"She Cannot Just Sit Around Waiting to Turn Twenty"

Understanding Why Child Marriage Persists in Kenya and Zambia

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ICRW International Center
for Research on Women
where insight and action connect

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Executive Summary

Choosing whether, when and who to marry is one of the most important, personal decisions that one can make. Yet, in many places around the world, girls and boys are forced into marriage before they're ready, a practice known as "child marriage". Around the world, an estimated 15 million girls are married each year before they turn 18, and UNICEF estimates that 720 million women alive today were married as children.[1] The harmful consequences of child marriage have been well documented. Child marriage often means the end of a girls' formal education, limited economic prospects, constrained social engagement, increased health risks and heightened risk of physical, emotional and sexual violence.[2-4] Considerable research to understand the determinants of child marriage has been conducted in South Asia; however, despite increased attention to the issue in recent years, the evidence base on the experience of child marriage in diverse contexts in sub-Saharan Africa remains limited. To fill this evidence gap and to provide information that can inform programmatic and policy actions, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), in partnership with Plan International Zambia and Kisumu Medical Education Trust (KMET), conducted intensive qualitative research in Zambia and Kenya.

Our objectives were to:

1) Explore and document the contextual factors that both promote and prevent child marriage; and
2) Understand the process by which adolescent girls get married.

We conducted a total of 55 in-depth interviews, 16 participatory focus group discussions and 17 key-informant interviews across the two countries and in both peri-urban and rural sites. The research team used thematic analysis to identify and organize data to meet the two study objectives.

Ultimately, what emerged were two direct precursors to child marriage across the study communities: school dropout and pregnancy. Each of these drivers stemmed from a much broader context experienced by girls living in Zambia and Kenya. Additionally, we documented an ongoing process of social change regarding the recognition of adolescence as a distinct life stage and the related tensions involved in the negotiation of the rights and expectations of adolescents at both the familial and community level.

To document these processes, we organized them into a diagram of the pathways to child marriage in these communities, presented on page 12.

Wider-reaching and more robust programs and policies are required to address some of the well-established challenges faced by adolescent girls that can result in child marriage and other negative consequences across Kenya and Zambia. In addition, to most effectively limit child marriage and mitigate its precursors, ICRW recommends additional research, as well as new pilot programs, which can help further elucidate and address some of the challenging issues emerging from this study. Every arrow in our diagram represents a pathway that can be disrupted by effective programming, reducing the drivers of child marriage and enabling girls to pursue alternative opportunities.

With greater opportunities and support from parents and communities, girls won't be driven by circumstances into marrying early. Instead, they will be able to realize their full capabilities and increase not only their own well-being, but that of their communities and countries as well.

Introduction

She has not gone to school for long so she cannot wait that long for the right age to get married. She cannot just sit around waiting to turn twenty.
— Mother, PFGD, rural Kenya

This is how one mother in rural Kenya described her community's views on child marriage. Yes, child marriage is harmful, and yet, what alternative do some out-of-school girls have?

Globally, the most recent estimates show that every year, 15 million girls are married before their 18th birthday. UNICEF estimates that right now, 720 million women alive today were married as children.[1] Research has shown that when girls marry before they're ready, they face a host of challenges, including an increased risk of experiencing physical, emotional and sexual violence, limited economic prospects, an increased likelihood of dropping out of school, increased health risks, especially when giving birth and other challenges and barriers that leave girls vulnerable.[2-4] Globally, a fair amount of attention has been devoted to uncovering some of the key drivers of child marriage, especially in South Asia. But evidence around the context of child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa remains limited. This report looks to fill that evidence gap.

Specifically, the study objectives were to:

1) Explore and document the contextual factors that promote and prevent child marriage; and
2) Understand the process by which adolescent girls get married.

Funded by the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, this research was carried out in Zambia with Plan International Zambia and independent research consultants, and in Kisumu, Kenya with Kisumu Medical Education Trust (KMET).

The findings from this study offer insight into the pathways to child marriage in Zambia and Kenya and to how contextual factors, including gender inequity and economic insecurity, affect the life course of girls .

Research locations

In both Kenya and Zambia, data were collected in rural and peri-urban areas in order to account for how migration and urbanization could affect the process of child marriage in these diverse settings.

In Kenya, research was conducted in two sites in Kisumu County, which has among the lowest median age in the country for first sexual intercourse for women (16.4 years) , where 15.4 percent of 15-19 year old women have begun childbearing, and where 53.9 percent of married women ages 15 to 49 are using a modern contraceptive.[5] ICRW partnered with Kisumu Medical Education Trust (KMET), an organization that implements several programs focused on improving the lives of young women, with a particular focus on those who are married early. KMET provides vocational training for girls married before 18 and works with girls' husbands and families to address challenges they face. KMET also provides youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, SRH education in schools, and facilitates a safe space program for girls in and around Kisumu where girls meet with mentors for discussions about their lives and issues they are facing.

