EVOLUTION IN THE EVIDENCE BASE ON CHILD MARRIAGE
2000–2019

Executive Summary

UNFPA-UNICEF
Global Programme to End Child Marriage

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marriage
A voice. A chance. A future.

#ENDChildMarriage

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Acknowledgements

This is an Executive Summary of the scoping review Evolution in the Evidence Base on Child Marriage 2000–2019. The full scoping review is available here

The issue of child marriage has gained global momentum in the past two decades, with a target for the elimination of child marriage by 2030 in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and an ever-increasing number of stakeholders committed to achieving this goal. Recent analyses indicate, however, that despite significant declines in the past decade, rates of reduction would have to accelerate by many times their current trajectory in order for the target of eliminating child marriage to be reached by 2030.

Given this monumental task and its urgency, it is important that upcoming advocacy, programming, policy, and investment efforts be informed by the best evidence available and that evidence strategies address the most critical gaps for effective action. In this paper, we present the findings from our scoping review of the evidence base on child marriage from 2000-2019 precisely to support this effort.

Starting with over 3000 articles, our search strategy yielded 386 articles that a) focused on child or early marriage or informal unions in lower and middle income countries (LMICS); b) provided new research insights based on a specified methodology; 3) and were published in English in either the peer-reviewed or grey literature between 2000 and 2019. We extracted and analyzed data from these articles and have organized the findings around the 1) prevalence of child marriage, 2) its determinants, correlates and context, 3) its consequences, and 4) interventions to address child marriage prevention and mitigation.

Overview

The volume of studies on child marriage has increased exponentially, with 193 publications in the 2016 to 2019 period alone equaling the 193 publications in the entire 16 year period from 2000 to 2015. The year 2012 was the key turning point for this acceleration. 70% of the resulting evidence base covers the two regions with the highest prevalence and burden of child marriage—Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and South Asia—16% covers all other regions, and 14% has a multi-regional focus. Evidence on SSA increased dramatically, with 79 publications in just the last 3.5 years compared to only 20 studies in the 12 years from 2000-2011. Latin America (LAC) and Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—are underrepresented in the evidence base even as publications for MENA have increased in the last 3-4 years.

The term "child marriage" itself became more regular coinage over these 20 years, with studies instead referring to "early marriage," "delayed marriage," or "age at marriage" prior to 2004-2007. In contrast, 65% of the publications with a relevant reference in their title since 2016 have used the term "child marriage." Despite the radical increase in the evidence base, the overall distribution across topics covered has not shifted much, with the largest share (181 articles) devoted to determinants and correlates (or "drivers") of child marriage, followed by 168 publications on its consequences, 93 studies on the prevalence and measurement, and 58 studies on interventions.

Prevalence and Measurement

In the last 20 years, research on child marriage prevalence has seen tremendous expansion in the geographies and subpopulations covered, the documentation of shifting trends, the effectiveness and range of data sources tapped, and the standardization and regularity of the measures used. The availability of fairly reliable data sources and a reasonably well-established indicator for measuring child marriage prevalence have been important contributors to the issue gaining momentum as a priority global development concern. The rigor and range of prevalence studies have expanded significantly, surging from 4 in 2000-2003 to 38 in 2016-2019, the majority drawing from reliable secondary sources such as the DHS or MICS. Country specific profiles are now available for a broader range of countries, and the number of countries covered in global estimates have increased from 48 in 2005 to 106 in 2018.

The data on prevalence has told a consistent story over the years. Most recent estimates indicate that the highest prevalence of child marriage is in Sub-Saharan Africa at 37%, followed by South Asia at 30%, but the burden still remains the highest in South Asia. Projections indicate that this distinction will belong to SSA in the near future due to slower declines in child marriage rates and higher population growth rates. Prevalence of child marriage and shifting trends in conflict affected areas—especially the Middle East—remains very difficult to measure due to data collection and validity challenges.

Interest in shifting trends in child marriage rates has grown with the advocacy and success in child marriage becoming a

target in Goal 5 of the SDGs; this is reflected in 23 of the 26 trend analyses published in 2012 or later. Regional and subnational trend analyses have become more common, with 7 trend analyses for the SSA region since 2012, an additional 3 dedicated to West Africa, and 2 trend analyses for South Asia, most published in 2016 or later. Similarly, 26 of 34 studies on subpopulation rates at a level lower than the country or province—usually for districts—were published after 2011.

