



Editorial

Singularity and Diversity in Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions



Globally, around 650 million girls and women married before their 18th birthday. According to recent data, Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for the largest share of child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU), with 35 percent, followed by South Asia, with 30 percent [1]. But as research expands, new geographies are coming into focus, including Latin America and the Caribbean, where one in four girls under the age of 18 are married [2]. Despite the evidence emerging from new settings, research still tends to focus on a limited subset of countries. Although the prevalence of CEFMU is greater in low- and middle-income countries, child marriage also occurs in high-income countries: for example, between 2000 and 2015, more than 200,000 minors, of whom 87 percent were girls and 13 percent were boys, were married in the United States [3].

Scholars and activists agree that the proportion of girls getting married early in many countries across the globe is very high compared to their male counterparts. However, analyses of CEFMU tend to focus solely on age to describe and explain this phenomenon. The underlying assumption is that once girls reach the age of 18, they are at reduced risk of violence and nonconsensual marriage. This ignores other important factors that place girls at risk, such as poverty, gender inequalities, including harmful gender norms, traditional understandings of femininities and girlhood, and gender-based violence.

The role child marriage plays in controlling female bodies, specifically young girls, and regulating their sexuality continues to be under-addressed in the discourse around gender equality and CEFMU. The aim of this special edition of the *Journal of Adolescent Health* is to present recent research on the diverse manifestations of child marriage around the world. This means going beyond geographies on which rich evidence already exists in order to amplify diverse voices and highlight the intersections between this practice and other manifestations of gender inequality and oppression. The collection of studies in this supplement takes this wholistic approach, so well captured in the commentary by Kimball and Dwivedi: “Our intention was never simply to work toward stopping child marriage, but to approach it via its root causes and to develop more holistic, transformational processes” for responding to the practice [4].

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Geographic and Linguistic Representation

The global review by Siddiqi and Greene in this supplement shows that the generation of knowledge and its translation into action continues to prioritize certain countries, neglecting many high-prevalence countries and disregarding others that have significant and even increasing levels of CEFMU [5]. This paper points to the need for giving voice to a greater plurality of voices and diversifying the discourse within global platforms. An important way to do this is to draw, consistently and systematically, on research in languages other than English and to challenge the traditional domination of countries that employ knowledge creation to wield power.

The feminist and women’s movements have long challenged the knowledge and language hierarchies. Yet research on CEFMU and the dissemination of that research continue to be dominated by Anglophone perspectives. The hegemony of English leads to international interventions that give priority to implications derived from this monolingual premise. Siddiqi and Greene call for the mobilization of evidence from diverse geographic and cultural regions to develop sustainable and context-sensitive interventions for addressing CEFMU. The research and evaluation field, dominated by the Global North, has given little importance to language justice. There is a saying, “Knowledge is power,” and Greene and Siddiqi describe the power hierarchy very well.

Scholarly journals have an important role to play in prioritizing evidence from diverse regions and countries. This supplement has consciously attempted to cover multiple regions, including those from the Global South (Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South Asia) and the Global North (North America). In all their diversity, the collection of papers in this supplement highlights regional patterns and global commonalities regarding the issue of CEFMU.

Child Marriage as a System to Control Girls’ Sexuality and Maintain Family Honor

In Latin America, as in South Asia and other settings, societal expectations of women dictate that they be modest, innocent, chaste, nurturing, passive, self-sacrificing, and family-centered; the enactment of these so-called “virtues” upholds their families’ reputation and honor. Across numerous settings, it is believed that a girl’s sexuality must be controlled in order to

preserve her and her family's reputation and honor [6]. Pacheco-Montoya et al. describe this so-called “marianismo” and its consequences in Honduras, noting that “girls’ transition to adolescence can make adults anxious, leading them to excessively control girls’ sexuality.” [7].

From India to Central America, girls are taken out of school and pushed into early marriage to “protect” them from men and boys: potential boyfriends [7,8]. This concept of girls’ virtue and its value to family honor is key to understanding how controlling girls’ sexuality can drive child marriage: If caught “seeing boys” or having boyfriends, girls face serious consequences at home, often including violence. This can push (and pull!) girls into marriage since they see marriage as the only sanctioned pathway to romantic and sexual relationships. The persistent linking of girls’ sexuality with family honor applies direct pressure toward the immediate marrying of girls if there is any question about their behavior or perceived risks, and sometimes even when there is none [6,8]. As suggested in the commentary by Jha et al., “delinking age of consent and age of marriage would go a long way toward respecting adolescent sexuality and recognizing their evolving capacities in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.”

