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Social and gender norms and child marriage

A reflection on issues, evidence and areas of inquiry in the field

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Overview: Gender norms and child marriage

Introduction

‘Social norms’ currently figure among the most fashionable topics in social science research. While ‘culture’ was once referenced as a black-box variable by non-anthropologists, the research on social norms has represented an effort to get more precise in concepts and measurement. Still, it means different things to different people and is inconsistently conceptualised and measured.

A strong movement to identify and address gender norms has developed alongside and within these efforts to address social norms. An important distinguishing feature of the gender norms work is the understanding of gender as a hierarchical system that sharply disadvantages girls, women and non-conforming men and boys. (Work on social norms, in contrast, can be quite agnostic about the identity of the individuals upholding norms.)

Child marriage was one of the first areas of gender-related inequalities to which social and gender norms perspectives have been applied. The focus on gender norms in child marriage has reflected an appreciation of how difficult it is for individuals to decide independently to marry later or for their children to marry later, even when they think it is the right thing to do. The rules of patriarchy underlie most systems of marriage, and an understanding of gender norms is fundamental to explaining and working to end this practice that is so harmful to girls in many parts of the world.

The production of scholarly and programmatic pieces related to social norms and child marriage has increased as interest in social norms has grown. While social norms are not yet consistently understood or integrated in all relevant work, there is a widening array of literature that engages with child marriage as a product of social norms at least to some degree. This literature includes the social science research focused on how social norms relate to behaviour and how they are transmitted, studies documenting the practice and prevalence of child marriage and the array of negative health and development outcomes associated with the practice, evaluations of interventions designed to prevent child marriage, and tools developed for measuring social norms and programme impacts. Rather than systematically reviewing these literatures, here we try to move the conversation forward by synthesising the collective contributions these pieces make to our understanding

of social norms and child marriage, identifying trends and gaps, highlighting key resources, and offering some analytical perspective. This discussion piece is based on a literature search and interviews with researchers and practitioners working in the area.

Child marriage around the world

Child, early and forced marriage (abbreviated to ‘child marriage’ or CEFM and viewed as marriage before the age of 18) is a global problem that violates girls’ human rights, curtails their schooling, harms their health, and sharply constrains their futures (UNFPA, 2012; Greene, 2014). Young wives’ low status in their marital households can subject them to long hours of labour, social isolation, physical, sexual, and emotional violence, the risks related to early pregnancy, and having little say over anything that affects them (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2005).

Of course, boys are also negatively affected by denial of choice of marriage partner or timing of marriage and by adult male responsibilities being thrust on them too young. But patriarchal power relations mean that within marriage they have greater say, and also do not suffer the negative health effects of early pregnancy.

Child marriage is most prevalent in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa and in some parts of Latin America, the Caribbean and the Middle East (UNICEF, 2017). In South Asia, almost half of girls marry before age 18, and one in six before age 15. Various regions of Africa follow South Asia in prevalence, with around 40% of women aged 20 to 24 married in childhood. In the United States, quite a few states allow marriage before age 18, and some allow exceptions to the age of consent to be made by parents and judges and in cases of pregnancy, enabling girls to marry even younger (McClendon and Sandstrom, 2016). Worldwide, more than 650 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthdays, and about 250 million were married before age 15 (UNICEF, 2014: 2).

Despite many countries adopting minimum age of marriage laws, which themselves codify a set of norms and aspirations, many of these laws allow for exceptions, and/or are commonly violated, meaning their existence alone does not signify an effective tool for shifting the norms underpinning and driving child marriage. While legal norms can reflect and drive changes in norms, these

norms are, in some cases, actively resisted; furthermore, pluralistic legal systems, widespread exceptions to minimum age laws, and weak law enforcement all combine to limit the role of the law in changing norms about child marriage.

Child marriage has been declining in many settings, most notably before age 15 in most, probably as a consequence of increasing levels of schooling among boys and girls in low- and middle-income countries. In 2018, UNICEF reported significant drops in child marriage around the world, especially in India and Ethiopia; they cited these countries as having recognised the problem and taken action early on. In some settings and among some disadvantaged groups, the practice has been resistant to change. As a consequence, the practice has become more concentrated in specific hotspots and among disadvantaged groups. In sub-Saharan Africa, CEFM is declining so slowly that even a doubling of the rate of reduction would not decrease the number of girls who marry each year (UNICEF, 2015). Ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia (WCCC, 2017), young women in East and Southeast Asia who become pregnant outside of marriage (ibid), and girls in Latin America and the

Caribbean where informal unions are entered into by girls themselves, are among those groups for which CEFM has persisted.¹

In analysing the changes reflected in the new UNICEF data, Girls Not Brides notes that a greater understanding of the causes of the decline is needed (Girls Not Brides, 2018; UNICEF, 2017). Globally, it is likely that secular drivers of change, i.e., changes not directly related to CEFM, are playing an important role. These include things such as the growing recognition of the importance of education, including for girls, and the expansion of free and universal primary, and to a lesser extent, secondary, schooling; employment opportunities in places such as the garment industry in Bangladesh, Cambodia and elsewhere; improved transport that makes it easier to get to school; and so on. These factors and many others have slowly pushed up age at marriage, but their impact on girls' agency and empowerment varies greatly. Women's employment opportunities, for example, can contribute to their empowerment and to changes in how they are viewed, or they can bring in the funds to pay for dowry and leave women in largely unchanged circumstances.

Evidence on child marriage and gender norms: what do we know?

