



Unhappily ever after

Slow and uneven progress in the fight against early marriage

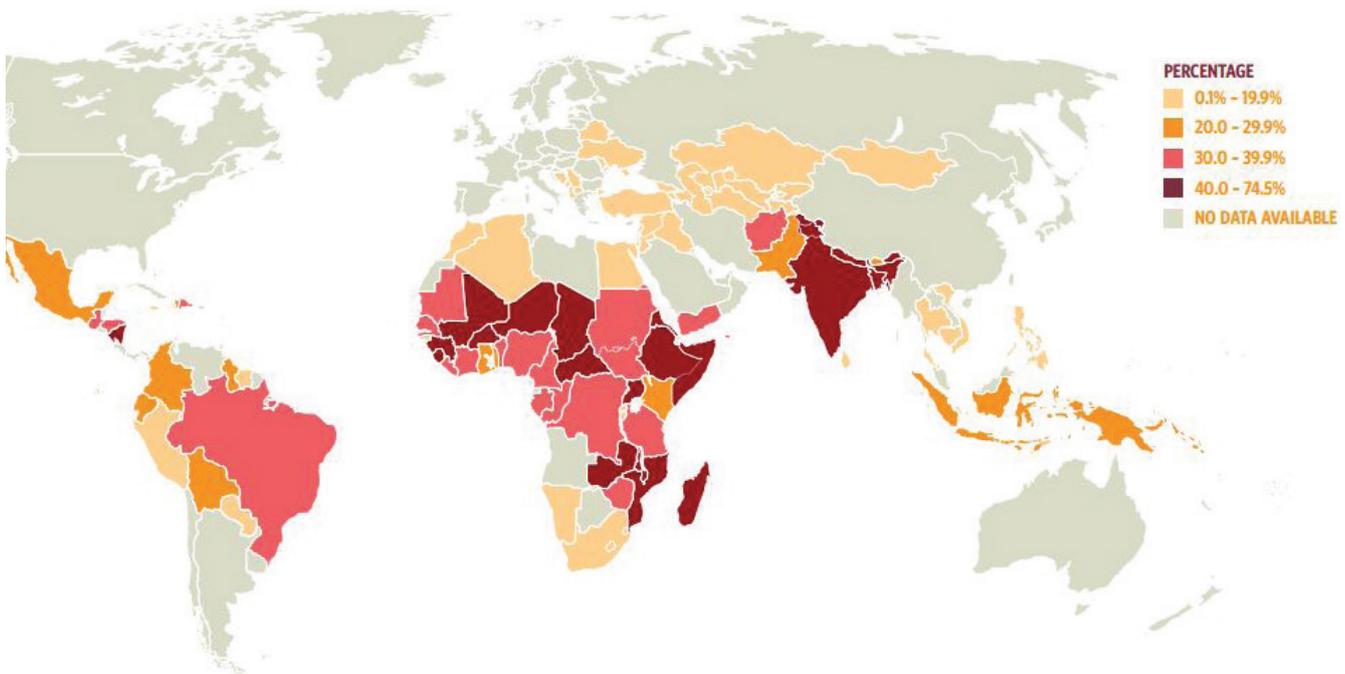
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Key messages

- Nearly one-third of all girls in the developing world marry before adulthood. More than one-tenth marries before 15 years. Early marriage is particularly entrenched in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, but trends vary significantly across and within countries.
- The consequences of early marriage are enormous in terms of foregone educational and economic opportunities; maternal morbidity and mortality; more limited voice and power within the family and community; life-course and inter-generational poverty transfers.
- While poverty plays a key role in marriage decisions, discriminatory social norms that value girls primarily in terms of their reproductive capacities are critical to understanding early marriage.
- The interplay of economic and social drivers of early marriage differ between communities, regions and countries; there is therefore no single strategy which is likely to end the practice.
- A combination of community awareness-raising, support for girls' secondary education, economic strengthening initiatives and legal empowerment for girls and women needs to be considered, but designed with an in-depth understanding of the local culture and context to avoid generating negative or unforeseen consequences.

