



Shared Roots, Different Branches:

Deepening
knowledge of
child marriage in
diverse settings





About the Call for Papers that guided this supplement

In February 2021, the Journal of Adolescent Health partnered with GreeneWorks and four regional guest editors to launch a Call for Papers on “Singularity and Diversity in Child, Early and Forced Marriage.” The objective was to identify research on child marriage that would highlight the diverse manifestations of the practice around the world. Priority themes included:

- Control of girls’ sexuality and how this contributes to child marriage across social and cultural settings;
- Married girls, and how to address their unique needs;
- Comparative analyses of child marriage, and the connections between early pregnancy and child marriage across different contexts.

This brief summarizes overarching patterns across the 13 articles and 3 commentaries accepted for publication. The document invites activists, practitioners and researchers to reframe the child marriage issue and suggests analysis and recommendations to reconsider and reimagine what it will take to end the harmful practice and ensure the rights of girls globally. We hope that this accessible and engaging opportunity to interact with these groundbreaking pieces of research will inspire you to read the publication in its entirety.

To access the full Supplement, go here: <https://tinyurl.com/JAHV70I3Sup>

Guest Editors:

- Madhumita Das, Independent Researcher
- Alessandra Guedes, UNICEF Office of Research, Innocenti
- Relebohile Moletsane, University of KwaZulu-Natal
- Joar Svanemyr, Independent Researcher

Editorial Coordinator:

- Margaret Greene, GreeneWorks

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How far have we come in the child marriage research agenda?

Becoming a wife before enjoying a full and nurturing childhood is common for many girls around the world. Globally, nearly one girl is married every three seconds.¹

This number is estimated to grow due to COVID-19, resulting in an additional 10 million child marriages that could otherwise have been prevented.²

The combined efforts of activists, researchers, and practitioners around the world has taught us more about child marriage than ever before. In 2015, Target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals marked the urgency of this violation of girls' rights, calling for the elimination of all harmful practices, including child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation by 2030.

Child marriage looks quite different across the world's geographies, and we can reach this target only through a nuanced understanding of the diversities of the harmful practice. And while advocating for increased legal age at marriage may be an important part of the conversation, it is not enough to address the complexity of the issue.

Siddiqi & Greene reviewed twenty years of child marriage research across four languages to explore the shifting landscape of child marriage. They found that across the Global South and Global North, the primary focus of research has been on prevalence, trends, causes, and drivers, rather than responses to the problem. Many child marriage programs have not been well documented or evaluated. The research is not distributed evenly across regions, even those with high child marriage prevalence, and that more research is needed in Spanish, French, and Portuguese to reflect the practice in settings where those languages are spoken.

Broader research identifies that control of girls' sexuality continues to be an overlooked as a critical driver of child marriage.³ The proper management of sexuality and control over girls' bodies are perceived as essential to family honor, while simultaneously denying girls the emerging agency and autonomy that could accompany adolescence.

Married girls are often forgotten in conversations about how to prevent child marriage, as though their futures have been predetermined by their marriage status. Yet married girls can continue to flourish through accessing education, improving health, and moving out of poverty—and there are tangible ways that policymakers, programmers, and community leaders can support this journey.

Rooted in gender inequality, child marriage has disparate drivers and impacts that differ geographically. In some places, early pregnancy is linked to increasing rates of child marriage, while in other contexts, such as emergency settings, social and economic upheaval make girls more vulnerable to child marriage.

Building a holistic and contextualized agenda for child marriage takes time and care, but we have already moved the needle in unimaginable ways over the past 20 years. Through collective efforts, and a united commitment to center girls' agency, ideas, and desires into this work, we can achieve SDG 5.3 to end child marriage, uphold human rights, and expand girls' opportunities and horizons.

¹ Girls Not Brides. (2022). About Child Marriage. England & Wales. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/>

² United Nations Children's Fund. COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage, UNICEF, New York, 2021. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>

³ Greene, ME, S Perlson, J Hart and M Mullinax. 2018. The centrality of sexuality for understanding child, early and forced marriage. Washington, DC: GreeneWorks and American Jewish World Service. https://ajws.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/centrality_of_sex_final.pdf



How do poverty and gender inequality interact to drive child marriage?