The focus of this section is on social science research on child marriage and gender norms. To organise and make sense of this vast literature, we draw out key themes and areas in which especially interesting discussions have taken place or are underway.

Child marriage is not a norm itself, but reflects other gender and social norms

Social norms underpin systems of marriage globally. Norms underpinning child marriage range across domains of the **transition to adulthood, sexuality,**

age hierarchies, religious beliefs, gender inequality, and women's and men's respective economic roles. An anthropological analysis of female genital cutting and early marriage in Ethiopia, for example, highlights the role these practices are perceived to play in protecting family reputation and heritage, contributing to the well-being of girls, and helping to define the transition to adulthood (Boyden et al., 2012). A study of child marriage among ethnic Roma immigrants in France describes the way in which describing them as 'traditional' sets them up as wrong and in conflict with the 'modern' standards of the European Union, and does not recognise internal resistance to the practice;

¹ Plan International has just completed a multi-country study in eight countries of the region to examine the normative aspects of CEFM in the region and appropriate responses. The reference to the regional report is Greene, Margaret E., and country teams from Bolivia, Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru, with Jill Gay, Alana Kolundzija, Brian Greenberg, Alexander Munive and Emma Puig de la Bellacasa. 2019. Hidden in Plain Sight: A Multi-Country Study on Adolescent Girls in Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean. Panama: Plan International Regional Office of the Americas, and UNFPA. It will be available via Plan International's 18+ website.

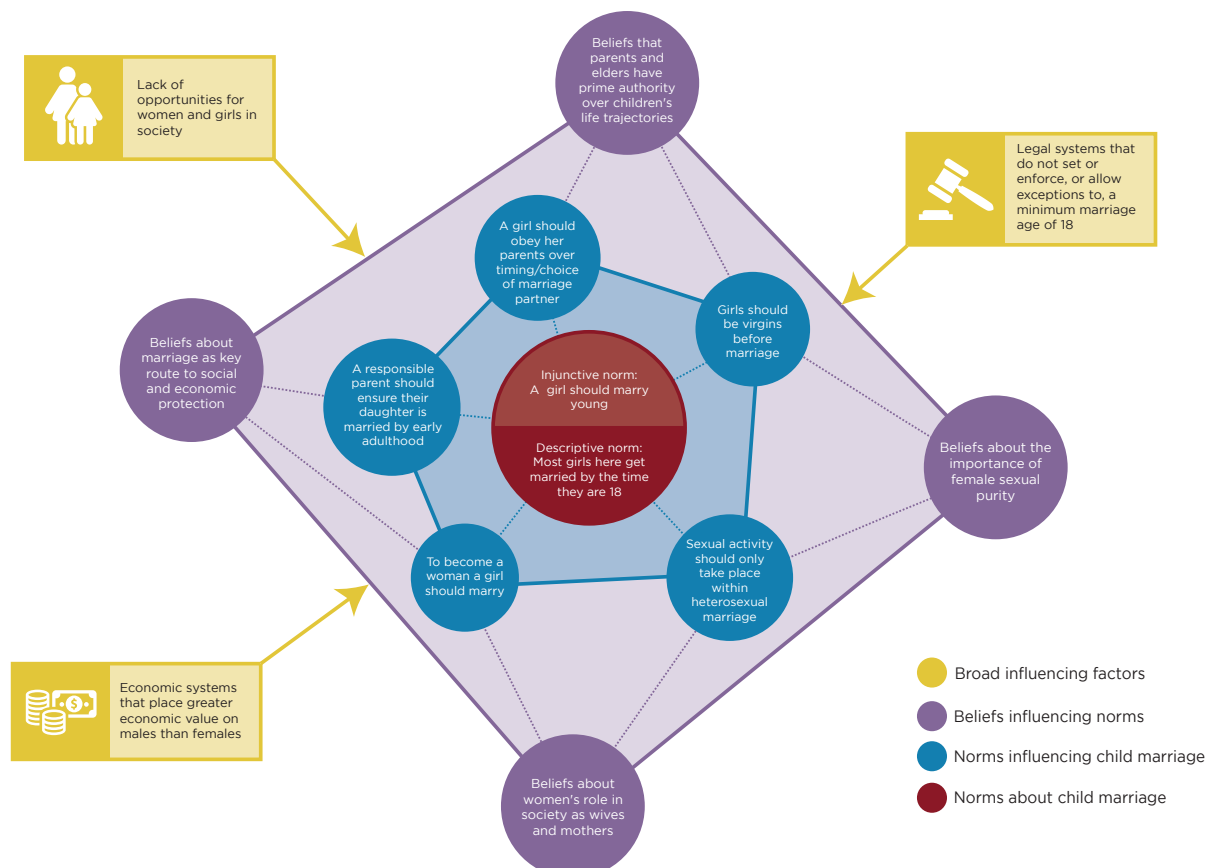
yet it seems that anti-racism efforts then support child marriage by treating it as a practice that is essential to Roma identity (Chaudhuri-Brill, 2016). Much of the normative structure underpinning systems of marriage is patriarchal. Some of the norms which inherently serve to preserve a patriarchal organisation of power in society, and which also lend themselves to permitting and condoning the marriage of girls as children, include norms, beliefs and ideologies surrounding: transitions to adulthood; the social construction of sexuality; obedience to elders or filial piety; religious and cosmological understandings and expectations; the centrality of marriage for girls' life project; the economic value of men versus women; and romantic expectations.

For a visual diagram from the ALIGN Project representing specific norms and beliefs which tend to drive child marriage across low and middle-income country contexts, view Figure 1.