There have been 18 studies published over the 2000-2019 period with a focus on child marriage prevalence for boys, providing a solid body of evidence on comparative trends for boys compared to girls. The most recent study in 2019 echoes the findings of a comprehensive 2005 study, confirming that child marriage rates are significantly higher for girls than for boys in every country among the 82 for which data are available, with 1 in 5 girls being married as a child globally compared to 1 in 21 boys.

An important area of progress worth noting is the more consistent and widespread use of the SDG indicator on child marriage—the proportion of women 20-24 married before age 18—as the standard for measuring prevalence. The use of the SDG indicator in prevalence estimates from 2012-2019 was almost universal, a major improvement over the heterogeneity and mixed quality of indicators used in the 2000-2011 period. Recent research also more consistently captures formal and informal unions and uses more complex techniques for estimating child marriage risk, such as survival or hazard models.

Gaps that will require further attention and innovation include more standard methodologies for determining trends in prevalence and burden over time, especially for sub-populations and sub-geographies. The challenge going forward is to align the generation and use of prevalence and trend data and analyses for effective intervention design and monitoring rather than advocacy efforts alone.

Determinants, Correlates and Context

The evidence base on the determinants, correlates and cultural context of child marriage has expanded more than any other topic. It also constitutes the largest share of the publications we reviewed—181 studies, 95 in the last 3.5 years alone. The largest share of studies were for SSA (34%) and South Asia (31%), followed by 15% multi-regionally and 11% in MENA. As in most of the evidence on child marriage, Latin America, East Asia and the Pacific, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia are under-represented. Studies on SSA have seen an explosive growth, from 3 in 2000-2003 to 35 in 2016-2019. Countries covered most frequently include India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zambia, Nigeria, and Malawi.

Although the expanded research has covered new geographic areas and provided new insights, there has also been considerable redundancy in the themes explored and the core conclusions drawn. Despite an emphasis on the unique nature of the contextual factors driving child marriage in specific locations, most of the recommendations for action from these studies are, in fact, very similar in advocating for "comprehensive efforts at

norm change." Follow up studies to assess uptake of this approach are rare.

About half the studies are quantitative, cross-sectional data analyses that consistently show that in a range of settings, girls with less education, from poorer families, and living in rural areas are the most likely to marry as children. The other half of studies use qualitative and mixed-methods, focusing at the community level and emphasizing contextual factors such as cultural traditions, sexuality and gender norms, social pressure, laws and legal loopholes, and the importance of childbearing in sustaining child marriage.

While confirming that the factors motivating child marriage are multifaceted, complex and interrelated, the vast research on "drivers" is consistent in documenting that child marriage is an integral part of broader gendered norms and power structures in a society. The data and evidence also establish that child marriage itself is a gender norm that is part and parcel of the larger system: it is likely that reducing child marriage would improve gender norms as much as changing norms would reduce child marriage. It is not clear, therefore, if framing of norms as "drivers" of child marriage does much more than establish a tautology.

Moreover, even as the specific manifestations of gender norms and power structures vary across context, there is overwhelming evidence around three basic commonalities that underlie and are embedded in the practice of child marriage across settings:

Gender and sexuality: Deeply rooted social norms around gender and sexuality are most widely cited as the primary contextual factor underpinning child marriage in almost every setting, and manifest in different forms: as protection of girls' "chastity," and "honor;" as proving fertility and legitimizing pre-marital sexual activity and pregnancy; or as transactional sex leading to a marital arrangement.

Gender and Economics: 50% of all studies—and 80% since 2011—postulate a relationship between economic factors and child marriage across settings. Three paths are highlighted in the economic link to child marriage, the first being the exigencies of poverty and parents' desire for one less mouth to feed, especially in times of crisis and conflict. Limited research documents a second path—wealthier parents' interest in marrying daughters early for status display. The third route is marriage transactions, linking lower dowries to younger brides in South Asia and larger bride prices to younger girls in Africa.