Poverty and gender inequality work together to increase pressure on girls and families to enter into marriages or unions. These pressures look different depending on gender, caste, displacement status, and other demographic factors.

When faced with a choice, girls may enter marriages out of concern for their families' economic wellbeing or because they view it as the best of very limited options.

In Jordan, **Shaheen, Othman, Hamdan, Albqoor, Al Atoom, Langer**, and **Gausman** found that the presence of Syrian refugees increased the prevalence of child marriage for both Jordanian and Syrian girls.⁴ While rates among Jordanian host communities may have increased due to the social influence of Syrian peers' early marriages, the link for Syrian refugee girls was rising rates of poverty.

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“The first reason is money. They would want to secure [their daughter] and ensure that she has a house in which to live” -

Syrian boy, Mafrq
(Shaheen et. al, 2022)

Yet, in considering the links between poverty and gender equality, **Nanda, Das**, and **Datta** demonstrate that a government cash transfer may not be enough to transform attitudes about early marriage; initiatives must go deeper to address gender norms.⁵

While girls are overwhelmingly the targets of child marriage, an estimated 115 million men alive today were married as children. **Edmeades, MacQuarrie**, and **Acharya** asked: what factors contribute CEFM among boys?⁶

The authors found that prevalence of CEFM among girls does not predict prevalence among boys. For girls, their readiness to marry was often based on age and menstruation, while for boys, it depended on their ability to provide financial support for their families.

An analysis across 59 countries spanning 16 years and exploring 42 indicators reveals that CEFM for boys is largely affected by economic factors. Prevalence of CEFM among boys rose when young men's employment increased and when boys' out-of-school rate increased. When poverty, employment opportunities and low secondary enrollment rates push boys into the labor force, they more often marry early.

Girls may be driven into CEFM to gain financial security through a husband and/or reduce the burden on their families, and boys are likely driven by others' expectations of their potential to provide for a family.

4 Shaheen, A., Othman, A., Hamdan, K., Albqoor, M., Al Atoom, M., Langer, A., and Gausman, J. (2022). Child Marriage in Relation to the Syrian Conflict: Jordanian and Syrian Adolescents' Perspectives. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70(35), S57-S63.

5 Nanda, P., Das, P., Datta, N. (2022). Education, Sexuality and Marriageability: Overlapping Tropes in the Lives of Adolescent Girls in Haryana, India. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70(35), S28-S35.

6 Edmeades, J., MacQuarrie, K., Acharya, K. (2022). Child Grooms: Understanding the Drivers of Child Marriage for Boys. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70(35), S54-S56.

How do parental and community pressures shape child marriage?

Parental influence and girls' autonomy affect marriage and union formation.

In Jharkhand, India, **Jejeebhoy** and **Raushan** studied the level of consent in marriage decisions by comparing three types of marriages among married girls ages 15-21:⁷

- self-arranged marriage- a girl met her husband prior to marriage and decided who she wanted to marry with or without her parents' approval.
- semi-arranged marriage- a girl was consulted about her future husband and given an opportunity to meet him before marriage.
- parent-arranged marriage- a girl had no say in marriage negotiations and met her husband at their wedding.

The study found that 18% of girls chose their husbands independently. But how does a self-arranged marriage affect girls' agency, their attitudes about gender roles and their marital relations?

There were clear advantages of self-arranged marriage compared to both fully-family arranged and semi-arranged marriages: once married, their pre-marital agency and shared interests and bonds of affection allowed them to make their own decisions, hold more gender equal attitudes, communicate better with their husbands, and more likely to use contraception.

However, self-arranged marriages did not protect girls from marital violence, a norm in this patriarchal setting. These marriages often resulted in family alienation and loss of parental support in bad times of marital problems, particularly spousal violence.