The two research sites in Kisumu were Manyatta and Osiri. Manyatta is a densely populated, peri-urban community within Kisumu town. Houses vary in terms of structure, but typically have metal walls and roofs and mud or concrete floors. Most people use mini-buses (*matatus*) or motorcycle taxis (*boda bodas*) for transportation. Girls reported that they typically walked or took *boda bodas* to school. Osiri is a sparsely-populated rural community outside Kisumu town, on the shores of Lake Victoria. Most houses here are constructed of mud and most have mud floors, though some are poured concrete. Most people walk for transportation within the community. Girls typically walked to school. Despite these differences between the areas, the information shared by the respondents did not significantly differ depending on if they were in Manyatta or Osiri. One reason for this could be the close association residents of Manyatta have with the rural areas from which they migrated, while another could be the selection of sites, which was conducted in consultation with both KMET, based on where they were implementing programs targeting adolescent girls health and wellbeing, and with village and community leaders, based on their insights about where more cases of child marriage were occurring.

In Zambia, research was conducted in two sites in Central Province, where the median age for first sexual intercourse for women is 17 years, where 29.9 percent of 15 to 19 year-old women have begun childbearing and where 41.3 percent of married women ages 15 to 49 are using a modern contraceptive.[6] ICRW partnered with Plan International Zambia, which works to help children in the country to access their rights to education, health and economic empowerment. Plan International Zambia operates many projects targeting youth. One project, *No I Don't*, empowers girls to make meaningful choices about their own lives by creating safe spaces for girls to freely express themselves among peers without interference from adults, by enhancing their access to sexual and reproductive health information, and by facilitating an enabling legal and policy environment to protect girls from child marriages. Another project, the *18+ Ending Child Marriages in Southern Africa Programme*, builds on key principles and priorities that are scalable and supported by Plan International's Child-Centered Community Development strategy to mobilize girls at risk of child marriage, transform gender norms and practices, and facilitate an enabling legal and policy environment to protect girls from child marriage.

The two research sites in Central Province were Makululu (in Kabwe District) and Chibombo (Chibombo District). Makululu is a densely-populated, peri-urban community outside of the city of Kabwe. Makululu is considered a shantytown, with seasonal fishing being the primary economic activity. Chibombo is a rural community further outside the city of Kabwe, where the primary economic activity is farming. As was the case in Kenya, despite differences between the areas, the information shared by the respondents did not differ. This could be due to the close geographic proximity and potential for intermingling between the two communities.

TABLE 1. STATISTICAL SNAPSHOT

	Kenya	Zambia
Marriage		
Legal minimum age of marriage (years)[7]	18	18
Legal minimum age of marriage with parental consent (years)	18[8]	16[7]
Percent of women 20-24 married before age 15	4.4	5.9
Percent of women 20-24 married before age 18	22.9	31.4
Median age of women 20-24 at first marriage (years)*	20.5	19.9
Sexual activity		
Percent of women 20-24 who were sexually active by age 15	13.6	11.7
Percent of women 20-24 who were sexually active by age 18	46.7	54.4
Median age of women 20-24 at first sex (years)	18.2	17.7
Use of modern contraception		
Rate of use among currently married women ages 20-24 (%)	49.8	44.1
Rate of use among sexually active, unmarried women ages 20-24 (%)	64.2	47.0
Pregnancy		
Percent of women 20-24 having first birth before age 15	4.1	2.8
Percent of women 20-24 having first birth before age 18	23.3	30.7
Median age of women 20-24 at first birth (years)**	20.3	19.3
Educational attainment		
Women 20-24 who completed form 4 at the secondary level (%)	23.2	16.7
Median years of school completed among women 20-24	8.7	7.9

Source: DHS for Kenya (2014) and Zambia (2013-14) except where noted
* In Kenya, the youngest age bracket at which this statistic was available was women ages 25-29.
** In Kenya, the youngest age bracket at which this statistic was available was women ages 25-29.

A statistical profile of each country is presented in Table 1. In both Kenya and Zambia, the legal minimum age of marriage is 18, though in Zambia, girls as young as 16 may marry with parental consent. Rates of child marriage are lower in Kenya as compared to Zambia for marriages both below the age of 15 and the age of 18. Median age at first marriage is 20.5 years in Kenya and 19.9 years in Zambia. More girls are sexually active by age 15 in Kenya as compared to Zambia, but by age 18, the comparison reverses, and more girls are sexually active in Zambia.

Rates of use of modern contraception among married women and girls are similar in both countries, at less than 50 percent, but higher in Kenya than Zambia for sexually active, unmarried women and girls (64.2 percent in Kenya compared to 47.0 percent in Zambia). Like sexual activity, early childbirth is more common in Kenya, as compared to Zambia, for girls under the age of 15, but by 18, the pattern has reversed. Overall 23.3 percent of girls in Kenya and 30.7 percent of girls in Zambia give birth before age 18. Though the median number of schooling years completed is less than one year higher in Kenya, as compared to Zambia, 23.2 percent of girls complete secondary school in Kenya compared to just 16.7 percent in Zambia. Overall, this demonstrates that educational attainment is low in both countries and that girls in both countries continue to experience early sexual debut and pregnancy, which are more prevalent at very young ages in Kenya, but more prevalent overall for girls below the age of 18 in Zambia.