Box 1 and Table 1 in [Marcus and Harper \(2015\)](#) provide a very good inventory of the sorts of norms that bear on the lives of girls and could influence child marriage.

Qualitative research efforts have enriched our understanding of the motivations of those who practice child marriage. A report on Plan International's Asia Child Marriage Initiative outlines the 'core ideas associated with reasons for marriage' gleaned from their interviews and focus groups in sites where Plan had child marriage-related programming (Plan International and Coram International, 2015). They find that these ideas reflect the ends to which marriage is a means for men, women and their families. In other words, child marriage helps people accomplish certain goals that are consistent with their worldviews. Many reflect rational human concerns: the wish to be safe or the wish to have children, for example. But they also capture the strength of the social norms which underlie patriarchy broadly, as well as the practice of marriage and of child marriage specifically. In Plan International's study, male and female participants of a variety of ages across sites in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Indonesia tended to cite fulfilment of sexual, emotional and reproductive needs as well as labour related to caring for themselves, their homes and parents as reasons men needed to marry. In contrast, the same participants explained that women

Figure 1: Gendered norms and beliefs contributing to child marriage



Credit: Margaret Greene, Rachel Marcus, Rachel George (ALIGN)

needed to marry in order to avoid the risks associated with not being married: risks to her reputation, safety and bodily integrity, risk of harming her family's honour or burdening them economically, or the risk of poverty or homelessness for herself and her children.

The bidirectional relationship between education and child marriage

Significant quantitative research documents a correlation (across many geographies) between years of education and age at marriage (Kamal et al., 2015; Raj, 2010). This finding forms the basis for much of the programming aimed at ending child marriage. However, the correlation belies a complex bi-directional relationship which is often highly variable even within the same country context, and which plays out on many levels, from households and communities to laws and policies.

Norms regarding education and child marriage are closely intertwined, and these two activities compete in the same stage of girls' lives. Not surprisingly, cause and consequence are difficult to discern (Lloyd and Mensch, 2008). It may appear that girls either drop out of school because they get married or that they get married because they are not in school; in fact, the evidence supports both arguments.

But rarely does child marriage lead simply and directly to dropping out of school, or vice versa (Brown, 2012). Certainly in some settings, the strength of traditional norms may dictate that either marriage or education may be pre-ordained paths for some girls; and in some settings the conventional wisdom in international development, that girls stay in school until marriage forces them out or choose marriage only because there are no educational opportunities, may apply. But the more common paths to child marriage are likely to be less linear. Expectations and intentions around education and marriage are likely to change over time as circumstances change for girls and their families. The anticipation of marriage can undermine girls' school experience and lead them to question the utility of education they may have no opportunity to apply; this can lead to poor performance and dropping out. Schools may be of poor quality (Mensch et al., 2001); this may reinforce parents' sense that sending girls to school is a waste of resources and that marrying them off is more prudent; or schools and teachers may reinforce harmful gender norms by teaching girls that their education will be limited and its purpose is only to make them better wives. Having premarital sex increases girls' likelihood of dropping out of school (Biddlecom et al., 2008). And the persisting dearth

of opportunities for girls to apply their education demotivates girls and undermines their families' interest in sending them to school.

The education-child marriage relationship is further complicated by factors such as rural residence and poverty, which correlate with both education and child marriage. For example, rural areas typically have lower access to schools and fewer formal employment opportunities, both of which impact the trade-off between education and marriage for girls. Distance to school raises concerns for parents about the safety of their daughters. Traditional social norms are also typically slower to change in rural areas than urban areas.

This is an area where social norms research has the potential to move the field forward. The same social norms which devalue girls and women as contributors to societies and economies underpin both marriage practices and educational opportunities, regardless of the direction of causality. Perhaps as important as understanding whether girls drop out of school to marry, marry instead of going to school, or follow a more complex path, is understanding the social norms and structural and economic factors that devalue girls' contributions outside the home.

A better mapping of the social norms around girls' marriage and education would also serve to highlight the opportunities for change. For example, understanding normative contexts in which married girls continue their education, such as schools for married girls in Iran (Greene et al., 2002), could point the way towards escape from the zero-sum game of marriage or education for adolescent girls.

Finally, empirical evidence on the nature and transmission of social norms in general and current child marriage practices specifically, such as Plan International's finding that parents' education level is inversely related to daughters' age at marriage (Plan International and Coram International, 2015), can inform the design of interventions to shift the balance so that foregoing education carries more social risk than pursuing it.

A 2015 article described international efforts to end child marriage in terms of norms entrepreneurship, arguing that current norms entrepreneurs (civil society groups) are using normative reframing to link child marriage to other important global goals and policy priorities as illustrated by efforts to define child marriage as a human right, thereby linking it to strongly supported

international norms and institutions, and advocacy efforts around the inclusion of child marriage in the Sustainable Development Goals (Shawki, 2015).

Economic drivers

What is the interface between economic drivers of child marriage and gendered social norms? All of these factors are of course closely interwoven. Structural economic factors like lack of girls' education and economic opportunities, poverty and financial dependency among women and girls create powerful, rational incentives for families to practice child marriage. Social norms supporting male sexual and social dominance reinforce these incentives (Plan International and Coram International, 2015). In South Asia, dowry increases with the prospective bride's age and level of education, exerting downward pressure on age at marriage (Anderson, 2007). Although this literature does not engage closely with norms arguments, the interpretation and meaning of these economic drivers has everything to do with norms of domestic roles and economic activity or dependency, or otherwise girls would not be singled out as 'burdens' to the family.