In the South of Lebanon, **Elnakib, El Khoury, Salameh, Sacre, Abirafeh, Robinson,** and **Metzler** found an association between child marriage and family structure. Girls in larger families were less likely to marry before 18, perhaps due to an expectation that older siblings marry first.

They also found that younger brides were less knowledgeable about sexual and reproductive health, and were less aware of the risks of early pregnancy and short intervals between births.

These findings echo conclusions from **Van Roost, Horn,** and **Koski** who find that parents may unintentionally drive child marriage in the United States. There may be a conflict between parents' roles in reporting statutory rape and consenting to child marriage, making it difficult to distinguish parental consent from parental coercion.

By supporting girls to make their own choices about their futures and bodies, and by providing information and support, parents can foster new norms that promote girls' autonomy.



⁷ Jejeebhoy, S. and M. Raushan. (2022). Education, Sexuality and Marriageability: Marriage Without Meaningful Consent and Compromised Agency in Married Life: Evidence From Married Girls in Jharkhand, India. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70(35), S78-S85.

How can CEFMU protective efforts reinforce the regulation of girls' sexuality?

Sometimes good intentions can have negative consequences. In efforts to protect girls from early marriages or unions, families, communities, programs, and policies can reproduce harmful gender norms.

Naved, Kalra, Talukder, Latorra, Nunna, Parvin, and Al Mamun spoke with adolescent girls, adolescent boys, parents, and community leaders to understand the social norms that underpin child marriage in rural communities of Bangladesh.⁸

While it is widely understood that increasing access to education for girls can reduce the likelihood of marrying early, efforts to keep girls in school may strengthen some of the very factors that drive child marriage, such as restrictions on girls' mobility, limitations on interactions with male peers, and obedience to fathers' decisions about their futures. These restrictions are rooted in a desire to control girls' sexuality which is largely connected to family honor and reputation—families believe that girls who practice their sexuality at odds with community expectations can bring shame to the family.

Across the world, in a rural area of Honduras, **Pacheco-Montoya, Murphy-Graham, Lopez, and Cohen** demonstrated the links between girls' limited mobility, constrained sexuality, child unions and “marianista” gender norms, the norms and beliefs of the local culture that demand girls' passivity, supervision, and regulation.⁹ Families' rigid expectations led to overwhelming, and often unattainable, standards for girls' behavior.

This inflexible protectivity was at odds with the realities of adolescent development, when girls begin to express their sexuality. In fear of defying their parents' orders to remain abstinent, girls marry at younger ages, viewing unions as the only option to engage in romantic relationships or sexually active.

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“I think that some parents have very oppressive attitudes, so girls think that running away with their husbands, they will have more freedom.”

Female Teacher, Honduras
(Pacheco-Montoya et al, 2022)

This research encourages a critical look at protective efforts—how are girls unintentionally pushed into the behavior that families seek to prevent?

Nanda, Das, and Datta demonstrated that even the desire to educate girls can reinforce restrictive norms around their sexuality. In Haryana, India, parents rigidly controlled school-going girls' behavior—determining when they were allowed to leave the household, with

whom they could interact, what they could wear, and holding girls, more than boys, responsible for any behavior deemed immoral.¹⁰

⁸ Naved, R.T., Kalra, S., Talukder, A., Latorra, A., Nunna, T. T., Parvin, K., and Al Mamun, M. (2022). G An Exploration of Social Norms That Restrict Girls' Sexuality and Facilitate Child Marriage in Bangladesh to Inform Policies and Programs. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(35), S17-S21.

⁹ Pacheco-Montoya, D., Murphy-Graham, E., Valencia López, E., Cohen, A. (2022). Gender Norms, Control Over Girls' Sexuality, and Child Marriage: A Honduran Case Study. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(35), S22-S27.

¹⁰ Nanda, P., Das, P., Datta, N. (2022). Education, Sexuality and Marriageability: Overlapping Tropes in the Lives of Adolescent Girls in Haryana, India. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(35), S54-S56.