Study methods

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of ICRW, the University of Zambia Biomedical Research Ethics Committee, the National Health Research Authority of Zambia and the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga teaching and referral hospital's Ethics & Review Committee of Kisumu, Kenya.

In each country, ICRW researchers conducted a four-day training with the local team prior to data collection and then supervised participant recruitment. Trainings included a full review of ethical standards and a detailed review of research objectives, qualitative research methods and the interviewing process and practice, including note-taking and on site translation techniques.

A total of 55 **in-depth interviews** were conducted across the two countries in both urban and rural sites. In-depth interviews were conducted with unmarried adolescent girls ages 15 to 17 who were in school (N = 12) or out of school (N = 11), married women ages 20 to 30 who were married before 18 (N = 12) or after 18 (N = 12), and married men ages 20-30 (N = 8). The interviews explored respondents' individual aspirations, perceived barriers and opportunities to achieving those aspirations and the extent to which they felt in control of their decisions. Respondents were asked to share information about their community and their perceptions about child marriage, including

how and why it occurs. Married respondents were also asked about their marriage process and the role they, their spouse and other actors played in decision-making around marriage.

A total of 16 **participatory focus group discussions** were conducted in the two countries, in rural sites only. Focus group discussions were conducted with unmarried adolescent girls ages 15 to 17 (N = 4), unmarried adolescent boys ages 15 to 17 (N = 4), adult mothers of adolescents aged 12 to 17 (N = 4), and adult fathers of adolescents aged 12 to 17 (N = 4). The discussions explored community-level perceptions, norms and experiences of the transition to adulthood and the context and process of child marriage, including: the choices and opportunities that girls have at different points in adolescence; girls' and boys' aspirations for the future; and how much control they have over decisions regarding those choices and aspirations.

Finally, a total of 17 **key-informant interviews** were conducted across the two countries in both urban and rural sites. Respondents in these interviews included community health volunteers, community elders, principals and teachers, clergy, paralegals, police and social workers. These interviews elicited the opinions of influential community members and other gatekeepers, since previous research on child marriage has demonstrated the importance of their role either in preventing or fostering change within the community. We explored their perceptions of the timing and circumstances of marriage, how this timing may have changed over time, the role of youth and other community actors in controlling these decisions, opportunities and barriers to alternatives to marriage and projects and practices aimed at stopping child marriage.

All interviews were audio recorded and conducted in the respondent's language of choice. Local researchers participated in daily debriefing sessions with an ICRW staff member during which emerging key themes, any surprising findings and any problems or challenges with data collection were discussed. At the end of data collection in each country, a final debriefing session was held with the field team and staff from the host organization to discuss and assess the validity of preliminary findings. After data collection was complete, all data were then translated and transcribed in English by trained local researchers. Three researchers from ICRW analyzed the transcripts using an inductive approach to elicit key themes. The findings were then shared with Plan International Zambia and KMET for final review.

Key findings

The qualitative research team used thematic analysis to identify and organize data to address our two study objectives to:

1) Explore and document the contextual factors that promote and prevent child marriage; and
2) Understand the process by which adolescent girls get married.

Ultimately, what emerged were two direct precursors to child marriage across the study communities: school dropout and pregnancy. Each of these drivers stemmed from a much broader context in which the lives of girls in Kenya and Zambia are embedded. Additionally,

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we documented an ongoing process of social change regarding the recognition of adolescence as a distinct life stage and the related tensions involved in the negotiation of the rights and expectations of adolescents at both the familial and community level. This section will discuss these three findings in the following three subsections: *Access to secondary education, Pregnancy,* and *Changing roles, influences, and support structures for adolescents*.

Access to secondary education

Quality education, and particularly secondary education, is one of the most powerful ways for girls to maintain and improve health and well-being. The more years of schooling a girl has, the better her chances are to delay marriage,[9] reduce her probability of becoming pregnant[10] and increase her use of contraception.[11] For example, a study by the World Bank found that for women with at least a secondary school degree, one additional year of school reduced her probability of becoming pregnant by 5.6 percent.[12] A more recent analysis by ICRW and the World Bank found that, across several countries in sub-Saharan Africa, each year of marriage before the age of 18 reduces the probability of girls' secondary school completion by about four percentage points.[13]

Despite the potential that education has to improve the lives of women and girls, gender disparities in secondary education persist in many sub-Saharan African countries. While a 2015 study found that gender gaps in secondary school enrollment globally had reduced to near parity between 1999 and 2012, with an average of 97 girls enrolled in secondary school for every 100 boys in 2012, the gender gap in sub-Saharan Africa remained from 1999 to 2012, with 84 girls enrolled for every 100 boys.[14]

Among many underlying factors causing gender inequality in secondary school enrollment, evidence suggests that child marriage remains the biggest barrier that either prevents girls from accessing education after marriage or leads them to curtail their educational aspirations.[15-17] Indeed, once they are married, adolescent girls' access to education becomes severely limited due to time burdens related to

household chores and childbearing.[18] Additionally, persistent social norms around gender roles tend to position school as incompatible with being a wife and a mother.[18]

