation of early marriage as sexual abuse (25.8% in the baseline situation compared to 78.6% after the intervention). Moreover, no respondents thought that legal action against early marriage and consummation of early marriage was necessary before the project was set up, yet 33% of respondents at the end of the project agreed that taking legal action or informing the Empowerment Committees were options if parents proved recalcitrant. The word cloud in Figure 2 supports these statistical data.

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10 Results were evaluated in several stages: regularly throughout the project by different committees, at the half-way point by the researchers, and at the end of the intervention, when a final evaluation was carried out collaboratively by the women and their allies working with the project team in a supervisory capacity.

Figure 2: Word cloud for known forms of sexual violence[11]

Source: Enquêtes RADI 2019 [RADI Surveys 2019].

3.2. Increase in numbers of marriages which are terminated, not approved/broken off

During the timeframe of this project, five cases of early marriage (see Table 1), out of the 15 forms of sexual or sexist violence recorded, were broken off or not approved, in contrast to no reports of termination during the 12 months prior to the baseline study.

These results were obtained following interventions by teachers, the mayor of a commune, members of Empowerment Committees and even the police. There were also anonymous reports, cases where marriages were not approved and imams in mosques who intervened through their preaching. The existence of the Empowerment Committees and the interventions of their members were therefore decisive (RADI 2019).

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11 Horizontal – top to bottom: Responsibilities, tradition, concentration, suicides, social, ignorance, lack, girls, indecent, abandon, incest, educational, abortion, adultery, exclusion, unfaithfulness, psychosis, clandestine, desertion, pregnancy, parents, **negligence**, young, flight, **excision**, **marriage**, poverty. **rape**, early, adultery, desirable, sexual, divorce, undesirable, school, violence, girl, childbirth, precocity, fondling, socio-cultural
Vertical – left to right: social, paedophilia, deceit, harassment, aids, causes, AIDS, STD, spouses, existence, practices, **forced**, early, physical, promiscuity, custom, no, verbal, expulsion, teen, domicile, fistula, **conjugal**, haemorrhage, disturbance, social, rejection, HIV, wife, physical

Table 1. Details of the reporting process and resolutions in cases of early marriage during the project.

Case	Process	Outcomes
Case 1	• Intervention by the local police in the Bagadadjui *commune* during preparations for the marriage of a 9-year-old girl following an anonymous call. • Parents of the victim arrested.	• Marriage not approved.
Case 2	• Reported by the victim to the Committee with a request for them to mediate between her and her parents.	• Marriage not approved after successful heightening of parents' awareness.
Case 3	• Case reported to a teacher by the victim. • Interview between the follow-up lead on the Committee, the head of the school and the village chief with the girl's father, highlighting the girl's educational achievements and the legal requirements.	• Marriage broken off.
Case 4	• Reported by the follow-up lead on the Ndorno Committee. • Contact made with the legal aid office of Association des Juristes Sénégalaises (AJS), an association of women lawyers. • Coordinator of the service contacts the father to notify him of the objection to the marriage of his daughter, as a minor.	• Father given a three-day ultimatum. • Marriage not approved.
Case 5	• The girl runs away three times to ask her maternal uncle for help. • Uncle appeals unsuccessfully to girl's father. • The girl's mother, sexually neglected and abandoned financially by her husband, learns of the presence of the project research team for the final evaluation and reports the case to them. • Supervisor of the project team contacts the RADI office in Kolda and the follow-up lead on the Committee. • The latter refer the case to the AJS legal aid office and the CCA.	• The marriage is consummated. • The girl, having become pregnant, is left in the marital home.

Only one complaint was dealt with through a formal legal process. The rest were resolved through social mediation and intervention by the Empowerment Committees.

3.3. The involvement of a judge as a determining factor in enlisting the support of traditional leaders (village chiefs and imams)

The endorsement of the legal dimension by some members of the community, notably traditional leaders, was facilitated by the involvement of a judge, as an imam confirmed: "I became aware of the importance of the issue of sexual violence because if an important public figure like a judge makes the effort to come here in person to speak about it, it's because it's a serious matter that warrants our involvement as community leaders, since people listen to us" (Ndorna, May 2018).

That commitment was manifest in concrete actions taken by community leaders to oppose early marriage. Imams and village chiefs took part in committees and awareness-raising activities. They participated in radio broadcasts and used their sermons to inform their listeners.

The example of an imam in the Ndorna *commune* illustrates this change for the better. The first time that we went to present the results of the baseline study, he left the room as soon as we raised the issue of sexual abuse. After two forums led by the judge, however, he began to attend the awareness-raising sessions and took part in the focus groups organised as part of the mid-project evaluation. His discourse then changed completely. The final evaluation shows that he had initiated actions to dissuade families and that he had appealed to the mayor to help convince parents. He also acted as a mediator to avert an early marriage in a village which had not been part of the project.

It is also worth noting the personal involvement of a distinguished cleric in the Bonkonto *commune*, a member of the Medina Gounass religious family.

3.4. The creation of a women's collective against early marriage

Women are both the main victims and vehicles of abuses such as early marriage. The practice of early marriage offers women a means of protecting their daughters against the dishonour of losing their virginity and becoming pregnant before marriage, as well as protecting their own reputation. Once some of them had become fully aware of the abuses involved and had been given training as members of Committees, groups of women decided to create a collective to raise awareness among their peers.

4. Conclusion

People are less aware of early marriage and its consummation than they might be of other kinds of rape, a fact that explains the results obtained in relation to this form of violence. Results show that research combined with participatory action and capacity building can be transformative. This pilot model, which is based on the legal empowerment of women and girls so that they can become more aware of their rights and better equipped to assert them, has shown that it is those women and girls who are the cornerstone of change. But change can only be permanent if it is brought about through strategic alliances with multiple actors: adult men, young men and community leaders, whether official or unofficial.

The legal emphasis of our approach allowed us to highlight civil law, the legal position on early marriage and the fact that consummation of early marriage is a criminal offence if the minor involved is under 13 years old. This constituted a powerful argument which, according to some accounts, caused 'real concern among some people'.

The existence of Empowerment Committees, which were close to local people, offered a mechanism for anonymous reporting and the provision of care for victims, contributing greatly to the results that were obtained.

Although this approach conflicts with the perceptions and values associated with marriage, the commitment obtained from women, men and traditional leaders after they had been made aware of the problem and/or received training shows that our approach can be accepted.

Nonetheless, these results must be treated with due caution, since communicating the successful outcomes and embedding what has been achieved are major challenges. Gendered social norms are still very powerful in these areas, and the social mobility and social success of girls is still perceived by a large proportion of the population as only achievable through marriage.

5. Recommendations

The results show evidence of successes but also of numerous ongoing obstacles which limit their impact. It follows that factors which have contributed to successful outcomes should be reinforced and replicated in other villages and regions. We must also find lasting solutions to overcome social obstacles and address the technical and economic factors which limit the impact of such a model. To accomplish this, we must:

- base our interventions on scientific knowledge and understanding, with a focus on inclusion and competence-building.
- consider early marriage from the perspective of social justice and multi-dimensional empowerment, with the aim of equipping women to fight all forms of abuse and violence in their lives.

- give greater weight to the legal and judicial aspects of early marriage, including the question of consummation, while still taking account of its social causes and consequences for women's health. This wide angle of vision allows a more holistic approach and enables strategies to be integrated within a global multi-sectoral plan.

- promote and maintain frameworks for social dialogue and community interaction that allow the whole community to be involved.

- develop sex education programs and facilitate access to services promoting reproductive and sexual health as well as preventing premarital pregnancies, which is fast becoming the primary factor in motivating parents.

- continue to promote education as a vector of social mobility for girls and identify role models who can be a point of reference for girls and their families.

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Public Space Safety and Security for Women and Girls in Rural Gujarat, India

A Factor in Early and Young Age Marriage

Poonam Kathuria and Subhalakshmi Nandi, interviewed by Gina Crivello

Violence within and outside the home continues to be an everyday reality facing many girls and women across the world. In India, while domestic violence has emerged as a topic of public discourse and research, there remains a general lack of attention to, and investment in, addressing sexual violence against girls and women in public spaces, particularly in rural areas: neither have the links between public space violence and early and young age marriage been adequately explored.

In this chapter, Poonam Kathuria, Director of the Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives (SWATI), and Subhalakshmi Nandi, Director of Policy at the Asia Office of the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), are in conversation with Gina Crivello, Senior Researcher at Young Lives. They discuss the insights and learning from the kNOw Fear intervention study undertaken in rural communities in the state of Gujarat to promote girls' and women's safety in public spaces, as an essential step to tackling early and young age marriage in this context.[1]

Gina Crivello: Can you start by telling me briefly about kNOw Fear and what you set out to do with this programme?

Poonam Kathuria: kNOw Fear is a pun on the words 'know' and 'no', meaning both say 'no' to violence and also understand violence. The project focuses on the public space safety of rural women and girls in Gujarat, India. We came up with the term 'kNOw Fear' because we believe that fear of sexual violence in public spaces is a major barrier to the mobility of rural women and girls. Families in rural areas respond by pushing girls inside the home to keep them safe, effectively limiting girls' access to education, opportunities and resources. As such, the kNOw Fear project recognises that early, child and forced marriages are part of a complex phenomenon involving the social fear of girls exercising their sexual choices and the way these fears play out in public spaces. This type of violence is a driver for early marriages, which in turn contribute to multiple forms of injustice such as economic dependency, pregnancies at a young age and the increased possibility of domestic violence.

Gina: What brought your two organisations [SWATI and ICRW] together to work on this topic?