A [brief](#) produced by Girls Not Brides and ICRW (2016) makes the case that because child marriage is often driven by poverty, providing income-generating opportunities or financial support to girls and their families can protect girls from early marriage. It details various programmes using strategies such as workforce education, financial literacy, job placement and financial support and loans. Conditional cash transfers are currently gaining popularity as a tool for postponing the marriage of adolescent girls, but Amin et al. (2016) caution that this approach is unlikely to address social norms in communities and within marriage. They and others advocate a broader view of programme impact, to include access to education, realisation of rights, and efforts to change norms (Nanda et al., 2012).

The [Economic Impacts of Child Marriage](#) project,² a collaboration between ICRW and the World Bank, assessed the collective impacts of child marriage (on early childbearing, fertility, contraceptive use, intimate partner violence, educational attainment, earnings in adulthood, and decision-making ability within the household, and health impacts on the children of child brides), and found that child marriage could cost developing countries

trillions of dollars by 2030. The largest economic costs by far would stem from fertility and population growth, with significant costs from stunting and child mortality, as well as loss of girls' education. This research, which represents the first global costing of child marriage, in effect estimates the cost of prevailing gendered social norms.

The relationship between laws and norms

The widespread existence of laws prohibiting marriage below the age of 18 as a violation of universal human rights, as enshrined most specifically in the 1964 International Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (UN, 1964), as well as contained in varying specificities in the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international agreements, shows that norm change has occurred on some level already. International norms and the policy and legal frameworks of the majority of the world's countries are clear in their disapproval of child marriage and make varying contributions to changing incentives around its continued practice.

Achievements in law and policy reflect shared understandings about what progress looks like, what is just, and what we aspire to.³ But in countries where the practice of child marriage persists, these aspirations may not be shared by all; or norms and other factors holding harmful practices in place may outweigh those aspirations.

In 153 of 198 countries, people must be over the age of 18 to marry. However, many of these same countries allow exceptions – for example, in Australia, an 18-year-old can marry someone as young as 16 with 'judicial approval.' In Iraq, Jamaica and Uruguay, people under the age of 18 can marry with parental permission. In some countries marriage ages differ based on religious affiliation (for example, different rules for Muslim boys and girls, whereby Muslim girls may marry at puberty and Muslim boys at 15). In 38 countries, women and men have different minimum ages of marriage under the law,⁴ with all but one having a lower age of marriage for girls than for boys – for example, in Bangladesh a woman must be 18 to marry but a man must be 21 (Sandstrom and Theodoru, 2016). Six countries – Equatorial Guinea,

² See www.costsofchildmarriage.org/about

³ For a useful interactive map of child marriage laws, prevalence data, and other data, see www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen/atlas/#/

⁴ In the case of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Grand Mufti called the marriage of girls 'permissible' under Sharia law, despite efforts by the Ministry of Justice to instantiate a minimum age of a marriage for a girl of 15 (Arabian Business, 2014). For a discussion of Islamic perspectives informing arguments against child marriage, see Islamic Relief (2018). For a mapping of Muslim family laws from the 'Sisters in Islam' Musawah movement, see Musawah (n.d.).

Gambia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen – still do not specify a minimum age at all.

Useful contributions from literature related to the legal and policy context of child marriage include empirical evidence on the association between legal and policy measures and the practice of child marriage, and tracking progress on the development of consistent legal frameworks against child marriage. This research is rife with limitations and challenges, including: frequent bias in reporting the legal age of marriage rather than the actual age; data that indicates whether marriage took place before 18 but not the age at which it happened; data on the frequency of conflicting legal indications at national and subnational levels and the ubiquity of legal exceptions to minimum age requirements; and a lack of information on enforcement of laws. Despite this, multiple studies have been able to show an inverse association between consistent minimum age at marriage laws and child marriage (Kim et al., 2013). A recent study uses a new global policy database to analyse national legislation regarding minimum marriage age, exceptions permitting marriage at earlier ages, and gender disparities in laws (Arthur et al., 2017). The authors show improvements in legal provisions but also identify remaining gaps, specifically regarding legal exceptions and gender discrimination. The impact of laws criminalising child marriage is ambiguous, according to RESURJ's research on sexual rights violations; as they observe, 'criminalization in the context of public health issues will lead to violations of the human rights of the individuals they are supposedly seeking to protect' (RESURJ, 2016: 3).

Empirical work on the effectiveness of legal frameworks in preventing child marriage points to two key challenges: (1) pluralistic legal systems, and (2) the use of legal exceptions to minimum age laws. These exceptions are important normative counterpoints to the laws, and undermine the application of the law in circumstances where parents or judges view marriage as advantageous.

Social norms theory might be used to better understand why and how legal measures do or do not impact the practice of child marriage: for example, what norms they are tied to, and under what circumstances law and policy measures can actually tip the scales in favour of delayed marriage despite the persistence of harmful gender norms, and how legal change (such as promoting the removal of legal exceptions to the minimum age for marriage) may or may not drive changes to norms driving child marriage.

In these cases, understanding under what circumstances child marriage is practised requires understanding the social norms at play. When the practice of child marriage persists despite growing institutional and normative constraints on it (national minimum age of marriage laws; a global normative environment rejecting the practice via treaties and declarations; growing awareness of the health harms of early pregnancy; the strengthening of a global norm favouring girls' education), it is because the social norms supporting the practice are strong, and the structural environment facilitates it. For the families and communities continuing the practice, marrying their daughters as children carries less social risk and more benefits than the alternative. Weak enforcement and easy exceptions to laws against child marriage reflect and reinforce the gender norms in place. Better research on social norms could help us to isolate and address the social factors that are resistant to change through legal reform.