For more ODI resources on this topic visit: www.odi.org/tackling-early-marriage

Figure 1: Prevalence of early marriage



Source: UNFPA database using DHS, MICS and other household surveys

Nearly one-third of all girls in developing countries will be married before their 18th birthday – often against their will to substantially older men. Indeed, one-in-nine will be married before they turn 15. Most of these girls live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. While early marriage has declined in some countries, evidence suggests that overall there has been limited progress.¹ Given the developing world’s ‘youth bulge’, this means that in absolute numbers it is likely that more girls are at risk of early marriage now than at any time in the past (UNFPA, 2012).

Prevalence and trends by country vary considerably

Rates of early marriage vary significantly by region and country (see Figure 1). For example, while the world’s highest rates are seen in Niger (75%) and Chad (72%), the overall rate in South Asia (46%) exceeds that of sub-Saharan Africa (37%). Furthermore, while Bangladesh’s rate (66%) is much higher than India’s (47%), India’s large population is home to more child brides than any other country in the world (UNFPA, 2012). It is worth noting that because early marriage is illegal in most countries, these numbers are likely to understate the problem. They also hide some of the detail and variation that is critical to constructing appropriate interventions to solve the

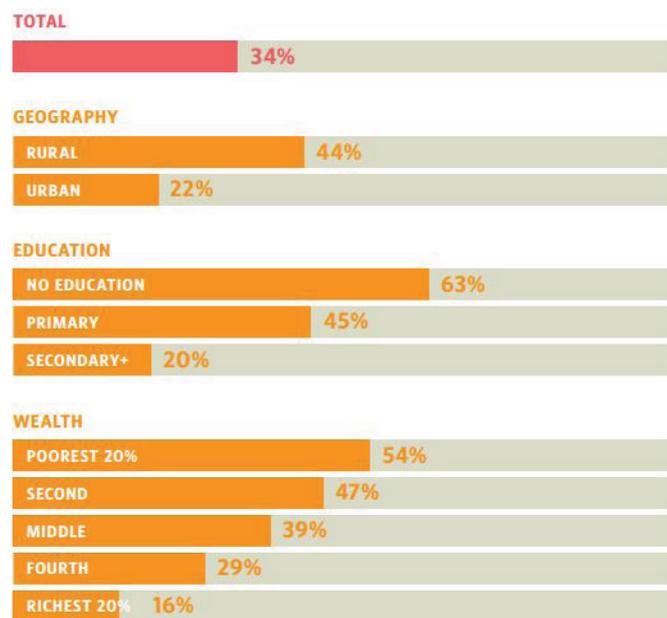
Nearly 39,000 girls are married every day – over 4,000 of them are younger than 15. This amounts to over 14 million child brides each year – and 142 million this decade.

problem. In Niger and Bangladesh, for example, one-third of all girls are married before 15, starkly different from Burkina Faso where – while half of all girls are married by 18 – very few marry by 15. National-level data also fails to capture often significant intra-country variation. In Ethiopia, for example, nearly 75% of girls in the Amhara region are married as children, versus less than 15% in Addis Ababa (Brown, 2012).

Rates of child marriage also vary significantly by household characteristics (see Figure 2, overleaf). For example, across the developing world, rural girls are twice as likely as their urban counterparts to marry as children (44% versus 22%). Similarly, girls with no education are more than three times as likely to marry young as are girls who have completed secondary school (63% versus 20%) – a ratio also seen in terms of household income. Only 16% of girls in the richest quintile marry as children, compared to 54% of those in the poorest. These disparities are particularly marked in the regions of the world where

1. The term ‘early marriage’ is often associated with terms such as ‘forced marriage’ and ‘child marriage’. While there are valid differences and arguments to be made about using these terms, or a collective ‘forced, early and child marriage’ (FECM), we use ‘early marriage’ for the sake of brevity in this paper.

Figure 2: Background characteristics of young brides



Source: UNFPA database using DHS, MICS from 78 developing countries over the period 2000-11.

early marriage is the most common. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, girls with no education are more than five times more likely than girls with a secondary education to marry as children (66% versus 13%) UNFPA, 2012.).