In fact, sending girls to school was largely motivated by a desire to increase their marriage prospects. Families believed that educated girls would be better able to support their children in school, hold household accounts, and assist their husbands.

In rural Malawi, **Kamwendo Naphambo** researched the interaction between chiefships, colonialism, and girls' sexuality and considered the intent behind community leader engagement.¹¹ While attempts to curb child marriage looked to community leaders to transform norms, chiefs benefited from the very same social norms that programming and research sought to change.

Chiefs in Chauma, Malawi received payments and conducted ceremonies for girls' sexual transitions. The onset of menstruation, for example, signified that the girls are *Otha msinkhu*, "finished growing."

Chiefs performed rituals for premarital pregnancy, which included the cleansing of girls who have violated community norms and embarrassed their families. In these situations, chiefs dictated the boundaries of girls' sexuality—celebrating when the transition was deemed "good for the community and shaming when not.

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“Parents would rather have their girls married than have them with teenage pregnancies,”

Schoolteacher in Chauma, Malawi (Kamwendo Naphambo, 2022)

Girls were forced into marriage rather than bring the family shame by being pregnant and unmarried.

According to **Van Roost, Horn, and Koski**, parents in the United States may also unintentionally play a role in driving child marriage. Many states allow children to marry at an earlier age than they can legally consent to sex.¹² To get around this inconsistency, some states exempt sex between married couples from their statutory rape laws. This may incentivize

child marriage as a means to avoid criminal prosecution.

Parents must consent to the marriages of their children, but they are also generally responsible for reporting statutory rape on behalf of their children. These roles may conflict, potentially leading to coercive situations in which children are pressured to marry. It can be difficult to distinguish parental consent from parental coercion.

Well-intentioned efforts to engage family and community leaders in delaying child marriage can sometimes do the opposite, strengthening and solidifying family and community power over girls' sexuality.



¹¹ Kamwendo Naphambo, E. (2022). A Vexing Relationship Between Chiefship and Girls' Sexuality: Insights From Rural Malawi. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(35), S22-S27.

¹² Van Roost, K., Horn, M., Koski, A. (2022). Child Marriage or Statutory Rape? A Comparison of Law and Practice Across the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(35), S72-S77.

How can we support girls who may be overlooked in our work to end child marriage?

Unions do not look the same across, or even within, all contexts.

In some places, a girl in an informal union, such as a joint living situation, can experience consequences much like those faced by girls in formal marriages. Yet implementing the same interventions for girls in informal and formal unions can hide the important differences between their experiences.

Muthengi, Muthoni and **Austrian** conducted interviews with girls in Zambia to explore the differences between relationships that did not have prior knowledge or consent of both sets of parents, in contrast with those in marital relationships where boys and girls were united in public traditional or church ceremonies witnessed by family members and friends.¹³

The researchers found that pregnancy, poverty, or their interaction, were the most common reasons for entering either marital or cohabiting unions. However, compared to those in formally recognized marriages, girls in cohabiting relationships were more likely to separate, less likely to receive parental approval, and more likely to become pregnant before marriage.

Differences between formal and informal unions have important consequences for girls' lives, and by extension, research and programming. For example, researchers can ask separate questions about "cohabitation" and "marriage" to identify the unique challenges faced. Policies and programs that focus only on raising legal age at marriage may not address risks faced by cohabiting girls and may even increase the number of cohabiting relationships.

The relationship between pre-marital pregnancy and unions extends beyond Southern Africa to Southeast Asia and Papua New Guinea where **Harvey, Fitz Gerald, Sauvarin, Binder,** and **Humphries-Waa** analyzed data from national surveys to assess the interaction between premarital conception and child marriages and unions.¹⁴

They found that premarital conceptions often lead to marriages or unions. Given that premarital pregnancy is rising in several of the countries studied, a rise in child marriages and unions may follow.