Poonam: SWATI[2] began 25 years ago as a feminist, community-based organisation with the goal to create a mass rural women's movement. Although the initial focus was on issues of livelihoods and income generation, we soon realised that unless you take up the issue of systemic violence against women you don't really question the structures of society. It's relatively easier to work on livelihood issues because these are seen to benefit everyone. No one really stops a woman from going to an income-generating programme because the income is coming into the whole family. But when you work on violence, you immediately and straightforwardly question the institutions of patriarchy and patriarchal control: you question family, the institution of marriage, social norms and gender inequalities.

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1   The discussion refers to qualitative findings reported in: Sebastian, D., S. Nandi, R. Verma, S. Bhattacharya, N. Bhatla, P. Kathuria, and N. Thakur (2020) 'kNOw Fear: Making rural public spaces safe for women and girls', Research Brief. New Delhi: International Center for Research on Women.

2   Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives

We are working to bring the issue of violence out of the closet, so to speak, because only by discussing violence can we reduce the social stigma for girls and women who experience it. With kNOw Fear, we're trying to create the conditions in society to address public space sexual violence in the rural areas where we work.

Subhalakshmi Nandi: ICRW[3] also operates from a feminist standpoint. Our collaboration on kNOw Fear has been investing in building women's and adolescent girls' agency, through feminist engagement, to build the voice and choice of women and girls, and, at the same time, to create an enabling environment and a responsive accountability mechanism which we consider critical.

Gina: What is your approach and methodology for achieving this?

Poonam: Our work is framed around the notion of citizenship rights rather than around patriarchy. I feel that in the current context, patriarchy isn't the hook for addressing these problems, because, when you say 'patriarchy is the cause', you are referring to an adversarial rather than a facilitating system. But the moment you start talking about citizenship rights you are talking from the vantage point of the Constitution of India which grants equality and equal opportunities to all citizens. It's a system that tells you that you can demand your rights. Someone can then say, 'these are my rights and you are not giving me them', whereas with patriarchy it's an uphill stream, like clawing against the tide. So, through the women's assemblies (*Mahila Gram Sabhas*), we promote women's agency to exercise their citizenship rights and in so doing facilitate bringing the voices of girls into the dialogue.

In kNOw Fear, we have started to work with local governance bodies in rural areas, the *Gram Panchayats*[4] who are constitutionally mandated to govern the village. One of their key mandates is social justice, including the welfare of women and girls. Although a certain percentage of the membership in these *Gram Panchayats* is legally reserved for women, in reality, women are not included as they should be and their husbands often participate on their behalf, reflecting patriarchy.

Through kNOw Fear, we are engaging women with these bodies by working with *Mahila Gram Sabhas*. We first meet and identify and plan what issues we want to take to the village assembly. These women's collectives also conduct safety audits in the villages. One of the demands that came up was for street lights in one area of the village. Another was cutting back bushes because women feared that someone could be hiding behind them and also that men were hiding behind the bushes and using their camera phones to film girls and women bathing. These are the types of issues that are brought out.

Since public space sexual violence affects different age groups differently, we engage younger and older generations in our work. For example, when it comes to girls' safety, we believe that women as parents have an important role to play since they have the power to

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3   International Center for Research on Women

4   *Gram Panchayat* or village panchayat: the lowest level unit of local self-governance institutions within the Indian *Panchayati Raj* (decentralised governance) system. The *Gram Panchayat* is the institution that usually operates at the village level, or at the level of a cluster of a few villages.

influence the norms around girls' mobility, demanding that public spaces be made safe for both girls and women.

Subhalakshmi: Youth engagement is also a key pillar of this work. One of the ways kNOw Fear has been working with youth is through the *Gyan Sahayaks* (knowledge facilitators). These are girls, aged 15 to 19 years, and boys, aged 18 to 22, who were selected and trained as peer leaders. Their main task is to mobilise young people in their own villages, to support the women's collectives in conducting the village safety audits and to encourage the community of young people to speak up to end sexual violence in public spaces. This capacity-building intervention has resulted in many of the boys and girls leading efforts to pressurise the *Gram Panchayats* to act on specific demands from the women's and young people's collectives.

> *"When we first started [trying to come] for training, our families did not allow us. We had to fight to get here, and, despite the backlash, we now fight for other girls. We go to their homes and explain to their fathers and mothers how it is okay for girls to also be educated and to dream of a better life."*
> (female *Gyan Sahayak)*

Gina: Do the girls and boys consider public space sexual violence a problem?

Poonam: Girls definitely see public space violence as a problem that needs to be addressed, and they see it as a problem that only they themselves have to address as they navigate the spaces in their everyday lives. For example, girls are the ones who take a different route to school, not boys. Because of the silence around public space violence, it has become so normalised that girls think it is just part of day-to-day living and that it is they who have to adjust to it. Although they find ways to adjust, it often comes at a cost to their own progress, mobility and access to education.

In the research that we conducted as part of this work, one in three girls reported taking a longer route to school in order to avoid sexual violence or teasing by boys. Another third said they had dropped out of school for fear of violence on their way to school or lack of a safe transport facility.

Gina: What about the boys and men?

Subhalakshmi: Among the young people we work with there are mixed perspectives on their roles as either 'perpetrators' or 'facilitators'. When asked what they think should be the role of men and boys in addressing sexual and gender-based violence in public spaces, we see an interesting contrast in the responses from girls and boys. The girls, despite much probing, were unable to see men and boys as anything but perpetrators. For them, the role of men and boys was to simply stop violating them. However, from the boys' perspective, their role was as facilitators for negotiating with the powers that be and representing the demand for rights on behalf of women and girls. One of the reasons we trained male youth as *Gyan Sahayaks* is because they are 'gatekeepers' to political and governance institutions.

> *"It is the responsibility of men to not view women and girls with the 'wrong gaze'. They need to start looking at us with respect, and without the intention to violate us. That is their role."*
> (female *Gyan Sahayak*)

The engagement with men and boys cannot stop there, where they are seen only as facilitators or gatekeepers. Their understanding of their own masculine privilege has to eventually be brought into the conversation around sexual and gender-based violence.

"It is the responsibility of men to not view women and girls with the 'wrong gaze'. They need to start looking at us with respect, and without the intention to violate us. That is their role." (female *Gyan Sahayak*)

Poonam: Although we have seen a rise in 'safe cities' projects in several cities across the world, including in New Delhi, in rural areas there is no such single governance body that can address this problem, and social-cultural norms hinder this issue coming out in villages. Fears around girls' safety are coupled with parents' worries about family honour, and many girls are married off young as a result.

Gina: Can you say a little more about how you conceptualise the connection between public space violence and early marriage in this context?

Poonam: We see girls' mobility as the lynch pin to early and young age marriage in the villages where we are working. It is also directly tied to education. There is plenty of evidence suggesting that when girls stay enrolled in school they are more likely to avoid early marriage; that girls who complete 10th standard [Grade 10] are six times less likely to marry early. But education can only happen if there is safe mobility. We need to work very hard for access to quality education and to ensure schools are reasonably located and that there is safe transport, especially for girls.

We see another layer of violence when it comes to early and forced marriage because when a girl is married early there is not a question of choice. Even among better-off families, girls are married young because of concerns around out-of-caste marriage or fear of girls exercising choice in their marriage partner. Nowadays, once the choice has been made, girls are asked 'do you like him?' The parents choose and the girls are asked if they are okay with the choice, and the choice has to be made within the caste or within the community.

"If a girl is harassed on her way to school and drops out for some reason, then it gets talked about in the village community and all the girls are forced to drop out of school. Sometimes she is also married off so that she does not get a bad name. But we know now that harassment is not the girl's fault; and that nothing should stop us from pursuing our education." (female *Gyan Sahayak*)

Gina: Does that mean that attitudes toward marriage for girls are changing?

Poonam: In the communities I've worked in over the last 25 years, I can see that attitudes are changing, but the pace of change is very slow compared to what one would have expected, and things are much slower to change in the rural areas. You still have almost half the girls in rural areas marrying before age 18, compared to one in three girls in urban areas.

Yet there are a lot of new social influences, from urbanisation and migration, to greater awareness of the importance of girls' education, to access to technology and the internet.

These have raised girls' awareness of what they are missing out on in the world. In some places, we are detecting a patriarchal and caste backlash, as parents and caste leaders continue to clamp down, passing oppressive diktats. We've recently seen attempts to ban girls' access to mobile technology,[5] or levying huge penalties on families who marry girls to someone outside the caste.

Gina: Is there an example from your work that comes to mind?

Poonam: A few cases come to mind; one of them was a marriage where the girl and boy were married as infants. The girl went on to become highly educated and she got a job in the police but the boy remained uneducated. The girls' parents decided to break this marriage, going against the entire community. They even paid a sum of money because, in some communities, there is a fine levied if you break an engagement and the fine is often very huge. In this case, the difference between the girl and the boy had grown to be massive; she was a police constable in a government job, a powerful position, so it seemed justified because she had gone on to make it big. Parents are able to do this where the motivation is very high and if they have the means, but I have also come across cases where educated girls have had to remain in very unequal marriages where the boy is not of her standard. You see both. That's why I say change is coming, but in rural areas the change is not as fast.

Gina: In your view, what is working? What are the priority next steps?

Subhalakshmi: kNOw Fear seems to be touching the right levers when it comes to mobilising and organising women and girls around the issue of sexual and gender-based violence, and in shifting entrenched norms around violence, mobility and aspirations, through training and raising awareness. As those on the receiving end of violence and discrimination, girls quickly pick up the knowledge, skills and tools for transforming power relations, and for addressing violence and discrimination. They begin to grow in confidence and understand and articulate better their daily experiences. But their agency remains constrained on many levels.