While the incidence of early marriage has been decreasing – on a worldwide basis – from 41.2% to 32.7% in the last four decades, overall ‘gains have been relatively slow’.² In India, for example, the rate of early marriage dropped only 12.5% between 1992 and 2006 – with the bulk of that drop seen between 1991 and 1999 (UNFPA, 2012). Indeed, in many countries, ranging from Mozambique to Pakistan, women born between 1985 and 1989 were actually more likely to marry as children than women born between 1950 and 1954 (Nguyen and Wodon, 2012a). Even in countries making steady progress, this is slow and often still results in early marriage. The median age of marriage in Bangladesh, for example, rose only a year between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s – and is still only 16.7 years (Brown, 2012).

The costs of early marriage

Early marriage has devastating consequences – for girls, their children and the larger economy. For example, because most young brides are under immediate pressure from their husbands and in-laws to begin childbearing,

few use contraception and most fall rapidly pregnant. Of the 16 million adolescents who give birth each year, 90% are already married (WHO, 2011). Since their bodies, particularly those of the youngest, are not yet fully developed, they are far more likely to have difficult deliveries. Indeed, pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15–19, with over 70,000 dying each year (UNFPA, 2012; Brown, 2012). Young brides face many other risks as well. A study in India, for instance, found that women married as children were twice as likely to report physical violence as women who were married as adults, and in sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls are 2–6 times more likely than adolescent boys to be HIV positive, because they are so often married to older, more sexually experienced men (ICRW, 2010).

As Brown (2012:6) notes: ‘One of the gravest injustices suffered by young brides is the denial of education’ (p.6; see also Nguyen and Wodon, 2012b). The impacts of this injustice are multiple and far-reaching. Not only does it limit girls’ earning potential, which increases the odds that they and their children will suffer from poverty, but it also reduces their odds of literacy and therefore their ability to take advantage of life-changing and life-saving information, including everything from agricultural techniques to sanitary practices. It also hinders the development of their confidence and voice, which leaves them with less access to decision-making over their own bodies and household spending. The knock-on ramifications of these deficits are huge, not only for their children – who are then themselves less likely to attend school and more likely to marry as children – but also for larger economies. For example, a UN study found that the Asia-Pacific region ‘is short changed between 42 and 47 billion dollars a year in GDP because of the untapped potential of women’ (as cited in Inderfurth and Khambatta, 2012).

In the context of early marriage, sometimes just a year or two makes a world of difference – particularly for the youngest girls. Dixon-Mueller’s (2008) assessment found that, based on a variety of social and physiological characteristics, girls under 15 were always too young to be ready to handle the demands of marriage. Those aged 15–17, she found, were sometimes ready, depending on their individual circumstances. Therefore, an additional two years for 13-year-old girls gives them time to complete primary school³ and gives their bodies time to mature enough to reduce their odds of encountering complications or dying during childbirth. For 15-year-old girls, an additional two years brings them to the cusp of adulthood, strengthens their voice and – in some cases – allows them to complete secondary school.

2. See Nguyen and Wodon (2012a) for details. Rates represent pooled data from 60 low- and middle-income countries.

3. In many developing countries girls start school considerably later than they do in developed countries.

Economic and social drivers of early marriage

Driven by a growing recognition of human and economic costs – as well as an international consensus regarding the impacts of early marriage on girls’ human rights – countries around the world have moved, albeit unevenly, to legalise the practice. However, as Brown (2012:14) notes, due to uneven enforcement even ‘strong legislation has often delivered weak results’. In India, for example, early marriage has been illegal for three decades (ibid.). Similarly, in Uganda, where a 1990 law raised the age of consent from 14 to 18, in order to protect adolescent girls from the sexual exploitation of ‘sugar daddies’, prosecutors have primarily targeted younger, poorer men rather than the older, wealthier men at whom the law is aimed (Gottschalk, 2007).

Stalled progress in the face of national legislation underscores the importance of the economic and social underpinnings that result in early marriage. When girls are married off, not only are they one less mouth to feed, which can be critical in times of stress such as drought or conflict, but – depending on the local situation – they often bring their natal families a bride-price, which can be higher for younger girls (Brown, 2012; WHO, 2011). In other situations, where girls’ families must provide them with dowries in order to settle marriage, the higher ‘price’ of older, more educated girls can incentivise families to marry off their daughters as soon as possible (ibid.). Highlighting the key role of cash, in Uganda girls often rely on ‘sugar daddies’ to pay their school fees – investing in their futures with one of the few options they have.