Because of the critical role education plays in preventing child marriage in other settings, we asked study respondents questions designed to better understand what opportunities and barriers exist for girls to achieve their educational aspirations in Kenya and Zambia. From these discussions, four key findings emerged:

1) Girls have high educational aspirations but very few opportunities to achieve them;
2) There are differing viewpoints on why girls drop out of school, but the most prominent barrier to education seems to be the precarious nature of financial support for school fees;
3) Once girls are out of school, they face multiple pressures to marry— social pressure from their family and community, and financial pressure, due to the lack of alternate means by which to support themselves;
4) Once girls are married, stigma, gender norms and financial constraints make returning to school difficult.

Girls' educational aspirations

In total, 23 unmarried girls ages 15 to 17 were interviewed individually across both countries. All but two were asked what level of schooling they would like to complete, if able.

Girls almost universally desired to complete university degrees, with one exception—a girl in rural Kenya who failed school and decided she wished to pursue a vocational course in hairdressing. The most popular profession girls desired was to be a doctor; other professions mentioned included nursing, teaching and journalism.

The aspirations expressed by these girls stand in sharp contrast to the realities of educational attainment in Kenya and Zambia. According to the most recent DHS data, the percentage of women who have completed higher than a secondary education peaks at 16.9 percent among women 25-29 in Kenya and 8.6 percent among women 30-34 in Zambia.[5, 6]

Drivers of school dropout

From the perspective of many parents and adults, adolescent girls' attitudes and behavior were the primary reasons for school dropout. Some parents and adult community members expressed feelings of helplessness and lack of control over girls' schooling decisions. Some went as far as to suggest that girls dropped out of school precisely because they wanted to get married. As one mother from Zambia described in a focus group:

When you tell her to go to school, she doesn't want to go, when you buy her books, everything to go to school, she doesn't even reach at school, she comes back on her way. You get tired and so what can you do to that person? It's the child that marries herself into marriage.
- Mother, PFGD, rural Zambia

A deputy head teacher at a school in Zambia echoed this belief:

We have children that would come to the office and say madam, "Nebo shetewo mano," meaning I am not smart. No matter how you try to encourage them, you give them reasons, the advantages of school, they will still say "madam, I am sorry. I want to get married."
- Deputy head teacher, KII, rural Zambia

In direct opposition to this statement, however, stand the stories of out-of-school girls themselves. None of the eleven out-of-school girls ages 15 to 17 interviewed suggested that a desire to marry was the reason for their school dropout. This may, in part, be an artifact of our sampling criteria, which excluded married girls below the age of 20. However, even among the eleven women interviewed who married before 18, none indicated they dropped out of school because they wanted to marry, though in many cases marriage quickly followed.

Instead, by far the most common reason for school dropout, as reported by out-of-school girls and women married before 18, was financial hardship and lack of money for school fees. Respondents reported that girls' sources of school fees were highly unstable. Girls with at least one living parent were reportedly best off, though often their parent(s) was/were unemployed or underemployed, causing the girls to drop out or seek support for school fees from other relatives. As one out-of-school girl in rural Kenya described:

Us, in our family we are not that well off. We are three children with our mother, and our father died. So I am not able to go school . When I go to school, I am sent away because of school fees. And there is no way my mother can get the school fees. And the way in which we are three, our mother just does menial jobs digging people's gardens for survival. So she told me come and stay here and when she gets money she will take me for some course. That is why I don't go to school.
– Unmarried, out of school girl age 15-17, IDI, rural Kenya

A different story, that of a woman from rural Zambia married before 18, highlights both how girls are affected by reliance on relatives for school fees and how other expenses, in her case, medical costs for her father, can result in leaving school early:

I went to Ndola to stay at my uncle's place so he gave me fake promises that when I go to Ndola he will be paying for my school... But when I went there he changed his mind and said that he had a lot of people he was paying for so I couldn't start school and I told him that I will go back to my mother's place, that's how I came back here. When I came back I found that my father was in hospital; he had injured himself at his work place. He was admitted to the hospital and he was there for a very long time. That's how I just saw the situation; my mother was not working and suffering with my father in hospital; I just thought life will be difficult now.
– Woman 20-30 married before 18, IDI, rural Zambia

In Zambia, several adult respondents reported that parents exert additional pressure on daughters to drop out and marry in order to alleviate their family's poverty. They explained that marriage benefits parents financially through the receipt of the bride wealth payment and the transfer of responsibility for financially supporting their daughter from her parents to her husband. The following is an example from Zambia of how respondents linked financial concerns to parents' pressure on girls to drop out of school and marry:

We hear the parents get tired of paying school fees, so when they don't have money they just say you better just get married. And not just school fees, sometimes the reasons are that they want the child to supplement their efforts for what is lacking in a home as a child gets married.

- Deputy head teacher, KII, rural Zambia

There was less evidence of direct pressure from parents on girls in Kenya to drop out due to financial hardship; rather parental pressure on girls to marry was spoken about more generally and not necessarily in relation to their ability to continue schooling.