Parents viewed marriages or unions as a solution to daughters' premarital pregnancies, echoing the findings from Pacheco-Montoya et. al. in Honduras, where parents pulled their daughters out of school for dating boys, and girls viewed marriage as their only path forward.¹⁵ Other research in Latin America and the Caribbean has shown that unions that might have been short-lived have lasting consequences for girls who become pregnant.¹⁶

¹³ Muthengi, E., Muthoni, L., and Austrian, K. (2022). Comparing Cohabiting Unions and Formal Marriages Among Adolescent Girls in Zambia: The Role of Premarital Fertility and Parental Support. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(35), 547-556.

¹⁴ Harvey, C., FitzGerald, I., Sauvarin, J., Binder, C., and Humphries-Waa, K. (2022). Premarital Conception as a Driver of Child Marriage and Early Union in Selected Countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(35), S43-S46.

¹⁵ Pacheco-Montoya, D., Murphy-Graham, E., Valencia López, E., Cohen, A. (2022). Gender Norms, Control Over Girls' Sexuality, and Child Marriage: A Honduran Case Study. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(35), S22-S27.

¹⁶ Greene ME et al. 2019. A Hidden Reality for Adolescent Girls: Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean. Regional Report. Plan International in the Americas and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Interventions addressing early and forced marriages and unions may increase impact by expanding their scope to include pregnancy prevention, access to contraception and services and supports for pregnant adolescent girls.

In expanding this scope, we might also ask—what about girls who are already married?

Early marriage and/or pregnancy does not have to mean the end of girls' futures and ambitions. Yet virtually everywhere, these transitions lead to a sharp decline in girls' opportunities.

Despite significant research dedicated to preventing girls from marrying or getting pregnant, married and/or pregnant adolescents are often overlooked. In conflict settings, where girls face a greater risk of early marriage, the consequences are even more severe.

Baird, Murphy, Seager, Jones, Malhotra, Alheiwidi, Emirie, Rashid, and Sultan researched the intersections between marital status, refugee status, and COVID-19 in Bangladesh and Jordan.¹⁷ They found:

- Refugee girls were at greater risk of child marriage than girls in host communities.
- Married girls across all settings faced more burdens: childcare responsibilities, lower household wealth, and reduced access to school.
- Married girls consistently fared worse than unmarried girls during the Covid-19-related lockdowns.

More attention is needed to develop specific programming that considers the unique constraints that married girls and unmarried girls face, including in humanitarian settings. However, service delivery could be tailored to support married girls. In contexts with high connectivity, mobile phones may allow married girls to receive schooling, sexual and reproductive health information, and income-generating opportunities.

As current and former regional coordinators of Girls Not Brides, **Jha, Kathurima, Lopez Uribe**, and **Nthamburi** echo the urgency of services for already married girls. While acknowledging the regional differences and diversities of early marriages and unions, the authors ask why investment in girls stops when they get married.

They point to uncommon, yet still existent, instances in which parents take their daughters-in-law to school. This phenomenon, together with the possibilities provided by communication technology such as mobile phones, demonstrate innovations for the continued investment in married girls.

Importantly, **Jha, Kathurima, Lopez Uribe** and **Nthamburi** advocate for an expanded vision of child marriage programming, which “brings evolving capacities of girls and their specific needs, hopes and expectations to the centre.”¹⁸

Girls who are already married are still children, deserving of continued investment and support for better futures.

¹⁷ Baird, S., Murphy, M., Seager, J., Jones, N., Malhotra, A., Alheiwidi, S., Emirie, G., Rashid, S., and Sultan, M. (2022). Gender Norms, Intersecting Disadvantages for Married Adolescents: Life After Marriage Pre- and Post-COVID-19 in Contexts of Displacement. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(35), S86-S95.

¹⁸ Jha, S., Kathurima, Y., Lopez Uribe, E., and Nthamburi, N. (2022). Girls Not Brides Regional Coordinators' Commentary. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(35), S5-S6.



How can we build an agenda that addresses the shared roots of child marriage?

To date, ending child marriage has been addressed from a siloed perspective where a huge emphasis is been given to ensure no girls get married before they reach 18 years. Counting the number of averted child marriages in a year or project cycle might benefit the statistics of a country, but not so much to girls who experience more regulations and sanctions on their rights.