While economics play a critical role in the perpetuation of early marriage, social drivers are often paramount – though the two are so often closely intertwined, it is difficult to separate them. Given that in many cultures girls and women are seen as fundamentally less valuable than men and boys, and are valued primarily for their reproductive capacities, parents not only see no reason to delay the inevitable, but often genuinely believe that they are safeguarding girls’ own best interests by marrying them off (Brown, 2012; UNICEF, 2013). A variety of discriminatory social norms work together to reinforce these beliefs about girls’ social status.⁴ Where, for example, girls lack inheritance rights, marriage is often the only way for them to gain access to the land they need in order to feed themselves and their future children. Similarly, where women are not allowed to engage in non-domestic labour, marriage is the only way to stave off future poverty. Furthermore, ‘in many countries the importance of preserving family “honour” and girls’ virginity’ leads parents to push their daughters into marriage, even years before they are ready, in order to preclude ‘immoral’ behaviour that might render them unmarriageable (Plan, nd).

Local realities and different pathways to early marriage

Detangling the web of disadvantage that places girls at risk of early marriage requires interventions that recognise the complexity of their positioning, the unpredictable nature of change and the inevitability of unintended consequences. The experiences of Hmong girls in Viet Nam, for example, highlight how progress on one front (the uptake of education) can be coupled with regression on another front (the elimination of early marriage) (see Box 1, overleaf).

Because Hmong girls do not have futures other than marriage, their parents often refuse to allow them to attend high school. Coupled with the increased contact that mandatory primary school has fostered between boys and girls, some girls are choosing to marry, in mid-adolescence, as soon as they leave school. In Ethiopia, on the other hand, girls in the Wollo zone of the Amhara Regional State are increasingly rushed from a pro-forma marriage into international migration that is fraught with tremendous risks of its own (see Box 2, overleaf).

Migrating to work as domestic servants in the Middle East, tens of thousands of Ethiopian girls are vulnerable to emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Likewise, in Uganda, it is often not early marriage itself that threatens girls’ wellbeing (see Box 3, overleaf), rather, it is the normalisation of intergenerational, transactional sexual relationships. ODI’s research in Eastern Uganda and the capital city, Kampala, has found that in addition to leading to early marriage, these relationships leave girls highly vulnerable to intimate partner violence, pregnancy, sexual infections and stigma.

Solutions

The reasons that girls are married off early is linked to the ‘value’ placed on women and girls in society in general. This means that there is no single strategy which is likely to end the practice, but a number of different approaches that depend on the culture and context, all of which must be catered for in order to avoid generating negative or unforeseen consequences. A combination of approaches might therefore include:

- developing community-based approaches, tackling the deeply ingrained discriminatory social norms of parents, communities and traditional authorities
- tackling income poverty at a household level so that families don’t need to resort to ‘selling’ their girls into marriage or relying on rich ‘sugar daddies’
- improving access to quality education – simply enrolling girls in school is insufficient. Schooling must be coupled with employment opportunities that make educational investments pay off
- legislating against early marriage alone is ineffective. While it does provide a structure around which other

4. Social norms can be defined as the behaviours and cues within a society or group that approve or disapprove of what is socially acceptable. These rules can alter values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, and may be explicit or implicit.

Box 1: Without changing ingrained social norms, early marriage will continue to curtail Hmong girls' life chances

The experiences of Viet Nam's Hmong girls, nearly half of whom continue to marry as children despite national averages that are moving towards the mid-20s, underscore the complexity of 'progress'. On the one hand, responses must be sensitive to ethnic concerns and take into account the factors that shape communities' day-to-day lives. On the other hand, recent evidence suggests that in order to alter girls' life chances – and prevent their early marriage – it is necessary to target the longstanding gender social norms that define girls' 'value' to their families and communities.