Pressure on out-of-school girls to marry

Social pressure

In both Zambia and Kenya, ongoing education was the only activity consistently viewed by respondents as why some women delay marriage. Girls, married women and married men were asked if they knew a woman who had married between the ages of 25 to 30. Some had never known a woman who married that late. Those who did consistently reported that the only reason she married so late was that she was pursuing higher education. As one man from rural Zambia reported, most women in his community married between ages 15

and 16. When asked why some women marry at age 20 or later, he said:

The main reason is that they are delayed because of school, especially women. In short they have something to do and that is school.

— Married man 20-30, IDI, rural Zambia

A mother participating in a focus group in rural Kenya narrated a common ideal of a girl's marriage pathway as follows:

If she still has her parents, at eighteen years she should be done with her grade twelve. If she goes on well with her education, the next four years she is in college or at the university. After finishing these four years, this last remaining year is enough for her to court because she had met a man when she was in college and this time she takes to prepare to get married at twenty-five years.

— Mother, PFGD, rural Kenya

Marriage delayed by education was seen as ideal by both girls and parents for several reasons, including her maturity and readiness for marriage due to her older age, her ability to obtain a more educated husband and her ability to support herself financially.

Problematically, though pursuing an education reportedly excused girls from the pressure to marry, not pursuing an education actively subjected them to pressure to marry. Describing reasons for parental and community pressure on girls to marry, one girl in urban Zambia who was not currently attending school said:

When they see that a girl is grown and is not in school and she is not doing anything, they can suggest that she gets married and her parents agree.

— Unmarried, out of school girl age 15-17, IDI, urban Zambia

Orphanhood

Orphaned girls are especially vulnerable to early marriage. Because they have even fewer reliable sources of financial support for schooling, they may be forced to drop out.

I married then because of life misery. It was not out of choice. I used to have a good life when my parents were alive because my dad was working. When they passed on, my problems began since no one could provide for you, you don't have school fees, you are sent away day and night...I couldn't just help it.

— Woman 20-30 married before 18, IDI rural Kenya

Others may drop out and marry in order to better care for their younger siblings.

Another thing contributing to early marriage is the death of parents, the child becomes an orphan. Sometimes you find this girl has become an orphan and she is the eldest in the family, so she takes up the responsibility of taking care of her siblings. And the support she can only get from the men which may make her end up in a marriage.

— Paralegal, KII, rural Kenya

Sometimes, they may even face additional pressure from guardians who view them as a burden and therefore pressure them to marry early:

Unfortunately to vulnerable girls, let's say for example orphans; they will marry early because the people who are responsible for them tend to view them as a burden so they want to release them early enough. Any time they come that they want to get married, not much attention will be given to this marriage but it will be seen as a relief to the burden that they are bringing to the family.

— Social worker, KII, urban Kenya

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Absence of alternative economic and social opportunities

In addition to social pressure to marry, out-of-school girls also experience financial pressure to marry due to the absence of economic and social opportunities that would otherwise allow them to support themselves, independent of families or partners.

In both Zambia and Kenya, women's economic dependency on men was a major factor driving girls into early marriage. Sometimes this dependency led directly to marriage as a way to ensure the girls' financial needs were met. This was succinctly put by a social worker in Kenya:

Some ladies will get into marriage as a source of survival. They know eventually they will find their meals and everything. So that is generating child marriage.
— Social worker, KII, urban Kenya

In other cases, women's low social and economic status and the lack of opportunities to earn an income as compared to men drove adolescent girls to engage in sexual relationships in exchange for money or goods, often resulting in pregnancy, an indirect pathway to marriage (as discussed in-depth later in the report):

What is causing child marriage here in Makululu is poverty. Life is hard; most of the people here are unemployed. All they do is fishing, [the men] go to camp out [at the lake] for three to four months to bring food on the table; the men don't even know what is going on back at home. As such, the woman could even be forced to send the girl child to sell sex so they could have food in the home, and the results are either diseases or pregnancy.
- Community elder, KII , urban Zambia

The two main reasons girls remained unable to financially support themselves were a lack of vocational schools or employment opportunities for out-of-school girls and gender norms that, while shifting slightly, still primarily reinforced traditional gender roles that precluded women from working in the formal economy, or that forced them to do so while still meeting all of the demands of their traditional household role.