Boys, on the other hand, have a different journey and trajectory. Their position of relative privilege limits their understanding of the extent of disadvantage experienced by girls their age. They get a 'high' from being able to exercise their power and agency vis-à-vis mainstream governance institutions through which they help bring about social change.

For a forward-looking agenda, there is clearly merit in advocating for greater investment and support for organising, training and building the leadership of women and adolescent girls. These are time-tested and proven strategies that work on the ground in every context. We've also learned that strengthening women's collectives for rights and equality can have a positive intergenerational influence. We should be exploring integrated programming involving women and girls in the context of transforming gender norms and ending sexual violence against women and girls. With boys, I believe that more nuanced and context-specific strategies have to be designed.

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5   For a news article illustrating this point, see https://indianexpress.com/article/india/calling-all-boys-thakors-of-gujarat-taluka-phone-ban-for-girls-5875996 (accessed 4 December 2019).

Poonam: In my view, we urgently need to break the silence and stigma around public space sexual violence in rural areas. In the women's groups, girls are encouraged to talk and write about these issues, to articulate their experiences and feelings. It's a beginning to say, 'let us talk about this', and acknowledge that this happens. Then we need to address the question of 'who is to blame?', because you even have women leaders making comments about the way girls might be dressing, in the same way boys make these comments, putting the blame on girls. To make a real difference will require changing attitudes toward the value of girls in society, beyond their roles as wives and mothers, so that girls' education and contributions to the economy become the norm.

THEME 4:
Policies and programmes to reduce child marriage in different settings

1. **Early Marriage in Mali, Niger and Togo: Data from Studies in Local Communities**

   Ambroise Aladji-Weka, Hugues Fonzan, and Nicole Gbedeba Dagawa, with Nikki van der Gaag

2. **Public Policies and Social Justice in the Struggle to Abolish Child Marriage in Ivory Coast and Senegal**

   Fatou Diop Sall, Koffi Ludovic Ehouma, Ramata Molo Thioune, and Zeinaba Kane

3. **Preventing and Combatting Early Marriage in Togo: Lessons from an Experimental Study Led by the NGO Women in Law and Development in Africa–Afrique de l'Ouest (WiLDAF-AO) in the Communes of Lama-Tessi (Central Region) and Tamongue (Savanna Region) of Togo**

   Jean-Paul Akakpo-Ahianyo and Atavi Mensah Edorh, interviewed by Marie Reine Toudeka

4. **Influencing Policy to Reduce Child Marriage in India**

   Renu Singh, interviewed by Kath Ford

Early Marriage in Mali, Niger and Togo

Data from Studies in Local Communities

Ambroise Aladji-Weka, Hugues Fonzan, and Nicole Gbedeba Dagawa, with Nikki van der Gaag

Despite being against the law in many countries, marriage under the age of 18 still affects around 12 million girls and young women every year. West and sub-Saharan Africa have the highest rates of early marriage in the world. While they are slowly declining, there are large disparities according to locality, religion and ethnicity.

The data outlined here are from an IDRC-supported participatory research-action-training project 'Combatting early marriages by empowering girls in West Africa' in Mali, Niger and Togo. This project, run between 2016 and 2019 by WiLDAF-Afrique de l'Ouest (WiLDAF-AO), worked with girls and boys, as well as religious and community leaders, to prevent and combat early marriages in Mali, Niger, Togo and throughout the region.

Early marriage prevalence, by country and sex, 2012 2018

	Mali	Niger	Togo	West and Central Africa
Girls married under 15	18.0%	28.0%	6.0%	15.0%
Girls married under 18	50.0%	76.0%	22.0%	40.0%
Boys married under 18	3.0%	6.0%	3.0%	n/a

Source: UNICEF global database (https://data.unicef.org/topic/child protection/child marriage).

Methods of data gathering for the project	Mali	Niger	Togo
Household surveys	1266	601	1200
Focus groups	8	30	8
Individual interviews with parents, religious and community leaders, and young people	42	75	35

Note: Data was collected between August and December 2016.

Drivers of girls' early marriage

Respondents were asked about the drivers of early marriage, which fell into four main categories. They were also asked about specific economic drivers.

	Mali	Niger	Togo
School dropout	76.0 %	17.6 %	n/a
Poverty	41.7 %	13.9 %	65.2 %
Difficulties accessing decent work	n/a	32.2 %	39.8 %
Negative gender norms	41.7 %	23.5 %	22.9 %

Economic reasons for early marriage raised by women and girls	Niger	Togo
In exchange for goods, money and services	5.3 %	12.0 %
To reduce the economic burden on the girl's family	n/a	18.8 %
To settle a debt incurred by the girl's family	n/a	11.8 %

Educational status of girls married early	Mali	Niger	Togo
No education	32.1 %	45.0 %	46.5 %
School Dropouts	40.0 %	n/a	43.8 %
Have attended Koranic school	10.0 %	26.0 %	0.5 %

How many parents and community leaders know of the risks of early marriage for girls' health?

As well as being a human rights violation, early marriage can have huge health consequences for girls. Despite knowing this, many parents still feel early marriage is the best option for their daughters.

	Mali	Niger	Togo
Obstetric complications	63.0 %	71.6 %	86.0 %
Maternal mortality	68.1 %	30.3 %	62.9 %
Infant mortality	64.3 %	19.8 %	52.0 %
Fistula	n/a	53.8 %	11.4 %

> **Ways that the community and families pressure girls to marry young**
>
> - **Moral/psychological violence.** Threats may include curses and even death threats. These can lead some girls to commit suicide.
>
> - **Physical/sexual violence.** The first sexual intercourse is sometimes de facto violence since it takes place under duress. Sometimes the girl is sexually tortured during long years of marriage. If she runs away to her father's house, she may be forcibly taken back to her husband.
>
> - **Violence against parents.** Parents who are reluctant to let their daughters marry are under a lot of moral pressure to give their consent.

Girls teach the community about child marriage

This cartoon is taken from 'Changing customs that favour the practice of child marriage', a training module to support girls to assist in the eradication of child marriage in West Africa, published in 2018 by WiLDAF-AO. It shows the girls and young women teaching the community about the dangers of the practice.

Public Policies and Social Justice in the Struggle to Abolish Child Marriage in Ivory Coast and Senegal

Fatou Diop Sall, Koffi Ludovic Ehouma, Ramata Molo Thioune, and Zeinaba Kane

1. Introduction

In West and Central Africa, a significant number of girls are, or are liable to be, marginalised in the development process; this runs counter to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to UNICEF (2019), more than 61 million adolescent girls face barriers which prevent them from enjoying their rights and citizenship. Among these obstacles, child marriage seems the most problematic, since it has an adverse – and lifelong – impact on several of the rights of adolescent girls.

It is in those areas that six of the ten countries with the highest incidence of child marriage are found, which means that about four girls in ten are married before the age of 18 (UNFPA West and Central Africa and UNICEF 2018). Among those, 15% marry before their fifteenth birthday. If that rate is maintained, 16.5 million girls could be affected by 2030 (UNFPA West and Central Africa and UNICEF 2018, Girls not Brides 2015).

Child marriage, which is defined as 'any legal, religious or customary union involving a boy or girl of under 18' (GESTES 2019), is widespread in Africa. Child marriage is a form of abuse which has physical, sexual and psychological consequences. It is a means of controlling young girls, either by threats of early marriage or by forcing them to marry and depriving them arbitrarily of their freedom, whether in public or private life (USAID 2019). This practice is contrary to the principle of marriage, that is the consecration of a union freely entered into by two individuals. It is also contrary to the principle of human rights and the rights of the child. It prevents the child from having control over her own body and deprives her of education, health and the right to determine her future.

It is true that action has been taken to eliminate, or at least significantly reduce, the number of child marriages, but such interventions are very limited, particularly in rural or semi-urban areas where the majority of poor households live (UNICEF 2015). Research has shown that the number of child marriages is linked to the level of household poverty. More specifically, research has revealed that there are significant differences between the situation of girls in different communities, both within the same country and across different countries. This raises a further question of inequalities between women in terms of their civic rights, depending on whether they come from rural or semi-urban areas, or from rich or poor households.

In the light of these findings and with the technical and financial support of IDRC, researchers from the GESTES Research Laboratory in the Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis (Senegal) and others from the Félix Houphouët-Boigny University in Abidjan (Ivory Coast) investigated the reasons why public policies and other actions designed to reduce the number of child marriages in Ivory Coast and Senegal are less successful than elsewhere, despite the fact that current statistics show that the age at first marriage is rising.

This chapter presents some results of anti-child-marriage policies and programmes in these countries. It focuses on an analysis of the differences in impact of these policies in rural and urban areas in Ivory Coast and Senegal. It contributes to the struggle against child marriage by devising and implementing inclusive, more effective policies designed to change behaviours and practices.

2. Methodology

We collected official data on anti-child-marriage policies and programmes in Senegal and Ivory Coast and correlated those with secondary quantitative data taken primarily from Demographic Health Surveys (*enquêtes démographiques de santé* – EDS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) in each of the two countries. We analysed these data using the social justice analytical framework. Social justice is based on the principle of equal rights for all citizens, who should be able to benefit, without discrimination, from the same advantages. In other words, programmes designed to combat and prevent child marriage should benefit all girls in the same way, whatever their individual situation (geographic, social, economic, etc.).

3. Results and critical review of public policies

Data on programmes, policies and actors in the struggle against child marriage show that there are different actors involved and that there is a relatively favourable institutional framework, as well as policies and programmes, dedicated mainly to the prevention of child marriage. A study of the data shows that the nature of programmes varies: policies, strategies, plans, programmes, projects, initiatives, actions, etc. Some are multi-sectoral (education, health, financial independence, legal, gender-based violence). Others focus specifically on child marriage. In cases where different strategies are combined, programmes very often include community-based awareness-raising and access to services.