While on a national level girls are now more likely than boys to attend all levels of school, including university, less than 4% of Hmong girls progress on to secondary school. This is despite the fact that nearly all of them attend primary school and that they are widely recognised as more serious, 'diligent' students than boys. Whilst in general it appears that girls would very much like to complete their education, their parents, nearly without exception, refuse to allow them to do so, as the skills that they would learn there are seen as irrelevant in terms of preparation for marriage. As one girl noted, 'My parents say that I am a girl, so I shouldn't go to school any more, the upper secondary school education brings nothing'. Added a mother, 'For girls, finishing grade 9 or 12 is the same, because they only get married'.

Furthermore, whereas in most contexts the rapid uptake of primary education seen in the Hmong would be protective against early marriage, since on average the longer girls stay in school the less likely they are to marry as children, our research uncovered troubling evidence that school may, in some ways, be encouraging early marriage among the Hmong, because it increases the contact that girls and boys have with one another. 'We didn't get married until age 22, 23 or 24,' explained one mother, 'now the youth gets married earlier'. Indeed, while the youngest Hmong girls tend to be married against their will, 'dragged away' by boys willing to marry the girl who is 'uglier but good at farm work', slightly older adolescent girls appear to be choosing to marry as soon as they leave school because in a world where pre-marital relationships are taboo, early marriage is the only route they can see to youthful, post-graduate companionship. Unfortunately, while girls go into marriage with aspirations of love, reality soon sets in. 'I was a daughter-in-law so I had to bear it, I had to endure hardship and unhappiness,' explained one 17-year-old married girl. Another, married 'for love' at 14, added, 'I was too stupid back then. There is nothing good about being married early.'

Underdeveloped infrastructure – the result of mountainous terrain – and nearly non-existent migration, which is frowned upon by custom, prevents Hmong girls from accessing the factory jobs that have convinced families across Asia to invest in their daughters' educations because they are worth more as earners than as wives. Combined with the fact that Hmong families lack the financial resources and 'connections' with which to access official government jobs, it is clear, as one 16-year-old girl made to leave school after 9th grade noted, that parents see no point in high school since 'a Hmong person, even if she completed the 12th grade, would come back home and work in the fields anyway'.

Source: Jones et al. (forthcoming).

policies can be hung, promoting girls' voices and power at multiple levels is also vital to their self-efficacy.

Established responses to early marriage include the development of supportive laws and enhancing girls' access to education, as well as providing economic support to girls and their families to address the poverty-related issues that collectively push girls into early marriage (UNFPA, 2012; Malhotra et al., 2011). They also include empowering girls and educating parents and community members – which are amorphous goals that require both careful tailoring to match community beliefs, and flexibility, to meet shifting realities at community level (ibid.). Based on our work with adolescent girls in Viet Nam, Ethiopia and Uganda, we can reflect and expand on these responses in order to reduce early marriage and improve girls' lives:

- **Move beyond legislating and enforcing laws around early marriage.** Early marriage laws provide an escape route for girls being married against their will. However, laws prohibiting early marriage are insufficient to

prevent it, and need to be combined with other forms of legal empowerment for adolescent girls. Monitoring and enforcement of wider legal rights, such as those that address asset and property ownership, inheritance, political space, family rights such as child custody, and equal divorce rights, are all necessary in order to address early marriage comprehensively and sustainably.

- **Invest in quality secondary education for girls.** Education alone is not a solution, and – in the case of Viet Nam's Hmong community – can unintentionally facilitate early marriage. Nevertheless, schooling is fundamental to expanding girls' options. Given that research has found that each and every year of schooling matters, and that secondary school makes the most difference to girls' power to make decisions, countries need to invest in affordable, quality primary education for all girls and ensure that high school is not seen as an add-on for the wealthy, but a given opportunity for all.
- **Support role models and tell their stories.** Without 'positive deviance' examples, girls cannot visualise

Box 2: To marry or to migrate: adolescent girls' constrained choices in Amhara, Ethiopia

Girls' choices in Ethiopia's Amhara regional state are highly constrained. The region has the nation's lowest average age of marriage – 14.7 years for adult women – and one of its highest rates of illiteracy; over 60% of women over the age of 15 have never been to school. Furthermore, despite the fact that Amhara remains reliant on subsistence agriculture, a combination of drought, overpopulation and land fragmentation has left over 40% of the population food insecure. Against this backdrop, many girls see only two options: child marriage or migration to the Middle East as a domestic servant. Indeed, driven by the region's high unemployment rates and fairy-tale stories of better wages and more modern lifestyles, girls and their families are increasingly ignoring the more common stories of horrific abuse and choosing to combine the two – first marrying and then migrating.