Gender Roles and Opportunities: research also universally documents the importance of marriage and motherhood as desired roles for girls and as the primary paths to adulthood, especially in the absence of meaningful alternatives through education and employment. The negative relationship between education and child marriage is very well documented, increasingly showing that it is secondary rather than just primary schooling that makes a critical difference. In contrast, the link between child marriage and paid employment options for young women is much less well documented.

Since 2012 there has been an increase in studies on the legal and policy context of child marriage, with a growing number of country profiles, regional mappings, and trend analyses indicating that more countries have improved their laws to prohibit child marriage and many have adopted national action plans. At the same time, these studies document the ineffectiveness of minimum age marriage laws, noting the role of exceptions, the disconnect with customary laws, and the lack of awareness and infrastructure to enforce laws. Evidence shows little relationship between legislation and child marriage rates, with recent estimates calculating that more than two thirds of child marriages are illegal under current national laws. It has also been argued that the readiness to adopt laws may be helping some countries to meet international standards, but this trend alone is not sufficient for demonstrating commitment without tangible follow through and implementation. Similarly, the more limited number of studies on national policies and action plans to address child marriage also present a dual note of progress and caution in documenting some good practices along with concerns about the many technical, financial, capacity and coordination challenges and constraints to implementing well-intended action plans.

With so much ground already covered by recent research on the determinants and correlates of child marriage, future research will need to concentrate on the most essential gaps. First and foremost, among these is to go beyond household and individual level factors and examine the relationship of aggregate or societal factors and child marriage over time. It is important to assess whether districts and locations that show improved prosperity, a higher share of educated girls, or more job opportunities also have lowered their child marriage rates. Especially useful would be a more extensive examination of the normative effects of education in delaying marriage for girls at the aggregate level. Another important gap is how sanctions come into play in enforcing and sustaining norms around child marriage: how does the real cost to families and girls for violating the norm vary by context? New research is also needed on the relationship between increasing labor force participation rates and wages for young women with potential shifts in parental plans and aspirations for daughters during early adolescence.

Consequences

The consequences of child marriage have been almost as well studied as its determinants and correlates, with a total of 168 studies. The pace accelerated after 2007, with 28 studies during 2008-2011, 46 during 2012-2015, and 75 studies in the 2016-2019 period. The dominant focus was on South Asia (62 studies) and Sub-Saharan Africa (52 studies), but research on this topic in the MENA region (17 studies) has increased rapidly since 2015. A wide range of countries and contexts have been covered, with the largest number of studies focusing on India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Niger, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, and Cameroon.

Most articles (156) focused on the impact of child marriage on married girls. The association between child marriage and

lower contraceptive use, early and unintended childbearing, high fertility, etc. is well-supported through studies across multiple countries. Increasingly, there is also evidence of child marriage being associated with lower levels of maternal care, safe delivery, and health care access in general. Pressure faced by child brides to prove their fertility, their limited understanding of reproductive matters, and their experience of violence and fear of divorce or abandonment are also well documented.

While some studies have explored the links between child marriage and HIV/AIDS, the evidence on this issue is mixed. Earlier claims that child marriage exacerbates the risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS have been questioned with arguments that the same factors may make some girls more susceptible to child marriage and HIV/AIDS risk. The evidence on health consequences for married girls other than reproductive health is also limited, mainly because despite growing research on the health status of youth 15-24, such studies target both young males and females and do not necessarily use sex or marital status as a criterion in their analysis. In recent years, two areas of health that have gained attention are nutritional status and mental health, although there are too few studies for any conclusive patterns or findings to be noted.

More broadly, there has been an important trend in expanded research beyond the health dimension, focusing also on the personal and social consequences of child marriage for girls, with 87 studies from 2000-2019 covering topics such as autonomy, marital satisfaction, gender-based violence, or education; 62 of these studies were published since 2012. A number of studies now document the disruption of social networks for young married girls, restrictions on their mobility, the negative effect on various aspects of empowerment, and the experience of forced sex. The evidence on the association between child marriage and intimate partner violence (IPV) is wide ranging and conclusive. Similarly, the bidirectional relationship of child marriage with education is well documented, although we do not yet have a good understanding of the contexts in which married girls succeed in continuing their education.