Naphambo’s study takes us to Malawi to highlight how local traditional authorities such as chieftaincies shape girls’ sexuality, on the one hand, and on the other, how this promise of “promoting positive sexual behaviors” serves to sustain both gendered sexual expectations and the leadership structures themselves [9]. Naphambo’s study also highlights ways in which the power of chiefs legitimizes and reinforces the practice of child marriage in Malawi. The study highlights how the legitimization of chiefly powers emerges to demand and receive gendered sexuality payments; invoking spiritual powers, sharing the proceeds to create acceptable norms and standards, and recalling colonially codified roles to exert influence over subordinates. Although this practice is rooted in the colonial era, the merging of institutional legitimacy fronts has helped the practice to survive into modern times.

Early Childbearing, Early Marriage

The literature suggests close connections between early pregnancy and CEFMU among girls everywhere, and this is reflected in the Harvey et al. paper on East and Southeast Asia, as well as in Naved et al. (South Asia), Pacheco-Montoya et al. (Latin America and the Caribbean), and Muthengi et al. (Sub-Saharan Africa) [6,7,10,11]. Harvey and colleagues explain that with a premarital pregnancy constituting an undeniable indication to the community that parents have failed to control their daughter, early marriage very often represents the only socially acceptable remedy [10]. Harvey and colleagues describe “premarital” conceptions leading to early marriage in Southeast Asia, especially in more conservative countries like Indonesia and Cambodia.

In Zambia, Muthengi et al. find that the two most common reasons given by girls for marrying or cohabiting were poverty and pregnancy, and sometimes both [11]. Premarital pregnancy tends to lead to cohabitation more than to marry, and with cohabitation often unsupported and unrecognized by parents, families, and communities, cohabitating girls are at greater risk of isolation and couple dissolution. Incidence of abuse in cohabitating unions is likewise high, and cohabitating girls often lose spousal benefits when their relationship dissolves or their partner dies.

Early Marriage Among Boys

Although less common than the early marriage of girls across regions and countries, early marriage of boys can be an important aspect of a boy’s transition to adulthood and a validation of his manhood. The paper by Edmeades and colleagues finds that early marriage among boys is determined by their entry into economic activity [12]. Given the centrality of the breadwinner role for men, child marriage for boys increases with employment and dropping out of school; the earlier a boy leaves school and begins earning a living, the sooner he marries. It is the opposite of the transition for girls, where leaving school means leaving behind opportunities to support herself and her family economically. The countries where CEFMU is prevalent differ for boys and girls, with only four countries ranking among the top 10 for both (Chad, Nepal, Madagascar, and Mozambique).

The relationship between low levels of knowledge of the dangers of early childbearing and spacing among child brides is also very high. On the other hand, Shaheen et al. also observed Syrian and Jordanian refugee boys speaking about child marriage, but not for themselves [13]. The paper by Elnakib et al. also examined CEFMU in humanitarian settings but focused on Syrian refugee girls in south Lebanon [14]. They found that child marriage among girls was widely practiced even in pre-war Syria and is still common in these refugee communities.

Diversity in Forms and Experiences of Entering Child Marriage

Several research contributions to this supplement show that child marriage takes a variety of shapes and forms, and the experiences of girls who are married or living in union vary significantly across settings and contexts. Van Roost et al. highlight the “blurred conceptual and legal boundary” that exists between CEFMU and sexual violence as a result of inconsistencies in US laws that allow, in some US states, children to marry legally at a younger age than they can legally consent to sex [15]. Authors call attention to the legal loopholes that are created when behaviors with a child that would be considered crimes outside of marriage are “decriminalized” when they take place within marriage. The diversity of experiences among girls (and boys) and the idiosyncrasies of contexts serve to warn us against making sweeping generalizations about what it means for a girl to be married before the age of 18.

Literature suggests that marriage patterns in India have seen some shifts, from only fully family-arranged marriages with no meaningful consent exercised by girls to a hybrid model in which girls play some role [16]. Studies in India and Pakistan have found that young women in self-arranged marriages were more at risk of marital violence than young women in arranged ones, and it may be those in semi-arranged marriages who face the lowest risk. Jeejeebhoy and Raushan describe earlier research from India, Nepal, and Pakistan showing that girls in self-arranged marriages were more likely than those in fully family-arranged marriages to display agency, hold positive attitudes, communicate with their husbands, and practice contraception.