One interesting finding from Kenya was the notion that this gender-rigid environment, where only boys and men can engage in paid work, can also drive early marriage for boys. Because they are able to generate some income at a young age, boys are able to marry earlier by leaving school and fulfilling their traditional gender role as a provider:

After the boy has stopped going to school, a youth, and he comes here at the lake shores and he starts getting some money, to him now in his mind, he looks at himself as an adult. And the only thing he can do because he has money is to buy whatever he wants and what he wants is a girl. And when he gets this girl, what he talks about is marriage.
— Paralegal, KII, rural Kenya

Difficulty returning to school after marriage or pregnancy

In both Kenya and Zambia, girls who were pregnant, parenting and/or married faced significant challenges to remaining in, or returning to school. Respondents in both countries reported that though laws forbidding pregnant or parenting girls from returning to school had been repealed, stigma, gender norms affecting household responsibilities of married girls and financial constraints still prevented most pregnant, parenting or married girls from returning to school. Shame was also mentioned by multiple types of respondents, primarily in Kenya, as a key factor in preventing girls from returning to school after pregnancy or marriage:

If Anyango [the name chosen by this focus group of boys to represent a typical girl in their community] had friends in school and she was bright in class then she has stopped going to school, she will not be willing to be seen by these her friends who are still in school. She will decide to be alone as these friends and others will be looking down upon her on the decision she made to get married and she will be ashamed of herself.
— Unmarried boy 15-17, PFGD, rural Kenya

Many respondents in both countries also reported that, in general, boyfriends and husbands were unable to finance a girl's return to education after a pregnancy or marriage. As one married woman noted:

I told [my husband] I still yearn to go back to school. He could also still see my school uniforms here in the house. So he asked me if want to go back to school and I agreed but now he also cannot afford my school fees.
— Woman 20-30 married before 18, IDI, rural Kenya

In addition, some respondents noted that men might have concerns about their young wives returning to school, as education might empower these girls by giving them greater control over resources and decision-making. For example, one woman from urban Kenya who married before age 18 shared:

They say that now that I am married I shouldn't go back to school because some girls who get married when they are still young and their husbands take them back to school, when they have finished school then they start looking down upon the husband and could even leave him and get married to a rich husband.
— Woman 20-30 married before 18, IDI, urban Kenya

Together, these four key findings illustrate the well-known conceptual linkages between education disruption and child marriage, discussed above. Despite high educational aspirations, girls are often prevented from completing their education, frequently because of a lack of steady financial support. Once they drop out, girls face extreme and immediate social and financial pressure to marry, and once married, find themselves unable to return to school .

Pregnancy

A recent UNFPA report found that, though there had been a slight decline in births before age 18 across developing countries, six countries in sub-Saharan Africa with a high prevalence of adolescent pregnancy (defined as greater than 30 percent) had all seen increases in births to adolescents below the age of 18 in the years from 1997 to 2011.[19] Additionally, the report projected that, within the next 17 years, births to adolescents below the age of 15 would nearly double in sub-Saharan Africa.[19] The consequences of early childbirth, especially to very young adolescents ages 10 to 14, are severe, and include increased risk of death during childbirth, obstetric fistulae, poor child health outcomes, disruption of education and lowered earning potential, among others.[19]

Drivers of early pregnancies include a combination of individual, relational, community and societal factors.[19] For example, girls can face barriers to accessing contraception due to national laws, community social norms and attitudes or both. In addition, poor or nonexistent comprehensive sexuality education in schools can lead adolescents to seek information from less reliable sources, such as peers. Adolescent girls are often less able to negotiate the terms under which they engage in sexual activities, both due to their age and pervasive gender inequalities, leading to riskier sexual behavior.

At the community, family and individual levels, our findings reflect the complex interrelationship of these determinants, particularly in relation to early pregnancy. While we did not explicitly ask questions about pregnancy, the topic emerged organically during interviews and discussions. From our data, three key findings arose:

1) As in many other settings, girls in the study communities had very limited access to information and services related to sexual and reproductive health, and are experiencing high rates of early pregnancy;
2) Despite the contextual factors increasing girls' risk of pregnancy, girls themselves were often blamed and expected to shoulder the full consequences of their pregnancy; and
3) Because girls were expected to take sole responsibility for becoming pregnant and finding financial support for themselves while pregnant, they often left school and were married early.

These findings are discussed further below.

Limited sexual and reproductive health knowledge and family planning access
Discussing issues related to sexuality and sexual and reproductive health remains taboo in many parts of the world, particularly for adolescents. The situation was no different in the context of our

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study, where extremely limited access to information about sexuality and to sexual and reproductive health and rights meant that many girls and community members did not understand their rights to determine whether, when and with whom to have sex, or their right to access information and services that could meet their sexual and reproductive health needs, including contraception.

Indeed, while in every interview and discussion, pregnancy was associated with early marriage, sexuality was mentioned only once, and the topic of contraception arose only in the context of discussions about misperceptions or disapproval of its use. Only married men and women were asked about family planning and only in relation to household decision-making; no adolescents were asked direct questions about access to or use of family planning to prevent pregnancy. In Kenya, the only strategy shared by respondents for preventing pregnancy among unmarried adolescent girls was for girls to stay inside and avoid relationships with boys or men.

I like staying alone. But sometimes when I walk there are those who like to call me, but my mother had told me if someone calls me I don't go to them. And these boys in Manyatta like impregnating girls and they drop them. So when the pregnancy begins to show, it forces one to leave school. So as for me, I fear having boyfriends because I'll have to stop coming to school. My life will be miserable, so I normally just stay in the house patiently. And my mother encourages me just to be patient until I finish school I'll help her one day when I finish school.
— Unmarried, in-school girl 15-17, IDI, urban Kenya

This view was held widely among girls and their parents, and even among key informants, including a community health volunteer who also recommended avoiding men and not having boyfriends as the way to avoid pregnancy. They implied that when a girl did not follow

this strategy, she is to blame for the consequences.