3.1. Institutional and political framework

In Ivory Coast, just as in Senegal, anti-child-marriage policies and programmes are based on those implemented at an international level led by the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). These public policies are designed to eradicate practices that are harmful to children. National legal frameworks are therefore closely aligned with the international obligations and commitments of the respective countries. Among these are:

- The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). On the basis of equality between men and women, Article 16.1 of this convention requires: 1) the same right to enter into a marriage contract; 2) the same right to choose one's spouse freely and to enter into marriage freely and without constraint;

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which came into force in Ivory Coast on 6 March 1991;

- The 2004 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). According to Article XXI of the ACRWC, marriages and betrothals between children should be prohibited and effective action, including legislation, should be put in place to specify 18 years as the minimum marriageable age;
- Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of March 2012.

The states of Ivory Coast and Senegal have tried to adapt these international laws and conventions for domestic use and their provisions are apparent in both state programmes and the actions of national and international NGOs.

In Ivory Coast, the national child protection framework is determined primarily by the Constitution and the 1970 Minority Act. This legal framework is supplemented by the Penal Code, the Labour Code and a series of acts relating specifically to human rights or particular aspects of child protection. However, even if a specific policy against child marriage has not been introduced, the struggle to eradicate this phenomenon started as soon as the country became independent, with legislation against early or forced marriage as part of Act No. 64-375 of 7 October 1964 on marriage. It was modified in Act No. 83-800 of 2 August 1983 (which states in Article 1 that no man under the age of 20 and no woman under the age of 18 may enter into a marriage contract). The provisions of this act were further strengthened by the 1981 Penal Code which also penalises this practice (Article 378 of Act No. 98-756 of 23 December 1998 states that any person forcing a minor under the age of 18 to enter in a customary or religious marital union is liable to a criminal penalty of between one- and five-years' imprisonment and a fine between 360,000 to 1,000,000 CFA francs, or one of those penalties only. Nevertheless, the Procurator of the Republic may grant an exemption on serious grounds). The Constitution of the Ivory Coast, adopted on 1 August 2000, confers responsibility for child protection to the State and public bodies (Article 6). However, this important advance largely ground to a halt during the political and military crisis of 2002–2011, where interest in questions of social development was largely overtaken by urgent humanitarian and security issues.

In Senegal, too, there are several mechanisms and strategies for the protection of children, notably from harmful practices such as child marriage. With a view to harmonising child protection policies and strategies, the State of Senegal established a national child protection strategy (the *stratégie national de protection de l'enfance* – SNPE) in 2013. The SNPE provides a benchmark for child protection. It identifies two strategic objectives: 1) the establishment of an integrated national child protection system and 2) the support and promotion of positive social change. The SNPE takes a three-pronged approach: prevention, particularly in terms of violence and exploitation; provision of state care for children in need; and the promotion of child protection by improving their living conditions and those of their families. In addition, as a follow-up to the creation of the SNPE, the State of Senegal set up a national inter-sectoral committee for child protection. It aims to improve coordination between different SNPE interventions to make child-protection programmes more effective. Despite this legal and institutional framework, the minimum marriageable age for a girl is 16 years, whereas all the international conventions ratified by Senegal set it at 18 years.

3.2. Impact of public policies on child marriage

3.2.1 Number of child marriages

Despite legal and institutional child protection frameworks, child marriage is still widely practised in both Ivory Coast and Senegal, even if the age at first marriage, especially for girls, has been rising over time.

In Ivory Coast, according to Figure 1, 47.5% of women who were married or in another form of union were under 18 in 1994. This percentage is declining and had fallen to 32.1% by 2016. As for women who had married or entered into another form of union before the age of 15 (in the category of women aged between 15 and 19 at the time of the survey), the percentages were 8.8 in 1994 as compared with 4.8 in 2016. A comparable percentage decrease over the same period could be seen among women aged between 20 and 49 years at the time of the survey. Analysis of these data showed a recent change in the timing of marriage among those women who were married before age 15. Whereas those between ages 15-19 at the time of the survey had been married in early childhood (between birth and age 4), those between 20 and 49 years at the time of the survey had been 4 years or older when they married. These data show that the phenomenon of child marriage is still current in Ivory Coast.

Figure 1. Women between 15 and 49 years of age who are married or in another form of union
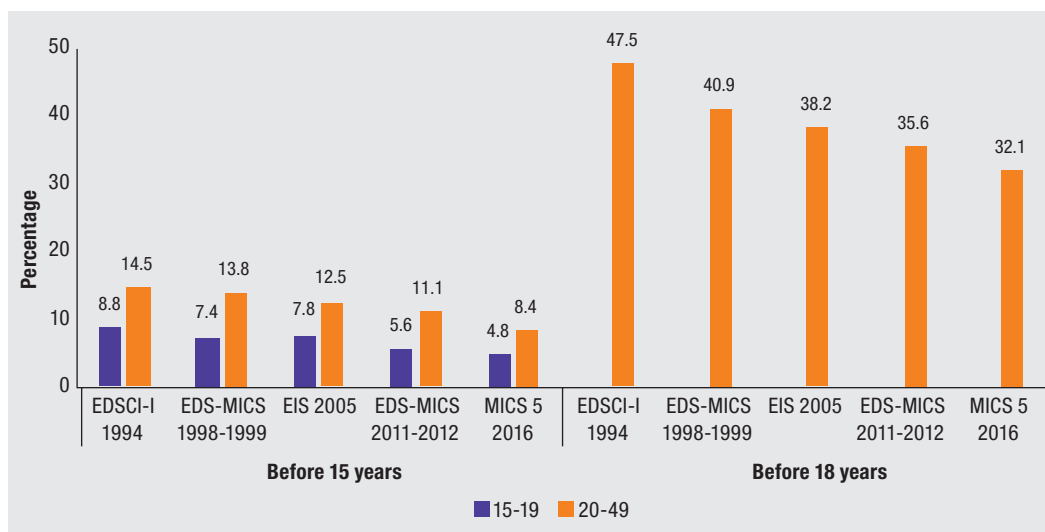
Source: Demographic and health surveys (EDS) and multiple indicator surveys by country (MICS), 1994, 1998-1999, 2005, 2011-2012 and 2016.

In Senegal, EDS data show that between 1986 and 1992, the highest rates of women married before reaching the age of 15 were 18% and 20%, respectively. However, from 2016–2017, data show a sharp decline in the percentage of women entering their first union before reaching the age of 15. Figure 2 shows the changes in the age at which a woman marries for the first time in Senegal.

Figure 2. Changes in the age of first marriage for women aged between 20 and 40 years (%)
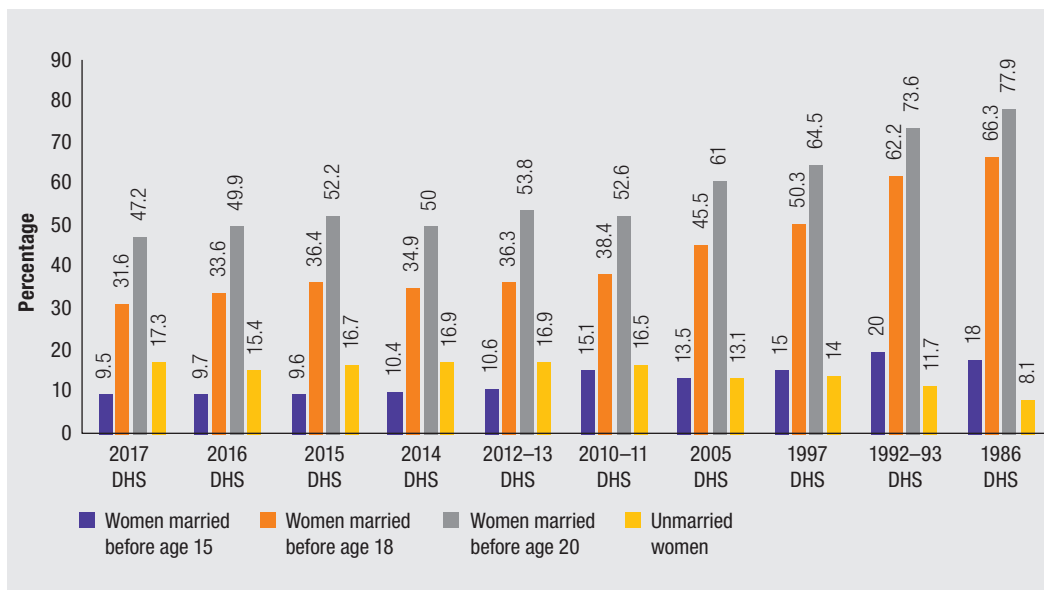
Source: ICF, 2015. The DHS Program STAT compiler.

3.2.2. Differences in the impact of child protection policies and programmes

Like earlier studies and existing data which have shown the link between the age at first marriage and poverty on the one hand, and living in a rural community on the other (UNFPA and UNICEF 2018), analyses of the data from the EDS and MICS surveys, as well as those from field surveys, show that in both Senegal and Ivory Coast there are significant differences between the effects of child protection policies and programmes according to the area of residence. These differences are superimposed on the existing socio-economic situation of the family.

In Ivory Coast, despite legislation which dates back 50 years and a fairly sustained programme of anti-child-marriage actions, the practice is still widespread across the country. Thus, in the nation as a whole, the most recent data show that 21.9% of women from urban areas are married before the age of 18 as opposed to 43.5% of those from rural areas (MICS 2016). These figures, however, do not reflect the much more varied pattern across different regions. The results of the EDS surveys show a greater prevalence of child marriage in the North, North West and North East, and in the South and South West: in these regions, more than half of women aged between 24 and 49 were married before the age of 18. To be more specific, at the time of our research, the percentages of women married or in a customary union before the age of 18 were: 52.1 in the North (Ferkessédougou), 43.4 in the West (Man), 38.4 in the North East (Bondoukou) and 36.9 in the South West (San Pedro).