Despite great cultural diversity in child marriage across the world's regions, **Das, Guedes, Molestane** and **Svanemyr** observe that the practice is upheld by common systems of gender discrimination and control.¹⁹ Although the studies in this Supplement reflect specific contexts and aspects of child marriage, our understanding of the shared roots of the practice can guide the research and intervention agenda.

This Supplement argues that practitioners, researchers, and policy members can:

- Explore more deeply how social and gender norms, poverty and other factors influence the age at marriage for girls and boys.
- Mobilize a diverse coalition, including families and community members, to promote equality.
- Shift restrictive gender norms with a deliberated focus in elevating girls' voices, visibility, and decision-making.
- Reflect beyond age limit to look at the process that manipulates girls' lives, such as unwanted sexual activity, early pregnancy, reproductive tract infections (RTIs), risk of HIV, and partner violence.
- Attend to girls in cohabitating relationships and informal unions, girls in emergency settings, and the impact of COVID-19.
- Address the root cause of child marriage, which **Kimball** and **Dwivedi** clearly state is "patriarchal control of girls' sexuality"²⁰
- Do no harm—contend with the possibility of reinforcing harmful norms through well-intentioned research and programming.

Child marriage threatens the live and future of girls. By disrupting this practice through attention to girl-centered values, sexualities, and rights, girls around the world can make decisions about their own bodies and lives, access education, and enjoy a full childhood.

¹⁹ Das, D., Guedes, A., Moletsane, R., Svanemyr, J. (2022). Singularity and Diversity in Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70(35), S1-S4.

²⁰ Kimball, D., and Dwivedi, A. (2022). Recollections of How the Child Marriage Field Has Evolved. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70(35), S7-S8.



The earlier 2021 JAH supplement, “**The Diversity and Complexity of Child Marriage**”²¹ deserves mention here. It considered the diverse drivers of, and potential responses to, child marriage across the world, highlighting the critical importance of context. In the supplement, Psaki and colleagues present a framework for understanding the varied drivers of child marriage, and for targeting policies and programs in response. Using this framework, Misunas and colleagues look at drivers of child marriage in Burkina Faso and Tanzania; Zahra and colleagues consider how the different drivers of child marriage in Malawi, Zambia, and India impact the health and wellbeing of married girls; Makino and colleagues demonstrate that diverse contexts influence the effectiveness of child marriage interventions in Bangladesh and Zambia; and Soler-Hampejsek and colleagues reflect on the negative effects of child marriage on girls’ education, learning, and productive employment in Malawi.

Elsewhere in the supplement, additional new evidence and recommendations addressing child marriage are shared. Raj and colleagues determine that progressive beliefs about gender roles in India can help expand married girls’ freedom of movement and digital connectivity. Tomar and colleagues demonstrate the negative impacts of early marriage on girls’ agency and decision-making power in rural Niger. An article by Yukich and colleagues estimates the potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriage. And compelling commentaries offer important perspectives from young leaders, multilateral institutions, donors, researchers, and advocates, calling for tailored interventions that work across levels and sectors (Muthengi and colleagues), increased coordination and partnerships to accelerate research-for-action to end child marriage (Efevbera and colleagues; Chalasani and colleagues), and inclusion of learning from advocates in oft-excluded regions and from adolescents and youth (Reiss; Eyleen, Alheidwidi, and Janušonytė).

The supplement was produced by the *Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium*, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which generated additional resources that can be found **here**.²²

21 Olum, R., Muthengi, E., & Chandra-Mouli, V. (Eds.). (2021). The Diversity and Complexity of Child Marriage. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 69(6), S1-S80. [https://www.jahonline.org/issue/S1054-139X\(21\)X0013-4](https://www.jahonline.org/issue/S1054-139X(21)X0013-4)

22 Girls not Brides. (2022) Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium. England and Wales. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-learning-partners-consortium/>