Child marriage norms in contexts of crisis, conflict and migration

The destabilisation and displacement of communities that occur in situations of conflict, forced migration or other crises have the potential to reinforce or erode existing norms, including the norms that support child marriage (Schlecht et al., 2013). Girls themselves may be inclined to marry early as a response to changed circumstances and insecurity (Knox, 2017). Civil society organisations and United Nations agencies have been working to document and respond to violence against children, including child marriage, in conflict settings (Noble et al., 2017). The heightened vulnerability of families experiencing periods of crisis and transition due to physical and economic insecurity can change the relative importance of social norms and other factors, resulting in a new calculus for decision-making, as Box 1 shows.

Issues of safety and security and fear of violence has also been found to increase early marriage in the wake of natural disasters. Oxfam documented a rise in child marriage following the 2004 tsunami, including cases where girls who were orphaned were being married off by family or community members (Oxfam International, 2005). Plan International found that early marriage increased following the 2010 floods in Pakistan and the earthquake in Haiti; in both cases this was attributed to fear of rape (Plan International, 2011).

Box 1: The Syrian conflict and child marriage norms

The ongoing conflict in Syria and the hardship faced by Syrians in its wake embody the way conflict can upend individual lives, social institutions, and ways of life. For example, before the conflict, more than 95% of Syrian children were enrolled in primary school, reflecting a strong normative valuing of early education. A 2013 UNICEF project reported, however, that among Syrian refugees in Jordan, only about half of Syrian refugee children are in school, and in Lebanon only around 20% (UNICEF et al., 2013).

Syria is also an example of the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war (itself a reflection of patriarchal social norms), and one which history has shown to be so effective at destroying social identity. Fear of rape has been cited in refugee accounts as a key reason for fleeing Syria, and the impetus for many child marriages in which marriages are arranged to 'preserve the honour' of girls who have been raped or are perceived to have been raped (UN Women, 2018).

Mourtada, Schlecht and DeJong (2017) identified several changes in the way child marriage was being practised in the refugee population in Lebanon as compared to in pre-conflict Syria, notably all ways of hastening or simplifying the path to girl marriage, including shorter duration of engagement, lower bride price, reduced age at marriage, and changes in cousin marriage practices. Qualitative research identified issues of safety and security related to displacement, worsening of economic conditions, and disruption of girls' education as drivers of the increased risk for child marriage. Others have documented similar trends among Jordan's Syrian refugee girls, including a trend towards young girls marrying much older men for financial stability (MADRE et al., 2013), and the use of brokers to arrange marriages of Syrian girls from poor families to older men from other countries in the Arab world, where Syrian women are apparently prized for their skin tone and eye colour (Frenkel, 2014).

A 2014 Council on Foreign Relations report recommends that keeping children in school and girls out of marriage should be prioritised by the US government, UN agencies and multilaterals and NGOs working in fragile societies in times of conflict and disaster (Lemmon, 2014). The report called for detailed, disaggregated data on affected populations; elevation of the issue of child marriage in US diplomacy; and integration of the unique needs of girls into post-disaster and post-conflict planning, including creating girls schools accessible to displaced people, conditional cash transfers for girls, and reimbursement of families for the income they may have received if their daughters were working or married. The Women's Refugee Commission similarly recommended in a 2015 report that interventions should aim to ensure that basic needs of families are met during the acute phase of an emergency, and that programmes be designed to promote the agency and value of adolescent girls (Girls in Emergency Collaborative, 2015).

The existing evidence primarily documents ways in which crisis can precipitate reinforcement of unequal gender norms and increases in child marriage as families in crisis seek to prevent dishonour or economic hardship. Further investigation is needed into how norms around the value and practice of child marriage in crises might be shifted in ways that lead to increased agency for girls.

Norms affecting the health impacts of child marriage on women and their children

The literature which treats child marriage as a risk factor for poor health outcomes in married girls and their babies provides an essential empirical basis to motivate action against child marriage, while simultaneously highlighting, often by its omissions, crucial gaps in our understanding of the normative context in which those poor health outcomes arise.

A significant public health literature documents the impacts of child marriage on girls and women married as children, and many durable findings have emerged, such as the global association between higher rates of girl child marriage and higher rates of maternal and infant mortality (Raj and Boehmer, 2013). This work mainly focuses on sexual and reproductive health outcomes associated with early initiation of sexual activity and early pregnancy, and often treats child marriage as a risk factor for those outcomes. There is growing appreciation of the psychosocial impact of child marriage and how this plays out in their physical and mental health (Petroni et al., 2017; Le Strat et al., 2011). Girls' lack of mobility, social isolation, and inability to make decisions and their domestic roles contribute to their poor health.

Empirical work has shown demographic consequences of child marriage including higher overall fertility, closer birth spacing, and less control by women of family planning and contraceptive use, and health impacts of early childbearing include higher risk of maternal mortality, fistula and undernourishment (Marphatia et al., 2017). In some cases, public health researchers add analyses which aim to tease out contextual factors. For example, a study showing the increased risk of maternal mortality for child brides also showed that countries with higher rates of girl child marriage also had higher non-utilisation of maternal health services, making a key link between the social and behavioural context of child marriage and the health outcomes associated with it (Raj and Boehmer, 2013).