As is the case for Ivory Coast, the EDS-Continue data for Senegal show that women living in urban areas marry later than women from rural areas (21.5 years and 17.7 years, respectively, among women aged between 25 and 49). These data also show significant regional differences in the average age at first marriage: Dakar (22.4 years), Ziguinchor (22 years),

Kédougou (16.4 years), Kolda (16.5 years) and Matam (16.7 years). The data also show that level of education and economic situation influence the average age at first union in Senegal: it is 17.9 years for girls who have not been educated and 21.5 for women educated at the primary level. The average age at marriage also rises in relation to economic prosperity: 23.2 years for women from the most affluent backgrounds and 16.5 years for women from low-income households (ANSD 2016).

3.2.3. Factors explaining different impacts

Analysis of interventions shows that there are differences in the impact of programmes. It is clear that there have been significant changes in urban communities but there has been relatively little change in rural communities. There are multiple factors explaining these differences in impact and they arise from a complex network of related practices: (1) social and cultural norms; (2) quality of educational provision; (3) socio-economic situation; and (4) religion. Children can prove vulnerable and likely to be married very young when several of these factors come into play within their families. The issues which contribute to these different impacts highlight the importance of taking full account of these complex practices. Unless this is done, any public policies combatting child marriage, however technically sound, cannot be firmly established and sustained.

The results of field studies provide a true picture of the reality of marriages in rural areas. Ethnographic specificity is one factor which illustrates the differences in the impact of programmes. Thus, through surveys of opinion in rural and urban communities, we have been able to observe different attitudes towards child marriage. In urban contexts, parents who took part in the survey roundly condemned the practice and saw no acceptable reason for it. The attitudes of people from rural communities seemed more diverse; some respondents suggested, among other considerations, that reasons for it stemmed from respect for norms and practices. Among some communities in Senegal **(Tambacounda and Kolda),** socio-cultural constraints are still very powerful and play a role in reducing the impact of interventions.

Traditions and religion influence child marriages, since all child marriages are traditional (according to the survey data, the Fula community is the most affected), but only sometimes religious (the Muslim religion), and they are rarely officially registered. That is not the case for Christian marriages, which must be preceded by a civil marriage ceremony.

In urban environments, the involvement of urban religious leaders has improved the efficacy of intervention strategies. By contrast, in rural environments, religious leaders and traditional chiefs are still influential opinion leaders and are difficult for intervention programs to win over. This is the case in many places in the western, northern and southern areas of Senegal.

Moreover, the scarcity of programmes to combat child marriage in rural areas explains why the practice is more persistent there. The Goudiry zone of Senegal is a case in point. Despite the fact that child marriage is still relatively common in that area, there are few programmes in place.

In addition to the reasons mentioned above, the economic disparity between rural and urban areas also influences whether child marriages continue or decline. The degree of poverty

varies significantly according to the environment and the extent of urbanisation. In urban environments, the existence of adequate educational infrastructure reduces the likelihood of child marriage. In rural environments, where provision of educational opportunities is inadequate, and where the quality and conditions of training are poor, marriage is considered the only option to gain control of a girl's sexuality as soon as possible and protect her from pregnancy outside marriage, which would be a source of humiliation for the family.

In Ivory Coast, religious and traditional beliefs are also often cited to justify child marriage, even if they are likely to be misrepresented. Take, for example, the case of a girl at school and from an urban environment who said: 'I heard someone on television speaking about the Muslim religion who said that if a girl's breasts were growing and she had periods, she should be married, since if that didn't happen and her father was on his deathbed, he would drink all her menstrual blood'. When she is married, a girl is held in higher regard, even in her own family, since her husband, in his capacity as son-in-law, can provide support if, for example, there is a death or a religious festival, whereas a girl who is not yet betrothed or is unmarried is seen as having contributed nothing.

Child marriage is not associated with any particular religion, but traditional practices are often open to interpretation and child marriage can be seen as a traditional way of endorsing solutions to family conflicts. Moreover, among foreign communities in Ivory Coast, the less people know of local laws, the less they respect them, sometimes even abandoning them in favour of the laws and customs of their country of origin. Some engage in the practice of child marriage away from Ivory Coast in their country of origin; as a result, teachers have reported cases of girls of foreign origin who have been taken out of school by their parents and sent to continue their education in their home country. We do not know what happens to those girls. Such behaviour is common; some African migrants in France, for example, take their daughters back to their country of origin on holiday and take the opportunity to have them cut, a practice banned in France.

The people who participated in the survey were, generally speaking, unaware of the law on marriage, and the majority of marriages are performed in religious or tribal ceremonies and are not officially registered. There are different attitudes to the concept of early marriage, even within urban communities, as the following comments show: (2) 'Back home among our people, the Tiembara of Diawala [a Senoufo sub-group], early marriage between the children of older and younger brothers is common. It's a really shocking phenomenon' (a girl from an urban community) and (2) 'Child marriage takes place in Tchologo, both in the Malian community and in the Senoufo community. Early marriage or intermarriage arranged by parents isn't as bad as all that. It's a duty and even customary and anyone who rejects the choice made by their parents has only themselves to blame for what happens to them' (a young man from an urban community).

In Ivory Coast, education also contributes to the decline in child marriage both in the eyes of the people themselves and the administrative authorities. It is increasingly accepted that girls at school should not be subject to a marriage arranged without their knowledge, nor should their education be interrupted. Girls who have been educated are more likely to rebel against marriage. Their school friends or teachers are often allies who protect them from this abuse. The presence of journalists who are aware of the problem is also an advantage; they can

sound the alarm. In the rural areas of the regions included in this study, girls who have little or no education are more likely than boys to be married before the age of 18.

Social networks play a role in decisions about child marriage. The decision-making process around giving girls in marriage usually involves several members of a community. Knowledge about this traditional process is jealously guarded by members of the respective communities, including canton chiefs, village chiefs, local dignitaries and mothers. This knowledge concerns: (2) the role of the main actors in the process; (2) the basis on which the arrangements for the marriage can be made (a spouse chosen on a basis of friendship, esteem and respect; the search for a family alliance; gratitude for a benefit given or a promise kept, etc.); (3) the period of betrothal signalled by the payment of a dowry in cash or in kind by the suitor; and (4) the formal marriage with the final dowry and the transfer of the fiancée to her husband.

Differences in the impact of programmes can be explained by the lack of follow-up policies and of strategies which ensure the sustainability of the programmes developed by the different stakeholders. After the actors responsible for implementing programmes have withdrawn, there are no arrangements for those who benefitted from them to take over, so that projects come to a halt, causing frustration within the respective communities. Members of the community then become recalcitrant or have little interest in future projects.

3.3. Critical review of programmes and policies from a social justice perspective

The situational and impact analyses of the struggle against child marriage show that:

- Overall, the range of current responses is very diverse, and includes policies, strategies and programmes. A number of actors are involved, and their objectives and the timeframes within which they operate are very different.

- That said, apart from the legal framework governing the minimum marriageable age, there is no coherent or systematic state policy to combat this phenomenon.

- As a result, child protection programmes and action plans frequently fail to take account of specific contexts and socio-economic and cultural characteristics, thereby limiting their potential impact on the reduction of child marriage.

- The diversity of actors and interventions in the fight against child marriage results in a variety of approaches and strategies, without any coordination between them. This limits their effectiveness.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The review of anti-child-marriage policies and programmes clearly shows that, overall, they have helped to bring about a reduction of child marriage in Senegal and Ivory Coast. However, these interventions affect girls differently according to whether they come from rural or urban areas. That raises the issue of inequalities and lack of equity between citizens as regards access to public resources. As a means of achieving greater social justice, public policymakers could take the following measures:

1. Develop policies and programmes which can be translated into concrete and effective actions to counter child marriage.

2. Work in a coordinated and multi-sectoral way at both the national and community level to ensure complementarity between different approaches and to maximise benefits.

3. Use the social justice analytical framework in policy development and produce data confirming that all girls likely to be victims of child marriage are considered in policies and programmes.

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Preventing and Combatting Early Marriage in Togo

Lessons from an Experimental Study Led by the NGO Women in Law and Development in Africa–Afrique de l'Ouest (WiLDAF-AO) in the Communes of Lama-Tessi (Central Region) and Tamongue (Savanna Region) of Togo

Jean-Paul Akakpo-Ahianyo and Atavi Mensah Edorh, interviewed by Marie Reine Toudeka

Marie Reine Toudeka: Good morning and welcome, colleagues. [In this interview,] we shall be discussing the project 'Combatting early marriage through the empowerment of young women in West Africa'. Without further ado, I'm going to ask you to introduce yourselves.

Jean-Paul Akakpo-Ahianyo: Good morning. I trained as a sociologist and I am a researcher at the Unité de Recherche Démographique (URD) [the Unit for Democratic Research] in the University of Lomé in Togo. I have been involved in the implementation of the action research project on preventing and combatting early marriage in Togo.

Atavi Mensah Edorh: Good morning. I work as a statistician in the URD. I was responsible for statistical analysis for the project [and] was involved from the initial baseline study to the completion of the project.

MR Toudeka: I would like to begin by asking you why you carried out this research.