Many girls are forced to marry by their parents or guardians, but reports from several countries like India, Ethiopia, and Nepal suggest that girls are increasingly being permitted to have a say in their marriage and to whom (semi-arranged marriage), and of girls making their own free decisions to marry

or to live in union with a man (self-arranged marriage) [16,17]. More and more, young people themselves are objecting to child marriage and engaging with their parents to delay their own marriages [13].

Even in a single setting, partnering is not a homogenous experience. Little attention has been given in the literature to the differences between marrying and living in an informal union (cohabitation). In Demographic and Health Surveys, marriage and union are considered as one category, which is problematic. Muthengi and colleagues point out that there are key differences, for adolescent girls and young women, between formal marriages and cohabitation, which should be taken into account to improve research and programs [11]. Muthengi et al. and Pacheco-Montoya et al. suggest that cohabitation is less stable and carries greater risks for girls and young women than does marriage (in Latin America and the Caribbean and some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa) [7,11]. The lack of parental blessing was identified as a major disadvantage of cohabitation, resulting in the community's lack of respect for the union [11].

Married Adolescent Girls are at Risk of Poor Health and Development Outcomes

Research conducted across three countries by Baird and colleagues finds that married girls are generally at greater risk of negative outcomes than are unmarried girls, with some variation observed [17]. In Bangladesh and Ethiopia, the deprivations experienced by married compared to unmarried girls across the settings studied include: facing a significant likelihood of having responsibility for at least one child, facing a severely constrained access to schooling, and enduring higher rates of food insecurity. In Bangladesh, among married girls, social isolation, heavy domestic and care work burdens, and regrets over the loss of educational opportunities are sources of distress. Yet, in Jordan, married girls are likely to enjoy greater financial security and access to technology compared to unmarried girls [17].

In Haryana state, in India, where girls' educational attainment has been increasing over time, what is astonishing is that this increase does not translate into a greater agency, more employment, or higher education for the girls. The paper by Nanda et al. finds that this is a result of families' strategic investment in girls' education in order to increase their marriageability, not advance their opportunities; an approach to education that comes with tight restrictions on girls' activities and whereabouts due to concerns about risks of perceived impropriety [8].

Among married adolescent girls, an increased risk of intimate partner violence is observed in transitional economies as women become empowered via employment and/or education. This makes it crucial not only that violence/child marriage prevention efforts address this risk but also that social protection and economic empowerment programs both anticipate such potential unintended consequences and incorporate efforts to change the norms that drive these inequalities into their work [6].

The Impact of COVID-19

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are keenly felt, and efforts to understand and respond to CEFMU are being undermined with every passing day of the pandemic [18]. Despite the heterogeneity of effects on girls of early marriage across contexts before the pandemic, during COVID-19-related lockdowns,

married girls' outcomes were consistently poorer than those of their unmarried peers, indicating that their well-being is more precarious overall, and that informal and formal sources of support are less responsive to married girls' needs [17]. For married adolescent girls, the Covid 19 pandemic has led to worse health, heightened fear of job loss, greater poverty, and food insecurity, as well as widespread psychological distress, all of which are factors that increase the risks for multiple forms of violence against women and all of which are heightened among refugee girls.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impeded data collection and evaluation efforts: For example, low connectivity precluded collection by Baird and colleagues of follow-up quantitative data in Ethiopia; for completing the study, the second round of interviews had to be conducted virtually.

COVID-19 has also had a huge impact on our authors for this supplement. Members of four different sets of author teams contracted COVID in early 2021, and many others, including members of the editorial team, were deeply affected by the pandemic, needing to care for family members and friends. Yet they prevailed. A trauma-informed approach, which provided a safe space for the authors and editorial team during the process, was an essential form of support.

Madhumita Das, Ph.D.
George Washington University
New Delhi, India

Alessandra Guedes, M.P.H.
Child and Adolescent Rights and Empowerment Team
UNICEF, Florence, Italy

Relebohile Moletsane, Ph.D.
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban, South Africa

Joar Svanemyr, Ph.D.
Research Consultant
Oslo, Norway

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