With only 5 studies, there is very limited evidence on the economic consequences of child marriage for girls, studies suggesting both limited labor market engagement as well as the possibility that due to poverty, child brides need to work for money. Similarly, only a few studies have addressed issues such as the durability and quality of child marriages, the risk (or ease) of divorce, and the dynamics of polygynous unions. There continues to be very limited research on the long-term consequences of child marriage for girls.

There has been growing interest in the consequences for children of married girls, with 32 studies overall, 14 of them since 2016. There is more or less definitive evidence about the association of child marriage with the risk of stillbirth, prematurity and low birth weight. The mortality penalty for children born to young mothers is also well established. Emerging evidence shows the impact of child marriage on stunting and poor anthropometric outcomes. However, beyond the immediate survival and health of children, there is little to no work on the longer-term life

implications for children of child brides, especially on their schooling, social, and economic progress.

There is now a body of research on the economic impacts of child marriage on societies and nations. Beyond the economic benefit of delayed marriages, however, there are a number of potential positive outcomes for societies and nations that have been theorized but not empirically documented. The ways in which reductions in child marriage could promote women's empowerment and gender equality at the aggregate level in society—from shifts in family structures to visibility in public spaces, to representation in the labor force—would be a particularly useful agenda for the future.

Interventions

With only 61 of 386 publications, intervention research comprises the smallest share of the evidence base from 2000-2019, although like the other topics, it has also grown, especially from 2016-2019. Intervention research on Sub Saharan Africa (28 studies) has now surpassed intervention research on South Asia (22 studies), with MENA and LAC underrepresented, but multi-regional studies expanding.

The evidence base is scant on the implementation science of child marriage related interventions. We identified only 7 mappings of programme implementation that provide a limited understanding of the scope, range, challenges, scale, or sustainability of the hundreds of child marriage programmes that are being implemented, most of which are not formally evaluated. From operating in the context of multiple related issues in the 2000's decade, programmes now have a more specific focus on child marriage, especially in the context of national action plans. But their approach remains comprehensive, and as they are mostly operated by NGOs rather than governments, they are small in scale, facing significant implementation challenges on costs, capacity, scale-up and sustainability. Equally, there is emerging evidence that even heroic multi-sectoral coordination efforts on the ground have met with limited success.

In order to not just understand what works, but what is feasible to implement at scale, there is tremendous need for a larger number of implementation science oriented studies on designing, adapting, delivering, sustaining and scaling up child marriage programmes. Especially important would be to understand the paths to sectoral coordination that consistently succeed or fail, the extent to which beneficiaries get the full bundled packages and content of multi-component interventions, and the pathways, timeframe, advocacy, and modifications it takes to sustain and scale-up a promising intervention through government systems.

We identified 7 reviews (6 of them systematic reviews) of programmatic evaluations with child marriage prevention or mitigation—or both—as outcomes. Four of these evidence reviews specifically focused on child marriage prevention while the remaining three considered child marriage prevention and/or mitigation as one sub-area in reviewing evaluations of broader gender, health, or reproductive health programmes. Only one review was published in 2011, the remaining published between 2015-2018.

These evidence reviews have helped to classify child marriage interventions by meaningful categories. They have also highlighted the countries and geographies of focus, as well the intentionality and rigor of evaluated programmes. However, they have shed limited light on what works to prevent child marriage, with none of the systematic reviews concluding with an overwhelming preponderance of positive or null findings. Conclusions were also restricted by the limited number of evaluations available.

One of the clear insights emerging from this scoping review is that there is no agreed definition as to what constitutes an intervention or evaluation to mitigate child marriage, which makes it difficult to specify the number, scope, and effectiveness of such interventions. In using the criteria that child brides need to be specified as beneficiaries, or as an analytical category in evaluation analysis, we were able to find only three evaluations on child marriage mitigation, all in sub Saharan Africa and undertaken between 2015-2019. These studies provide equivocal findings which are not generalizable given the small number of evaluations. However, we consider that 16 additional interventions in our review most likely mitigated the impact of child marriage on outcomes such as schooling, economic opportunity, empowerment, and reproductive health, but the specific impact on child brides was not provided or assessable because of the evaluation design and how results were reported. Going forward, it would be important to agree on shared criteria for identifying child marriage mitigation evaluations.