JP Akakpo-Ahianyo: We undertook this research because national statistics suggest that adolescent girls enter into early marriages in certain parts of Togo, notably in Lama-Tessi (Central Region) and Tamongue (Savanna Region). Data collected in Togo in 2014 by the l'Enquête Démographique de Santé (EDST) [Demographic and Health Survey] show that the percentage both of women married before the age of 15 and of women married before the age of 18 is greater in rural than in urban areas. The percentages in rural areas are around 9% and 36.8%, respectively, whereas in urban areas, they are 4.5% and 19.4%. Overall, therefore, women enter marriage at an early age in Togo, and a relatively high percentage of early marriages has been reported across the country.

The second reason for the research is that there are gaps at the national level in legal frameworks designed to prevent child marriage. For example, legally, the minimum marriageable age is 18, but, at the same time, a legal dispensation can be granted if there are 'serious grounds' for marriage. But criteria for such grounds are not specified. That creates a loophole which allows communities to marry their young women at an early age. The results of our baseline study consolidated the results of the national survey, showing that, overall, among the women surveyed, 30.5% of women had been married before the age of 18.

AM Edorh: As a preliminary part of this research project, we conducted a baseline study to produce a comparative evidence base. The database allowed us to further our knowledge of early marriage. I'd point out that one of the goals of the baseline study was to develop a strategy for influencing and promoting collaboration with a view to using the results in other regions where the same problems exist.

MR Toudeka: In your opinion, how can we explain the fact that the two target areas for your study have much higher rates of early marriage than the other regions of Togo?

JP Akakpo-Ahianyo: Essentially, the explanatory factors are: the rural nature of these areas, the impact of socio-cultural and religious factors, and poverty. The findings of the URD baseline study show that the practice of early marriage is maintained by beliefs anchored in age-old, traditional practices such as the appearance of signs of puberty (body size), [according to] 64% [of respondents]; breast development, 63.8%; start of menstruation, 59.1%; and the importance attached to virginity. Three economic explanations were also recorded:

(1) the exchange of goods, money and services (18.8%); (2) the desire to reduce the financial burden on families (12%); and (3) repayment of debts incurred by the parents of the girl (11.8%).

It is in rural areas that the customs and practices underlying child marriage are most persistent. It is in those regions, too, that there is the least awareness of the laws forbidding child marriage. In these areas, a girl who loses her virginity or becomes pregnant outside marriage brings bad luck and dishonours her family. So, to avoid such dishonour, daughters are married as soon as the first signs of puberty appear. Moreover, because of poverty, girls are used as a currency of exchange [barter]. They are a form of income which allows families to pay off their debts or meet other financial obligations.

Our research showed that in some religious communities, the marriage of a girl who is a virgin is regarded as sacred. That marriage will last because the purity of the girl is a guarantee of success. Such social and religious conceptions in rural communities are thus important factors in the frequency of the phenomenon in these regions.

MR Toudeka: Why have government efforts to eradicate early marriage been less successful in those regions?

JP Akakpo-Ahianyo: In the two Togolese regions which were the focus of our research, the main reason that government efforts did not lead to a significant reduction in the number of early marriages is that the interventions of the Ministère de l'action sociale [Ministry for Social Action], a state service implementing policy on early marriage, did not extend to all the *cantons* [administrative districts or communes] in the two prefectures, namely Tamongue in the Tanjoaré prefecture and Lama-Tessi in the Tchaoudjo prefecture. And early marriages are common in these two prefectures. State interventions targeted only some communities for various reasons which could be related to budgets or to government priorities. The second factor is a lack of coordination at the national level between different institutional responses to early marriage, whether at a local civic level or from state organisations.

AM Edorh: I think failure to coordinate different actions taken to combat early marriage is the primary reason why government efforts have been less successful in those areas.

MR Toudeka: What was the main aim of your intervention?

JP Akakpo-Ahianyo: Our objective was to develop an integrated action model which would contribute to the reduction of early marriage in Togo. The intervention aimed primarily to empower young women by enhancing their knowledge and skills. Our work centred around a number of key themes, which included: their rights and duties, gender-based violence, sexual rights, leadership and negotiating skills. By developing the skills of adolescent girls in these areas, our aim was to help equip them to play a leading role in combatting early marriage. They would be able to raise awareness within their communities and oppose and denounce early marriages. The project, therefore, had to train these girls to interact with their communities and to speak confidently in public, so that they could influence their peers, the members of their communities, their families, state officials and, above all, those who uphold traditional practices.

This strategy is relevant because the factors that lead to the marriage of adolescent girls are deeply embedded in their way of life, its habits, customs, and traditional and religious norms.

I would stress that the ultimate goal of this intervention was to develop different strategies which would create the conditions needed to prevent early marriage more effectively. In other words, to improve the legal, institutional and political framework, and to weaken cultural and religious resistance.

MR Toudeka: How did your methodological approach allow you to work towards that goal?

JP Akakpo-Ahianyo: There were three phases of the project. In the first phase, we carried out a baseline study. The second phase focused on the intervention itself and the implementation of an integrated action plan. In the third phase, we evaluated the results of the intervention.

The baseline study enabled us to produce a database which improved our knowledge of early marriage. In the two communities studied, we were able to measure the frequency of early marriage, its development, the underlying causes and its consequences for girls in terms of health and personal development. We also identified the obstacles which prevent them from engaging fully with the wider development process.

Using the baseline study, we were then able to develop an action model. This model was made up of several activities designed to develop the girls' knowledge and skills. First of all, we selected a number of girls and boys, as well religious leaders and traditional chiefs. In the context of our strategy for empowering girls, we set up a team of young men who supported awareness-raising activities led by the girls who had been selected.

After choosing the girls [to] take part in this project, we set out to identify the competencies which they needed to develop. As part of the training programme, there were modules on public speaking designed to change behaviours within the girls' communities and to enable them to get key messages about early marriage and the rights of girls across. We also set out to develop their negotiation skills to enable them to take advantage of opportunities to further their empowerment. After we had identified their training needs, we went on to develop a series of training modules.

These modules were developed collaboratively by the research team and leaders of national projects run by the NGO, Women in Law and Development in Africa-Togo (WiLDAF). The modules covered legal, social and political fields. Religious and community leaders were also identified and trained so that they could become key actors and allies who would play an important role in combatting early marriage, as they are the gatekeepers of traditional practices. Training for the leaders was delivered through a series of forums.

The girls were trained, supported and equipped to raise awareness of topics relevant to early marriage and its consequences for girls' health. We also organised events promoting exchange and networking between the different countries participating in the project, notably Niger and Mali.

The third key part of the action plan was the evaluation of the results of different interventions. Evaluation procedures were set up to document the impact of the activities initiated by the girls – on their communities, their personal lives and leaders of their communities. We also recorded changes in behaviours and perceptions which resulted from these activities.

The monitoring and evaluation model made provision for data to be collected during quarterly and half-yearly meetings. During the quarterly meetings, monitoring data were collected from the boys and girls. In the meetings held every three and six months, monitoring data were collected from community actors and religious leaders.

AM Edorh: Regarding the baseline study, I should stress that it included three countries: Mali, Niger and Togo. The three countries used the same measuring tools to yield comparative data.

MR Toudeka: What were the main outcomes of this programme?

JP Akakpo-Ahianyo: The training programme for young leaders focused broadly on basic human rights, gender-based violence, the biological and social roles of women and men, the consequences of early marriage, leadership, laws relating to early marriage, the techniques used to offer consultation, assistance and aid in legal matters, and communication and advocacy skills. After completion of the programme, the young leaders who had been trained returned to their respective communities to spread the message and raise awareness.

These activities led to significant qualitative changes both for individuals [the young people trained as leaders and the religious and community leaders] and within communities. Among those actively involved, the main change that we observed was an improvement in their knowledge of the phenomenon of early marriage. Before our intervention, these key players had considerable gaps in their knowledge of early marriage. Thanks to the programme, they learned about the legal marriageable age, the consent of spouses, gender, and fines and prison sentences incurred by community leaders and other persons involved in arranging early marriages.

The youngest participants were able to develop their skills in public speaking. We also observed that they were likely to reject early marriages more spontaneously or to marry after completing their studies or training. After our intervention, those who were still at school want to finish their studies, and trainees want to complete their traineeships. We met young people who travelled scores of kilometres to go to secondary school; whereas, before our intervention, they were more inclined to neglect their studies. As for the parents, they often took little interest in their children's education. Now, following our intervention, the young people are able to discuss their education with their parents.

The motivation to change is not the same for young girls as for young boys. After completing our training programme, the decision to delay early marriage among girls is prompted by an understanding of the impact of early marriage on health, in other words, complications arising from childbirth which can cause lifelong problems. What promotes change among young boys is an awareness of the risk of extreme poverty and hardship associated with early marriage. Boys cannot cover the costs of antenatal appointments or meet the financial needs of a family.

Before our intervention, young people were not interested in household chores and were discourteous to their parents or guardians. The boys and girls who learned about their rights and duties as part of our training programme now treat their parents or guardians with greater respect and help out with household chores.

As far as community leaders are concerned, their training improved their knowledge and perceptions of early marriage. As a result, they are better equipped to solve problems related to early marriage within their communities. An unexpected outcome of the new competences which they had acquired was a renewed appreciation and acknowledgement of the status of the traditional chief, a position which hitherto was held in low esteem by members of the community.

The training and awareness-raising activities in which religious leaders took part enhanced their comprehension of the phenomenon of early marriage – its causes and consequences – and improved the ways in which they conduct the marriage ceremony. Thus, religious leaders now consistently ask to see legal marriage documents before any marriage celebrations can take place.

With regard to communities, the awareness-raising programme for young leaders resulted primarily in a change in perceptions and attitudes among men as well as women. Thanks to these changes, behaviours leading to early marriage within communities are less common. And, in fact, early marriage, which was previously considered normal practice, is today perceived as harmful for young girls' health. Moreover, parents are now more interested in education and in ensuring that their daughters are educated, which was not previously the case.