In Ethiopian Muslim communities it is often deeply shameful or 'sinful' for girls to remain unmarried after they begin menstruating. Once girls are sexually initiated in the context of marriage, however, parents consider that they have met their social and religious obligations. It is therefore becoming common for parents to insist first on marriage and then on divorce. 'Then they force her to go to Saudi Arabia to work and send money for them', said one father, from Hara, a town in North Wollo Zone.

Parental pressure, both explicit and implicit, is a significant factor in most girls' migration. One young returnee explained, 'Your parents will nag you by saying, 'Your friend is generating a lot of money by going overseas. What use is there if you waste your time here by doing nothing? You are not married! A girl's education?! Where are you going to reach after learning?' Another girl added that when girls try to convince their parents to let them stay and go to high school rather than migrating, they are often accused of sexual impropriety: 'Her family will lay blame on her. They would accuse her by saying, "You wanted to stay because you wanted to sleep around.'"

Girls do not always, however, migrate because of parental pressure. Some chose to migrate, against parental wishes, in order to improve their parents' lives. This is out of a sense of filial piety that girls reportedly feel and enact much more deeply than boys. Others chose to go because they 'feel inferiority' and have been seduced by the glamorous stories told by the illegal brokers who have made themselves key players in the migration industry. While local authorities are working hard to publicise the more common outcomes of migration – which include overwork, non-payment, social isolation, and physical, psychological and sexual abuse – the stories told by brokers continue to carry more weight in most girls' minds. One explained, 'When you hear bad things, your interest in going [there] decreases. But again, when you hear the good things, such as somebody bought a car after going there or somebody built a house after going there, you forget all the sufferings and accidents that can happen.'

The majority of migrants to the Middle East are older adolescents and young adults but, because migratory paths are now so well established, younger girls are beginning to migrate in larger numbers. Indeed, despite national laws that prohibit the work-related migration of any person under the age of 18, several studies have found that up to 11% of migrants are young adolescents traveling with false IDs – given that 100,000 women left Ethiopia for the Middle East in the first eight months of 2013, it is likely that tens of thousands of girls are currently at risk. False IDs are easy for girls to acquire; as one young woman explained, 'I was 14 years old when I went to Saudi Arabia. I got my identity card with the falsified age of 26 years old. There was no problem.'

Unfortunately for her, and most girls of her age group, 'no problem' with the migration process rarely translates into 'no problem' with migration outcomes. As one young returnee concluded, 'From 100, 15% might secure a good income'. For the rest, 'They beat you, they starve you and they make you work for 24 hours a day. Until your contract is completed you cannot go out and you are not free.'

Source: Jones et al. (2014).

better horizons. Ensuring that all girls have access to higher education – and to benefit from it – not only helps adjust parents' views about schooling, but also begins to build a group of role models who demonstrate what girls can do. Therefore, facilities to celebrate girls who choose to follow alternative routes should be investigated, as it can be difficult, dangerous and lonely.

- **Promote decent youth employment opportunities and highlight the long-term costs of inaction.** It is difficult to obtain parents' buy-in for higher education without altering the wider employment landscape. Where more schooling leads to better odds of higher-paying employment, it is easier to sell the advantages of schooling

as an investment that will pay off – as well as the eventual costs of not investing. Solid employment options are also critical to establishing a growing group of role models.

- **Persist with rights-based approaches.** In the context of poverty and food insecurity it can be preferable to promote increased schooling and delayed marriage as investments that benefit the families of girls. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that this 'instrumental' approach to girls does not become paramount to their rights. In the case of Ethiopia, for example, what girls can do for their families has been radically altered by the opportunities presented in international migration – to girls' great detriment.