The identification of relevant structural factors like this can add to our understanding of how and why child marriage confers harm, and of what measures can mitigate that harm. A 2013 study in Ethiopia which found higher rates of suicidality in adolescent girls who were married, promised or had received marriage requests, added a layer of analysis that showed that girls living in communities actively working to stop child marriage experienced some protection from this association (risk of suicidal ideation) (Gage, 2013). This finding provided a basis for recommending stronger community engagement in child marriage prevention, and contributes to what we know about how to chip away at harmful normative structures.

A recent review article of the health and social impacts of child marriage in Asia illustrated that marriage age is not only a 'gateway' to the many negative health consequences of early childbearing, as the public health world sees it, nor is it just a practice with human capital consequences, as social scientists may see it; rather, these issues are interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Marphatia et al., 2017).

Similarly, studies have shown that children born to married girls are at higher risk of stunting (Efevbera et al., 2017), pre-term birth and low birth weight (Kurth et al., 2010) and infant mortality (Raj and Boehmer, 2013). Adolescent motherhood is often the true risk factor of interest in these studies rather than child marriage itself. These studies make an important empirical contribution by providing rigorous evidence of the intergenerational health harms of child marriage; however, they often miss the opportunity to engage with the contextual factors and social norms which drive child marriage and its associated outcomes. Often, researchers conclude that more research is needed on exactly how the associations

they have documented happen. For example, a 2010 study finding that the risk of malnutrition is higher in young children born to mothers married as girls rightly calls for further research into how early marriage impacts children's access to food (Raj et al., 2009).

An exceptional recent contribution to this literature theorised that child marriage serves as a vehicle for both biological and social process, and that therefore both biological and social pathways contribute to the well-being of babies born to child mothers in sub-Saharan Africa. By virtue of their focus on the mechanisms, both biological and social, for this association, and their large sample size (37,558 mother-child pairs), Efevbera and colleagues show quantitatively that early childbearing is not the sole pathway by which child marriage impacts child health, but that maternal education level and family wealth also serve as pathways (Efevbera et al., 2017). While this work does not engage with social norms directly, it does add significant statistical power to the evidence implicating education and poverty as key structural drivers, and it provides a rare bridge between the public health literature that treats child marriage as a risk factor and the social science work aimed at unpacking the norms and other factors supporting child marriage.

By and large, the public health literature on child marriage does not yet engage meaningfully with social norms. Yet norms are the fabric shaping women's experiences in married life; they underpin the social and behavioural factors – such as access to contraception, quality of health facilities, education level, and wealth – that convey women's risk of these negative health outcomes. Norms can affect women negatively, both physically and mentally, in ways that have broader, lasting impact. One exception may be the emerging work on the connections between normative expectations about sexuality and child marriage, and the kinds of interventions that can address sexuality, even in challenging circumstances (Greene et al., 2018).

Divorce

Divorce is little discussed in the child marriage literature, but the possibility of leaving a marriage is what confers any meaningful sense of choice. The literature on gender-based violence has much to say about how the shame of divorce keeps women from seeking help when they are abused or threatened. As research from Kyrgyzstan shows, 'cultural traditions and social norms – most notably the social construction of marriage, the shame associated with divorce, and the status of daughters-in-law in Kyrgyz society – are used to justify domestic

violence and prevent victims from seeking help’ (Childress, 2018). In Vietnam, social norms supporting marriage discourage abused women from seeking divorce and support; they also impede police and local court systems and community-based support networks from providing help to these women (Vu et al., 2014).

What is the relevance to a discussion of child marriage? Wives’ and husbands’ ‘bargaining power’ within marriage is determined by the resources they bring into their marriages, and their ability to leave – referred to in the economic literature as their ‘threat point’ (Quisumbing et al., 2005). Normative expectations for women about marriage being the most desirable state, that divorce is shameful, that women should put up with abuse and greater domestic workloads and defer to their husbands to keep the peace; and normative expectations for men that they dominate in decision-making, that

their needs take precedence, that their economic support for the household ‘buys’ them the right to an obedient and deferential sexual and domestic partner – these norms are reinforced by women’s and men’s respective resources (age, financial assets, education, employment) and contribute to determining the power balance within marriage. Girls marrying early are thus positioned to experience disadvantage within union, and that disadvantage can extend to their inability to leave.

With norms strongly biased against their leaving, women are trapped, even when they face violence and abuse. As the author of the research in Kyrgyzstan writes, ‘Successful prevention requires more upstream efforts to change the social constructions of marriage and gender roles, and not a strategy limited to treating the symptoms of the problem at the individual level’ (Childress, 2018).

‘What works’ in programmes and practice?

The ‘what works’ literature often does not engage deeply with social norms theory, and the evidence that does reference social norms suffers from some limitations that make it difficult to compare and summarise. There is significant variability in both the types of interventions that target child marriage, and in the outcomes measured, and while some studies have showed clear impacts, more often results have been marginal or mixed.

About ten years ago, research by the International Center for Research on Women produced the Knot Ready review of programmes working to end child marriage in India (ICRW, 2008). They found that providing life skills and raising awareness of the issue of child marriage were the most common strategies, and that parents and programme implementers were reluctant to challenge the norms that kept the practice in place. (This was before intense global focus greatly increased investment and sharpened attention on the role played by gender norms and the distinctive programmes required to address them.) In 2014, ICRW published *More Power to Her*, a review of programmes that highlighted the elements that empower girls to make decisions about their own lives and to influence family and community to improve conditions for girls (ICRW, 2014). In 2016, continuing

its documentation of the evolving field, ICRW published its systematic review *Solutions to End Child Marriage: What the Evidence Shows* (ICRW, 2016). It highlighted programmes that educate and mobilise parents and community members as one of the five key areas of intervention, noting that this is where efforts to change norms are located. Just as importantly, it compared the programmes across four areas that relate implicitly to norms: (1) depth versus scale and sustainability, (2) evaluation rigour, (3) time horizon and (4) selection bias and tipping point.