The traditional chiefs also drafted a document on fines and prison sentences incurred by individuals involved in early marriages. One of the strengths of the project was the collaboration between the community leaders and the boys and girls because they are key actors within the community. They can dissuade people and are living proof that the project is taken seriously.

It is also interesting to note that the majority of community and religious leaders continue to be involved in the interventions made by the young people, to whom they still offer support and help.

MR Toudeka: Can you confirm the age of these adolescent girls?

AM Edorh: We are talking about adolescent girls of between 10 and 18 years old.

MR Toudeka: How did you define and identify the outcomes of the programme at the end of your interventions?

JP Akakpo-Ahianyo: We collected data which allowed us to evaluate our research from the two sites of our action programme. We used two methods of evaluation: one quantitative, one qualitative.

First of all, we collected quantitative data from WiLDAF-Togo, the NGO which took part in the project. The quantitative data mainly concerned: the number of debriefing sessions[1] in

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1   A debriefing session is where the newly trained young leaders, having returned to their communities, present a report on what they have learned to the religious leaders and dignitaries of their community.

each place according to the number of participants; the number of leaders who took part in the forums; the number of leaders identified in each place according to sex and date of identification; the number of awareness-raising sessions per village and *canton* run by the young people who had completed the training; the number of people attending the awareness-raising sessions; advocacy activities in different places; the number of radio broadcasts made by the young people in their place of residence, and the number of quarterly and half-yearly follow-up meetings which had taken place.

In terms of qualitative data, we carried out a total of 35 interviews in Togo. Of the 35 interviews, 11 were individual in-depth interviews, and there were 12 discussion groups. Group discussions were community-based and could include men and women. These different types of interviews were analysed to assess the impact of the training activities on the young trainee leaders, the competences that they had acquired and the direct impact of the actions they had taken (awareness-raising, advocacy sessions, legal support, broadcasts) on their communities.

MR Toudeka: Based on the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, tell us about the challenges that you had to face and how you responded to them.

JP Akakpo-Ahianyo: In terms of challenges, we noted first that, although the project encouraged and emboldened the young leaders when they spoke in public, they found it difficult to answer questions about abortion, early pregnancy, the sexual and reproductive health of young people and adults, family planning and child trafficking because their training had not equipped them to tackle those issues.

The second challenge which we identified in the quarterly meetings was that the notion of advocacy had not been taken on board either by the young trainees or members of the community (community leaders, men and women). We also noted that at the end of the project, a minority of trainees (girls and young boys) still found it difficult to speak in public.

Completion of the monthly feedback forms was also a problem. Participants did not always answer all the questions and their replies were sometimes too vague and confused. These forms were later collated by the WiLDAF-Togo programme leader.

MR Toudeka: Is the programme still ongoing? If so, how and why? What are the principal learning outcomes which you would like to share and what are your future plans in terms of revising the module for use in other places?

JP Akakpo-Ahianyo: The programme is now over, but some activities which were set up in the context of the programme are ongoing. The final reports which we received following the evaluation show that activities to raise awareness of the harmful effects of early marriage are still taking place (50 in Tamongue and 57 in Lama-Tessi). At the end of the project, we raised the question of sustainability with the young people and the community and religious leaders. However, the number of participants in awareness-raising activities has reduced in comparison to the number of actors recruited during the project. Current awareness-raising activities are held in churches and mosques, or during events in which the newly trained young leaders can take advantage of meetings called by *canton* chiefs to speak about early marriage. The young people also mentioned that there had been no further instances of early

marriage since the end of the project. Radio broadcasts could not be continued because funding to set them up was provided by the project.

Results of the project

There are three fundamental factors to note. First, the project encouraged a more widespread awareness of the harmful effects of early marriage on the health of young girls and on the overall development of the community. Different actors were affected by the project: the young people whom we trained, young people who were not trained, community and religious leaders, and local authorities. Second, the young leaders who were trained and young people within the communities became fully committed to opposing early marriage. Third, the involvement of community and religious leaders in the activities of the project means that the newly trained young leaders will have their support in taking further action. These three factors will enable future interventions to make a greater impact.

Lessons learned/suggestions for the future

There are some key points to be considered if this action model is to be reviewed and used elsewhere. The time allocated for training the young leaders should be extended because the five days available for the project were insufficient for these young people to master all the topics covered.

In terms of follow-up, since the project could not appoint someone locally to take responsibility for follow-up, the newly trained young people had no real support. Moreover, since facilitators are unpaid, the help they can offer is limited and subject to their availability. So the next time this action model is used, it would be desirable to appoint a follow-up officer within each community to provide sustained support for all the actions initiated by the young leaders.

The baseline study also showed that poverty was a key factor in the persistence of early marriage. It would, therefore, be worthwhile in future to repeat this action model elsewhere but with the addition of a financial compensation package, since newly trained young leaders, however well-intentioned they may be, need money to continue their education or training. Without such an arrangement, young girls can become more vulnerable and therefore liable to accept early marriage.

MR Toudeka: Is there anything more you'd like to add before we finish?

AM Edorh: We have to continue the struggle to prevent early marriage.

JP Akakpo-Ahianyo: I hope that the results of this project in Togo will be sufficiently high-profile for interested parties overseas to find out about them and benefit from our experience. Finally, we hope that this interview will be helpful in future interventions.

Influencing Policy to Reduce Child Marriage in India

Renu Singh, interviewed by Kath Ford

In October 2017, India's Supreme Court issued a landmark judgement ruling that a man who has sex with his wife, when she is less than 18 years old, is committing rape. Evidence from Young Lives longitudinal data and census analysis by the team contributed directly to this important change in the law, aiming to reduce child marriage.

In this chapter, Dr Renu Singh, Young Lives India Country Director, explains why she continues to work so passionately on addressing child marriage, and how longitudinal research can have a real impact on improving the lives of young girls and boys.[1] Renu is in conversation with Kath Ford, Young Lives Programme Manager and former policy lead on Violence against Women and Girls at the Department for International Development, UK.

We would like to thank Anne-Charlotte Gimenez and Deborah Walnicki for their contributions to this piece.

Kath Ford: What makes you so passionate about addressing child marriage in India?

Renu Singh: On a personal level, I was married off at the age of 19, through an arranged marriage, and I've always felt that this shouldn't happen to other people. Though being married at 19 is not legally classified as child marriage, I feel 19 is still too young and that early marriage is extremely challenging. I was lucky in that I was married into a home that encouraged me to continue my post-graduate and doctoral studies, but many young people are not as fortunate.

On a professional level, early evidence from our work using Young Lives data highlighted the significance and scale of child marriage in India. Our research in 2011 demonstrated that 37% of girls were married by the age of 19, and 28% of girls were married *before* the age of 18, the legal age for marriage in India. These shocking statistics really woke me up to the issue of child marriage, especially since Andhra

"12.1 million girls and boys were married below the legal ages of 18 and 21 years, respectively, in 2011 …. this was my wake-up call."

Pradesh and Telangana states (where the data were collected) are not even the states with the highest incidence of child marriage. We then investigated larger datasets, including an analysis of India's 2011 census, in collaboration with the National Commission of Protection of Child Rights, to better understand trends and the extent of the issue. What we found was equally shocking; though there was a declining trend in child marriage at the national level, *12.1 million* girls and boys were married below the legal ages of 18 and 21 years, respectively, in 2011. This underlined the enormity of the issue and that although some things were improving, this was my wake-up call telling me, 'we need to do something!'

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1   Young Lives is a longitudinal study of childhood poverty following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over 15 years (www.younglives.org.uk). Findings on child marriage from Young Lives India are part of a multi-country comparative sub-study (2017-2020), conducted with Child Frontiers, that included Ethiopia, Peru and Zambia.

Kath: What a powerful call to action. From marrying at the age of 19 to where you stand today, do you have a sense of how your family's experience of child marriage has changed over time?

Renu: I was probably the last one in my family to have married that young. I know my mother probably got married around the same age, but, after me, I don't think anyone in my family married before the age of 23 or 24, many were 25 or 26 years old. And they were marrying out of choice, rather than through an arranged marriage. To be fair to my parents, I don't believe they wanted me to get married so young, but my mother's ill health was a major factor in my parents arranging my marriage. In my case, being married at 19 through an arranged marriage was more a response to circumstances than a long-held belief.

Kath: Do you feel that society in India is changing at the same pace?

Renu: No, not really; I would say my family is much more modern than wider Indian society currently is. For example, I have just come back from Rajasthan where we conducted a consultation with over 200 young girls studying in school, aged between 14 to 17 years, to mark Girl Child Day (11 October 2019). Many of these girls talked about the continuing pressures on them to get married. But the good thing is, they're increasingly aware of the law and their rights. We ran a training workshop to build awareness about current laws relating to marriage and how the legal framework can protect them. At least this dialogue is now open, which is a very good thing. I think things are changing for the better, particularly the mindsets of young people. But are the mindsets of the older generations changing? No, not as rapidly as I think they should be; patriarchy is so entrenched in India.

Kath: So how do you think change can and does happen? For example, what were the most important factors that led to the landmark judgement of the Supreme Court in 2017?

Renu: To be honest, I think that much of our success to date has been due to being able to respond to opportunities as they arise, rather than by following a specific pre-determined strategy. In the example of the Supreme Court judgement, change happened through continuous interactions with policymakers over a long period of time, backed up by the strength of data and analysis enabled through Young Lives research. We began a series of dissemination meetings on our findings relating to adolescence over six years ago, initially pulling together a small core group of people working on adolescence and child marriage from across government. At one of these meetings, the chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights was struck by the alarming situation on child marriage and requested we extend our analysis using the 2011 census data. Young Lives was fortunate to have donor support that gave us the flexibility to respond to this request and take forward specific secondary data analysis.[2]

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2   Young Lives was core funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) from 2001 to 2018. Additional Young Lives research funded by the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) and more recently the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), among others, has enabled deeper analysis into specific research areas, particularly in relation to child marriage.