We identified 31 evaluations on child marriage prevention, 14 of which were published in the 2016-2019 period, thus adding a significant share of very recent evidence on what works to prevent child marriage. Sub Saharan Africa had 14 evaluated programmes, most of them in recent years, while the 15 evaluations in South Asia began earlier and have increased in number very gradually. There are two evaluations for Latin America, and no evaluations in the Middle East.

With a critical mass of 31 evaluations of interventions to prevent child marriage across a diverse set of countries over the last 20 years, we can reach some more definitive conclusions with regard to what works to delay marriage than we have been able to in the past. Recent years show an expansion in the pool of evaluations with regard to more single component, multi-arm, and at scale interventions. This has also meant that a larger share—in fact a majority—of evaluated interventions did not originally intend to address child marriage, but the evaluations reflected researcher interest in assessing whether programmes or policies—such as cash transfers, schooling for girls or employment for women—would delay marriage in addition to the intended outcomes.

In synthesizing results, we find that multicomponent or comprehensive interventions have demonstrated only a limited success rate in preventing child marriage, with only 4 of the 11 studies showing positive results. This pattern is further reinforced by the fact that 0 out of 5 multi-component interventions in multi-arm studies showed a clear positive effect. In contrast, the five studies that evaluated the single component intervention of cash

transfers for schooling support to girls through fees, stipends, and/or uniforms show a remarkable 100% success rate. Further if we consider these results in conjunction with the results from conditional cash transfers (CCTs) for school support from 6 multi-arm studies, we actually have a critical mass of evaluations in this category, that makes a compelling demonstration of positive results with a success rate of 8 out of 11 evaluations.

On the other hand, the three evaluations of unconditional cash transfers intended for poverty mitigation show no success at all, suggesting that it may be the human capital investment in girls and provision of an alternative option rather than the cash itself that matters the most in child marriage prevention. The evaluations we reviewed also include 3 studies on the impact of asset transfers conditional specifically on delaying marriage. Although the number of studies is small, this approach shows a 50% rate of success and requires further exploration for more definitive results. The other result that is intriguing—but unfortunately without a critical mass of studies—is the consistent positive impact on delayed marriage in the two studies assessing the effect of a positive job market for women, supported also by the positive effect of livelihood skills found in one study.

These results suggest that advocates working on child marriage need to more proactively strategize partnership with large scale school-related cash transfer programmes and employment focused macro-economic policy initiatives to fully understand and influence the potential of these initiatives to address child marriage at scale. Moreover, the success of demand side interventions to promote girls' schooling through cash and in-kind support begs the question of the potential positive effects of supply side interventions for girls' schooling. Currently, we do not have any evidence on whether and to what degree child marriage is being prevented by large government initiatives increasing the number of secondary schools; improving transportation options for girls to get to school; expanding the number of female teachers; or improving the quality and skill set of girls' education. It would be important for researchers and advocates to consider these supply side interventions and their potential impact on child marriage and related outcomes in addition to more proactively influencing the many demand side interventions to improve girls' schooling.

With a larger number of studies now available on multi-component interventions, our analysis also points to the need for a deeper examination of exactly why so few evaluations are showing low success rates for this approach, and the reasons for their low rates of scale up and sustainability. As it is currently the most commonly implemented approach among the large range of unevaluated child marriage programmes, thorough reflection on both weaknesses and strengths is essential for informing many ongoing and planned programs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our review indicates that the evidence base on child marriage in the last 20 years has been robust and varied, providing important insights on prevalence and measurement, determinants, correlates and context, consequences, and interventions. It has resulted in the expansion of geographies and populations covered, more trend analyses and use of reliable data sources, more consistent use of measures and standards, as well as increased rigor in intervention and non-intervention research. For the agenda going forward, it will be important to assess the macro and meso levels conditions and levers which lead to large scale change, with a view to targeting not just advocacy, but policy and programmatic action on the ground. Intervention research especially needs to guide the child marriage community in strategically leveraging the vast majority of policies, programmes, and resource investments at scale that are currently not within its purview. It will also be important to revisit long cherished intervention strategies and perhaps consider even more creative approaches to significantly advance the achievement of SDG target 5.3.1.

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