As community health volunteers we try helping young girls who have not married to keep away from men so that they may not be exposed to sexually transmitted diseases and even pregnancies. We try our level best but we are just volunteers. A girl can tell me I teach her well but she lacks this and that. I may not have to. So even after teaching her she could still go mess up.
— Community health volunteer, KII, rural Kenya

For example here at my home, we have meetings on Saturday with our parents. They tell us we should complete school first before getting pregnant or having a boyfriend. That is what helps us. When we come from that meeting we recall what grandfather told us and decide what to follow. If you fail to follow the counsel like I did, you mess up.
— Unmarried, out of school girl 15-17, IDI, urban Kenya

In both Kenya and Zambia, participants who did mention contraception shared their belief that it promotes early sex and can lead to fertility problems, as in the quotes below.

I also have an issue with family planning. However sexually active the girl might be, it is not good to encourage the child to [use family planning] because the moment you let the child get involved in family planning, the child can do anything.
— Deputy principal, KII, rural Kenya

A child is supposed to be told that this is wrong and she should not do it, not taking her for injections. It means you are showing her the way to sleeping with men and also destroying [her] fertility.
— Mother, PFGD, rural Zambia

Girls' lack of knowledge about how to prevent pregnancy and, in some cases, about how pregnancy occurs was apparent in the stories they shared about their own experiences becoming pregnant.

I was in my teens. That is when I got pregnant. After getting pregnant I came to visit another brother of mine here at Sabako. I didn't even know I was pregnant. My mother is the one who told me.
— Woman 20-30 married after 18, IDI, rural Kenya

(Laughs) you know like me, I just got pregnant by mistake. There was a day we left together with my friends. Each one of us had a boyfriend and we didn't know we could spend out, that's the day I got pregnant and it wasn't me alone. Two of us got pregnant.
— Unmarried, out of school girl 15-17, IDI, urban Kenya

Parents did not mention having any experience in discussing family planning or sexuality with their children, and only one respondent, a teacher from Zambia, recommended that such discussions might help prevent child marriage.

I feel as parents we are not doing enough. I feel at local level as mothers and fathers we are not talking to our children on sexual matters, we still feel, when I mention sex to my child

she will feel out of place. Then we are missing it out because immediately I don't tell my children the truth, the child learns it from another person and she/he feels what they have learnt from another person is the truth.
— Deputy head teacher, KII, rural Zambia

Blame and responsibility for pregnancy

Interviews with participants revealed the presence of a "sexual double standard," which is defined as males being allowed to engage in sexual behavior while women are censured for it.[20, 21] Although most participants recognized the nuanced circumstances in which adolescent girls got pregnant, including the financial motivations for sexual activity and the lack of sexual and reproductive health knowledge and services in their community, they still held the girls solely responsible for having out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

That stage makes girls change their minds such that even if she was a good girl, she changes and won't listen even when you talk with her. And she can behave like that until she finds herself getting pregnant in the process.
— Woman 20-30 married after 18, IDI, rural Kenya

There are so many reasons; I don't know what is causing these young girls to have children at an early stage, I don't have a specific reason for that, I don't know whether it's just being naughty, they don't listen to their parents when they try to advise them. We girls are very naughty; forget about what our parents advise us not to do. We still do things behind our parents back and when we get home we act innocent. I came across one mother, she really cried about what her daughter did. Parents are really complaining about their girl children, one parent even complained that she wished she never had girl children. Boys are better.
— Woman 20-30 married after 18, IDI, urban Zambia

Pregnancy and child marriage

Respondents articulated both direct and indirect pathways between pregnancy and early marriage. Indirectly, pregnancy was said to lead to child marriage through school dropout. As noted above, once girls are out of school, they face both social and financial pressure to marry and significant barriers to returning to school.

Often, though, the pathway from pregnancy to child marriage was direct. Once pregnant, few participants mentioned girls staying with their parents. Instead, responsibility for the pregnancy fell almost completely on the shoulders of the girl. Most frequently, girls who became pregnant were expected to leave the home and get married.

Sometimes some parents make their children to get into marriage. When they hear they are pregnant, they take their belongings and throw them out and tell them to get married.
— Unmarried, in school girl 15-17, IDI, urban Kenya

Yes, you will find someone who is 15 is pregnant like my cousin. She has been taken to her marital home. She got pregnant at 16, if not 15, and they took her to the man.
- Woman 20-30 married before 18, IDI, rural Zambia

As mentioned earlier, girls had few options for financial support once out of their family home, requiring them to become dependent on male partners for financial support. In Kenya, participants frequently shared that girls have to find another man to care for them if the father of the child is unwilling.