The result was a powerful report on child marriage, a joint publication by Young Lives and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights.[3] The report was then shared with the line Ministries and used as evidence to respond to parliamentary questions by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. This was a real turning point for Young Lives policy engagement.

The next key step was an invitation by a leading judge to share the report with the judiciary. The resulting Supreme Court judgment, that came out on 11 October 2017, directly quoted our report on child marriage, including reference to Young Lives data and research. The judgement stated that every sexual act with a minor, even with a minor wife, must be termed as rape, to stop child marriage. I believe that classifying child marriage not just as illegal, but as rape, is a huge deterrent and enables much stronger messaging. India has very strong laws relating to rape, but marital rape had never before been accepted, even where the wife is underage.

> *"I believe that classifying child marriage not just as illegal, but as rape, is a huge deterrent and enables much stronger messaging."*

So, I think that's how policy change comes about. Being flexible enough to respond to political opportunities for change as they arise, and ensuring related research is accessible and targeted to influence policymakers.

Kath: Ensuring effective legislation is in place is clearly critical for addressing child marriage. But legislation *alone* is usually not sufficient for effectively improving the lives of young people. What also needs to be in place to ensure that legislation has a positive impact, including mitigating the potential risks of backlash to that legislation?

Renu: Yes; we have some brilliant pieces of legislation in India, including our constitution. But how effectively are they implemented? And how effectively are mechanisms put in place to make legislation work for the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups? I think we still have a lot to do to ensure the right safety nets are in place. For example, if you encourage young girls to say no to child marriage, are there safe spaces for them to turn to if their parents abuse them or if they are subsequently stigmatised for not getting married?

Also, what happens when a young girl is forced to marry someone her parents choose, or when there is violence or alcoholism at home? Or she herself decides she loves a man and decides to get married as a child? Who is it that will actually file a case to ensure the law is adhered to? Do young girls and boys themselves have the wherewithal to know how to make a case? And if they do, who is going to protect them in the process? Shelter homes should be specifically designated for these girls and special provisions for their continuing education and skill development must be ensured.

> *"Shelter homes should be specifically designated for these girls and special provisions for their continuing education and skill development must be ensured."*

3   Young Lives and NCPCR (2017) 'A Statistical Analysis of Child Marriage in India Based on Census 2011', New Delhi: Young Lives and NCPCR. https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/ Report-Child_Marriage_final.pdf.

I was at a primary school in Rajasthan recently, and saw a young girl who could not have been more than 10 years old. She had her head covered and I knew there was something wrong because little girls don't usually cover their heads. I asked her classmate, 'what's happening with this young girl?' and her classmate replied, 'she's getting married tomorrow!' When I followed up with the school principal, he told me that the young girl's older sister was due to be married, but that the family had decided to also marry her younger sister at the same time, as they wouldn't have enough money for another ceremony. He assumed she would not be sent away to her new marital home until she reached puberty (a custom called *Gauna*), but would be married nonetheless. When I questioned the principal about why this had not been reported, he replied that he had been married off at 2 years of age!

This is a common story we hear from many communities. Of course, I reported this case to the State Commission and the marriage was subsequently stopped. But, in retrospect, I really don't know if I did the right thing, because I'm not there to help this particular girl. I don't know what the backlash is going to be. It's all very well to think you saved this child from an early marriage, but I don't know what the rest of her life is going to be like. She may hold the stigma of having a broken engagement for the rest of her life.

Kath: That powerful story really underlines the importance of understanding why young people get married in the first place, and ensuring that appropriate safety nets are available to support them. Has there been much analysis in terms of looking at outcomes of specific cases of child marriage processed through the system?

Renu: No, not yet; but I'm very keen to do that and we are planning to work with a lawyer to take this forward. We would like to look at the case histories for all cases of child marriage that have gone to the high courts and the Supreme Court, and to understand why there are so few cases filed in the first place. Recent consultations we have had with state officials in West Bengal and Rajasthan have indicated that even when a girl goes to the police station to report a child marriage, a First Information Report is often not filed. Children's voices are just not being heard.

We must remember that even for marital rape, as per the new judgement, somebody has to report it and take it to the magistrate. Usually what happens behind closed doors remains behind closed doors. The new legislation is a big deterrent, but it is unlikely to have real impact if there are no related convictions. So far, I am not aware of any individuals being punished under this particular judgment, though child marriages are continuing to be reported. That is why I think we need to do much more research.

> *"The new legislation is a big deterrent, but it is unlikely to have real impact if there are no related convictions."*

We have just finished a qualitative study looking at unmarried teenage mothers living in shelter homes in Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan. And what did we find? Many girls had run away from abusive parents or extreme poverty and then ended up in abusive relationships. Many didn't know how to use contraceptives. They're young, they got pregnant, and then their parents disowned them and they ended up in shelter homes with a young baby. These shelter homes are not currently designed for ensuring the skill development of young single mothers.

Kath: In terms of impact of the Supreme Court judgment, you've mentioned that it enables policymakers and practitioners to deliver much stronger messages against child marriage. Could you tell us a little more about that?

Renu: The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act passed in 2006 already aims to prevent child marriage in India. However, a major weakness of this law is that it doesn't automatically declare child marriages to be void ab initio; rather, it makes child marriages 'voidable'. This means that child marriages can be annulled if, and only if, they are reported. This law has therefore had limited impact to date on the incidence of child marriage, both because somebody has to report the child marriage in the first place, and because there has been very limited follow up through the courts (if any).

The new judgement means that we can now say that every husband who has sex with a minor wife is *committing rape*. This is a much more powerful message and a much bigger deterrent because we have had lots of convictions against rape in India; everybody knows about it.

Of course, this judgement only provides for marital rape of *minors* and not for those over the age of 18. But at least this is a start; I see this as a huge win.

Kath: Clearly your analysis through Young Lives had a huge impact on the Supreme Court ruling relating to child marriage. What advice would you give other longitudinal researchers who are also striving to deliver research to policy impact? In my experience, a key step is understanding the incentives of those with political influence and working out which research findings are most likely to provide that vital hook to catalyse change.

Renu: I agree**,** but a key challenge is that researchers often don't have enough time to really engage with policy debates. They're so busy undertaking research and data analysis. By setting up specific country offices, Young Lives positioned us so we were not only doing research, but we could also engage in continuous policy engagement. I think this is critical for research to remain relevant; unless you have a seat at the table in key government debates, you won't be able to understand what is of interest to a policymaker at a particular point in time. And politics is constantly changing, especially in countries like India and other middle-income and developing countries. Political agendas change, priority areas change. For research to remain relevant, it needs to be adapted to changing circumstances; key research findings and messaging need to be targeted and nuanced to draw the attention of changing policymakers and service provision.

Kath: What do you see as the most important areas of policy that still need to be addressed to both reduce child marriage and to support those who have experienced early marriage?

Renu: I think that making sure girls and boys stay on in education and making secondary education free and compulsory is an absolute pre-requisite to reducing child marriage. In addition, ensuring that the curriculum taught in schools is actually relevant for transitions from schooling to the labour market. Secondary education should include a focus on life skills

because if we don't provide opportunities for fostering young people's agency, decision-making, problem-solving and critical thinking skills, we can't expect them to be able to stand up to all the challenges in the future. It is vitally important to ensure that adolescent girls have the right skills and competencies to sustain themselves economically, and it's good to see there is a growing focus on the development of adolescents' skills in India.

"Making sure girls and boys stay on in education and making secondary education free and compulsory is an absolute pre-requisite to reducing child marriage."

I think we also need to make sure that young couples who are already in the institution of marriage, whether by choice or not, are supported in preventing teenage pregnancy and becoming parents at a very young age, not least to reduce the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

And we need to ensure that unmarried teenage mothers are provided with dedicated shelter and support systems, appropriate to their needs; as far as I am aware this is not currently being provided, and certainly not on the scale required.

Kath: Many thanks Renu for such a rich and thought-provoking conversation. Is there anything else you'd like to add in conclusion?

Renu: I am very grateful that the Indian government is now pushing for change to prevent child marriage. I'm also encouraged that policymakers are waking up to the fact that we can't address child marriage and teenage pregnancy as two separate issues. Preventing teenage pregnancy requires preventing and addressing child marriage. The more that policymakers work together on these issues, including education and skills development, the more chance we have of making real change happen and improving the lives of young girls and boys.

Acknowledgements and credits

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Dreaming of a Better Life
Child Marriage Through Adolescent Eyes

Putting an end to the practice of child marriage became an international commitment under Sustainable Development Goal 5 that focuses on empowering girls and women worldwide. *Dreaming of a Better Life: Child Marriage Through Adolescent Eyes* offers fresh insights and evidence to inform these efforts, based on findings from research and intervention projects funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to investigate different aspects of child marriage. Spanning rural and urban settings across Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire, India, Mali, Niger, Pakistan, Peru, Senegal, Togo and Zambia, the chapters address themes such as adolescent girls' agency and roles in marital decision making, teenage motherhood, sexual and gender based violence against children, and lessons learned from trying to influence policies and implement programmes to reduce child marriage. The short chapters, and mix of photo, visual, interview and traditional reporting formats, are designed to appeal to policymakers in their national contexts, as well as resonate with others committed to supporting and empowering marginalised children and young people everywhere.

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