Specific approaches that have been used to change norms at community level and thereby reduce child marriage include those that promote community dialogue and organising mothers’ and fathers’ clubs, like Tostan in Senegal, and Berhane Hewan in Ethiopia.

Edutainment via television series, films, radio dramas and interactive theatre has been another promising strategy to shift norms relating to child marriage. Examples of work in this area include Breakthrough TV in India. Also interesting is the work using Interactive Theatre for Justice to end child marriage in Bangladesh (Aleem, 2017).

Table 1: Key reviews of 'what works' literature

Review	Key findings
McQueston et al. (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Findings suggest that improving school attendance may be just as effective as or more effective in reducing adolescent childbearing as providing reproductive health education in school; conclude that improving education may be a substitute for family planning Evidence for effectiveness of cash transfers is stronger than for the other interventions evaluated; impact on increasing age at marriage, marriage rate among adolescents, total fertility, and teen pregnancy
Kalamar et al. (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four studies had significant positive impact – three of these provided an economic incentive to stay in school; one implemented life skills curriculum and parental education. Of the additional three studies with mixed results, all offered school fees or cash transfers They concluded that those with an economic component had the greatest impact
Chae and Ngo (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looked at both single and multi-component interventions that included one or more activity in the following areas: empowerment, schooling, economic interventions and community-level interventions They also analysed cost-effectiveness data useful for comparing successful interventions They found that interventions with an empowerment component were the most successful
Botea et al. (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This less systematic review looked at broader effects on improving sexual and reproductive health outcomes They found life skills, economic opportunities and school incentives to be the most impactful things to do
Yount et al. (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looked at individual-level and multi-level interventions Definition of gender-based violence included child marriage, and instances that are not child marriage are relevant Found community engagement, skill-building to enhance voice/agency, social network expansion to be important

Girls' clubs and empowerment programmes, in schools and in communities, are also a common element of anti-child-marriage programming. Their focus is helping girls develop the negotiation skills to avoid child marriage, helping them know their legal rights and where they can turn for help in case of a proposed marriage. Unless they have broader community engagement components, they do not explicitly promote norm change, but it could be argued that by helping girls – and boys in mixed clubs – change their attitudes toward child marriage, they are building a new norm in a certain cohort of the population.

Finally, the reason we are not discussing some of the other well-known child marriage programmes here, such as Kishoree Kontha or BALIKA in Bangladesh, is that they do not have explicit community-based norm change components.

Table 1 summarises five key reviews of the recent 'what works' literature on programmes to end child marriage or to change the lives of girls in ways that are closely related to child marriage.

Collectively, these reviews provide a summary of what has been found to work. This evidence is valuable for increasing our understanding of how and why practices around child marriage change, and for further developing

our engagement with the social and gender norms that contribute to the persistence of those practices.

The major recent reviews of what works to end child marriage do not have that much to say about social norms or theories of norms change, focusing instead on programmatic interventions that tend to be distributed across the ecological framework and are easier to measure. Some of the systematic reviews exclude programmes that engage with norm change because their measurement does not live up to their exacting methodological standards, e.g., DISHA (Kanesathasan et al., 2008), even though such programmes do attempt to influence norms. More evidence is needed on the specific aspects of interventions that lead to impact; in particular, we need to expand our understanding of how social norms interact with other factors to lead to child marriage (or not), or to produce harmful health and development outcomes associated with child marriage (or not). For example, as noted above, there is significant evidence for the effectiveness of conditional cash transfers on reducing rates of child marriage in some contexts. What does this tell us about the relative importance of social norms and other drivers in those contexts? And how do successful interventions affect the underlying norms? Or do they work in spite of the normative environment?

However, the references above highlight and emphasise economic interventions as there is comparatively little evidence available of norm-change-related interventions. Normative interventions tend to be overlooked by many of these reviews because they are not evaluated with randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and are thus excluded from consideration. Development economists have made important empirical and methodological contributions on what interventions impact child marriage, such as research related to incentives for girls continuing in school; and the use of controlled-trial designs for better causal inference. Key questions emerging from this work are: How can this learning be better taken up by NGOs and other implementers? How can work on community and contextual factors be bridged with economic analysis,

reap the benefits of interdisciplinary work, and build a better shared evidence base?

The need for more evaluations of interventions at the community level and all of the work currently underway to change norms emerges starkly from this assessment. Although community interventions were identified as the ‘least utilised’ by the programmes included in the systematic reviews, this was partly because these reviews considered only behavioural changes rather than changes in attitudes; longer time-horizons for evaluation are needed to assess the impact of work with families and communities and on social norms and to be able to measure behavioural outcomes.

Knowledge gaps and conclusions

Despite the flood of materials that describe, engage with and try to shift gendered social norms as they relate to child marriage, a number of important gaps in our understanding of norms remain.

Gaps in knowledge of the impact of social-norm-change activities. In looking at social-norms-related, economic and other interventions, more research is needed to isolate their respective contributions. Changing social norms looks as though it could be the most sustainable approach and might also have multiplicative effects in areas of health and development beyond child marriage... but we don’t know for sure. We need to build the evidence on the potential impact of social norms. The struggle is methodological: documentation of norm change is more difficult than capturing changes in attitudes or behaviours, requires capturing change among multiple population groups, and requires a longer timeframe. The kinds of evaluations needed include:

- RCTs and quasi-experimental studies that compare the impacts of programme ‘arms’ with and without a social norm intervention, such as the forthcoming CARE and Government of Ethiopia evaluation of the Abdi Boru initiative.⁵
- Longer-term interventions that incorporate norm-change activities and attempt to measure their impact

alongside shorter-term attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. The challenge is how to interest the broader field in norms-related activities, even when they have been evaluated with methodologies other than RCTs.