Box 3: A pathway to early marriage: ‘sugar daddies’ in Uganda

Intergenerational and transactional relationships are a significant concern in Uganda, with broad implications for girls’ continued disempowerment. The widespread ‘sugar daddy’ phenomenon is multidimensional and complex. Usually involving substantially older men (10 years older or more), these relationships can sometimes serve as a segue into more stable long-term relationships, including marriage, or can be more temporary and focused on girls’ short-term material needs. Fundamentally driven by poverty – and limited bargaining power – some girls are drawn into these relationships by their need for food, clothing, school fees, or a desire for a more affluent lifestyle, while others are pushed by parents eager to reduce their daily overheads.

While in many cases it appears that girls’ relationships with their ‘sugar daddies’ are consensual, power differentials constrain girls’ choices at every turn. As children and adolescents, not only do they lack substantial bargaining power in their natal families – and have extremely limited access to any form of income stream – but they have also not developed the cognitive resources to understand emotional manipulation or think through the longer-term ramifications of their actions. This immaturity, and the ‘choices’ it fosters, puts them at risk on a daily basis as they become involved with men who give them what they ‘want’ but abuse them. One girl, now 18 years old, explained, ‘When I was growing up I saw my mother struggling, unable to provide for us, and I was convinced by my peers that I needed a man who had money to provide. At the age of 12 years I got a man of 28 years who used to provide some basic needs.’ Another added, ‘With the sugar daddy you don’t have to beg for money. He gives it readily so that you don’t reject him. Then you can go to the salon and change your hair style, buy clothes and cosmetics, pay your school fees or adopt a trendy life style.’

Girls’ age and lack of voice leaves them powerless to protect themselves over the course of their relationships as well. They are, for example, unable to insist on condom usage – dangerous as ‘many men have gonorrhoea and syphilis, which they believe can be healed by having sex with a young girl’. Given that older men often see children as a sign of their virility, girls are also prevented from using contraception. When they fall pregnant some are forced by their parents to marry the father, even if he is abusive – and others find themselves on their own, outcast for their single motherhood and even poorer than when they started. One girl explained, ‘Old men love children. They want to be congratulated every year for having a new child.’ Another, who dropped out of school to live with her baby’s father, continued ‘I couldn’t believe it when he chased me away saying he was not ready for marriage!’

The nature of marriage itself also works to disempower girls in many situations – particularly as informal unions become more prevalent. Tacitly agreed between parents and the older men with whom girls are involved, these unions rarely involve the written records that would facilitate girls’ compensation in the event of marital dissolution or inheritance in the event of widowhood. Given that intergenerational relationships are widely perceived to entail a ‘licence to early widowhood’, this lack of formality risks trapping relatively young women and their children in poverty – with no legal recourse.

Source: Bantebya et al. (2014).

- **Messaging matters and must be very carefully tailored.** In Viet Nam, for example, parents and older adolescents increasingly understand that younger girls are more likely to have difficult pregnancies and less healthy children. Where such language can be exploited, without reinforcing motherhood as girls’ only option, it can be useful to quickly change behaviours. Programming and messaging must also be sensitive to the fact that social norms can change significantly within a generation, and that empowerment cuts both ways. This means that the messages girls need to hear today may be quite different from those they needed to hear only yesterday. For example, in many countries, girls have comparatively more freedom for the first time – and are able to choose their own spouses rather than submit to arranged marriages. Consequently, the focus of social norms sensitisation for these girls needs to shift from the topic of early marriage and related issues per se, to a stronger focus on adolescent sexual reproductive health and other

- forms of empowerment. While this means that girls are marrying for love, it also means that they are marrying in the throes of adolescence, which many come to regret as soon as the ‘crush’ fades into reality. Because this phenomenon is new, and does not require reworking tradition, there is substantial scope to build messaging that empowers girls to make smarter choices for themselves.
- **Beware of unintended consequences.** Where policy change comes quickly, it can have unforeseen impacts. The ‘defilement’ law in Uganda, for example, was put into place to help prevent the ‘sugar daddy’ phenomenon, as well as the pathways it developed to early marriage. Given the wide scope of the law however, prosecutions around illegal pre-marital sexual relations have overwhelmed under-resourced local services. Responses to early marriage therefore need to be aware that impacts of investments can be far-reaching – and not always in girls’ best interests.

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Front page image: Flower Hmong women, Bac Ha market, Lao Cai, Vietnam. Photo: © Tran Thi Hoa / World Bank.