- Shorter-term markers of success. In the absence of longer-term studies, shorter-term markers of norm change are needed. These might include, in different contexts:
- Reduced sensitivity to sanctions
- Girls having a greater say in timing of marriage or choice of partner
- Married girls having a greater say in marital decision-making
- Changes in ‘smaller’ norms related to child marriage – who decides, for example, if a girl must marry if she is pregnant.

Gaps in capacity to identify and weigh the norms that relate to child marriage. As noted above, many norms contribute to, reinforce or even undermine child marriage. In different contexts, the weight of norms regarding dominant male sexuality/subordinate female sexuality may be greater or less than those regarding divorce or schooling.

Gaps in knowledge of norms affecting married girls. Most evidence of ‘what works’ in the field is geared

5 See www.care.org/work/health/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights/what-we-do/adolescent-health/abdiboru

towards identifying interventions with the potential to prevent girls from marrying. Somewhat less examined is the question of how to prevent some of the negative outcomes associated with child marriage once girls are married. Many child marriage researchers call for greater efforts to mitigate the impacts of child marriage on girls – such as enabling married girls to continue education or training, increasing use of maternal and child care among adolescents (Singh et al., 2012), mental health support for child brides (Gage, 2013), and protection of women in child marriages from intimate partner violence (Kidman, 2016). However, there remains a relative dearth of evidence around which to design such efforts and greater understanding of social and gender norms might help generate policy- and practice-relevant insights.

Gaps in tools that translate social science research on norms into programmatically useful guidance.

- Diagnostic tools for seeing whether norms are in place, for example whether child marriage reflects specific norms in a given social context, or whether material conditions are more important.
- Monitoring and evaluation tools for establishing baseline and impact of programmes addressing norms.
- Norms and agency: As we work to track norms, we must also continue to account for agency in the context of normative influences.

Assessment and documentation of vulnerabilities and risks that arise when norms/practices change.

Societies and communities develop norms to assist with risk management. The fact that normative structures are also built to protect the power and status of their builders – those who lead the communities who practice them – does not mean that they do not also provide some protection for those with less power. Inherent in responsible efforts to loosen the grip of gender norms is assessing new vulnerabilities that may arise as a consequence of social change.

Our weak understanding of the repercussions of norm change plays out in the mixed effects and unintended consequences of child marriage initiatives. For example, practices have both good and bad health impacts. The modification of norms will no doubt have unintended consequences, some of them negative. This is an area where rigour and transparency should be encouraged. Despite the fact that donor-funded initiatives are loath to document and publicise any impacts which may have been counter to their goals, doing so is important to our collective project of learning how best to design

and mobilise resources towards changing norms and the harmful practices they underpin. One example is the likely protective effect of early marriage from HIV in some contexts, and the possibility that later marriage could contribute to increased HIV. Such risks need to be honestly assessed so that programmes can be designed to mitigate them.

Some relevant questions in this vein include: If sufficient economic opportunity and safety is not in place, and marriage is delayed, what are the economic and social risks for women? Would there in fact be increased risks to unmarried girls in refugee populations or conflict zones if early marriage were truly not an option for their families? Do girls who delay marriage but get pregnant lose the opportunity to marry and thereby suffer economic hardship in the longer term?

Evaluation. A final word on evaluation: A repeated recommendation from interviewees and a challenge for interventions was the need to think more creatively about evaluation, to conduct more long-term evaluations, and to include among them controlled-trial designs. The social norms space is largely lacking in these kinds of evaluation, and often for good reason. While an education intervention, for example, can have a direct and measurable impact on a girl's schooling, norm-change interventions are far more complex. First, the time horizon must often be much longer than what is required to change knowledge, attitudes or behaviours. Second, it is generally necessary to work with a number of different population groups to bring about shifts in norms, so measurement is more challenging in that way as well. And finally, change in a gender norm may lead to multiple behavioural outcomes, requiring some careful decision-making about what makes the most sense to measure.

The evidence base relevant to incorporating social-norms thinking into efforts to combat child marriage spans numerous disciplines: including public health, law, political science and economics. Multiple sectors in the international development space are producing relevant interventions and publications on humanitarian assistance, education and economic empowerment. But rarely do interventions weigh evidence from across disciplines; and often organisational and disciplinary silos prevent or slow collective learning. Development economists and NGO implementers, for example, appear to be heading in different directions. There is opportunity here for synthesising work in these areas, for engaging in more dialogue across disciplines, for aligning both research aims and methodological practices to most efficiently fill the gaps in our knowledge.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a four-year project aimed at establishing a digital platform for the Community of Practice (CoP) centred on gendered norms affecting adolescents and young adults. Project ALIGN seeks to advance understanding and challenge and change harmful gender norms by connecting a global community of researchers and thought leaders committed to gender justice and equality for adolescents and young adults. Through the sharing of information and the facilitation of mutual learning, ALIGN aims to ensure knowledge on norm change contributes to sustainable gender justice.

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Disclaimer

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Front cover: Bossena (blue t-shirt) got married when she was 15. She's now divorced. © Jessica Lea/Department for International Development/Ethiopia

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