No I married a different man because after I got pregnant my boyfriend denied me and was not supportive. He even said it wasn't his baby. After he denied the baby I felt I should just get married to somebody else.
— Woman 20-30 married before 18, IDI, rural Kenya

Such marriages were so common in Kenya that there was a name for it, the "hooking eye," meaning the process of connecting pregnant or out-of-school girls with men to marry them. One adolescent girl reported that in the short time she had been out of school she had been approached by three different "hookers," each proposing that she marry one of their relatives. The girl reported that her father accepted each of the three offers, and when she refused, he treated her so harshly that she had to run away from home. In private, her mother encouraged her to delay marriage, but did not stand up for her in front of her father or the "hookers."

Together, these three key findings illustrate the close relationship between pregnancy and child marriage in these communities. As in many other settings, girls in these communities had very limited access to information and services related to sexual and reproductive health, leading to high rates of early pregnancy. Girls were then expected to shoulder the full consequences of their pregnancy, including both school dropout and early marriage.

Changing roles, influences, and support structures for adolescents

It has long been recognized that the phase of adolescence and what it means to be an adolescent vary based upon the surrounding cultural, historical and political contexts.[22-24] As societies have shifted from agricultural to post-industrial economies, so have the definitions of adolescence. In societies where the primary economic activity was agricultural production, children were often seen as an economic resource, with no authority over decision-making.[25] For girls, this meant that there was often no gap between when they were seen as children and when they became wives. Instead, childhood "ended suddenly with early marriage."[26]

However in contemporary industrial societies, including the communities in which this study was conducted, there is increasing acknowledgement of adolescence as a distinct phase of life, occurring between childhood and adulthood. As adolescence becomes recognized within a community, community members also implicitly or explicitly establish expectations for the rights and responsibilities of adolescents. As our data show, these expectations can create tension between adults and adolescents, who may have differing views on who should have decision-making power over key life events, including marriage.

In addition to social tension surrounding the negotiation of adolescents' role in their communities, the growing literature on adolescent development shows that this phase is also a time of rapid physiological, biological and psychological change. Before young adulthood, when they are better able to establish self-control and hone their ability to visualize and plan for the future, adolescents move through a period of identity formation in which they are more likely to be influenced by their peers, are less likely to perceive risks, and may have difficulty thinking concretely about the future.[27] The choices they make during this phase are highly sensitive to their school and family environment.[27] To a large degree, the nature and quality of adolescents' future lives and their aspirations depend on how successfully "they are able to negotiate through this critical period."[28]

In our interviews and discussions in Zambia and Kenya, the tension implicit in the challenge of defining the rights and expectations of adolescents in these communities was shared in three key ways:

1) Parents and adolescents expressed relationship challenges—parents felt their children were defiant and rude, while in Kenya, a variety of participants reported that parents were contributing to girls' marriage through a lack of emotional support and understanding;
2) Adolescents were seen as emulating their peers' behaviors in ways that increased their risk of early pregnancy or marriage; and
3) Parents saw child rights and the associated increase in adolescents' decision-making power as a negative change from the past, when parents exerted greater control.

Parent-adolescent relationship challenges
Parents shared feelings that adolescent girls defy their parents' wishes and can be difficult and rebellious. One example given by some respondents was about their daughters' defiance around fulfilling what were traditionally seen as girls' household responsibilities, while another respondent gave an example of defiance relating to school attendance and the desire to marry.

When parents talk to her, she will ignore because she feels the parents are not providing her with what she wants but the boys do. She will be rude towards the parents.
— Girl 15-17, PFGD, rural Kenya

At 12 she starts having fun. She wants to go where others are. She goes to disco matangas. She starts spending time with people older than her. Even if you force her to do something she won't do it properly. Maybe she already has other plans with her friends they want to go walk around. If you tell her to do house chores they won't be done properly.
— Mother, PFGD, rural Kenya

Sometimes you can be telling your child, 'listen go to school and get an education or you won't be anything in society' but she does not listen. She will tell you she does not want school but wants to get married so what can you do? And when she is telling you that, she is already pregnant. Now you as a parent what can you do? But now when the pregnancy is visible that's when she remembers what you used to tell her and wishes she listened.
— Mother, PFGD, rural Zambia

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Only a few parents discussed ways in which to deal with adolescent girls when they become defiant, recognizing that parents can have a role in guiding their daughters.

Anyango [the name chosen by this focus group of fathers to represent a typical girl in their community] at 15 is a fully grown woman. If you disagree with her in this house, you will find her gone to be married. You need to read her mind. If you are a reasonable parent, when she is high you go slow on her and only get tough with her after she cools down.
— Father, PFGD, rural Kenya

In Kenya, some participants shared stories about parents not dealing with conflict in a way that remained supportive of their daughter. In an earlier section, we discussed parents' lack of financial support for girls to attend secondary school. Now, we highlight quotes from participants in Kenya who felt that fathers, specifically, do not support their daughters emotionally, which often leads to girls leaving their homes and getting married.

I told you something earlier that sometimes a girl child has already messed [up] and is pregnant. Instead of handling the situation calmly and later tak[ing] her back to school, the father becomes so harsh. The harshness may drive the girl to marriage since she needs to escape even if her life will be miserable. The idea of talking to fathers is a very good one. They really need to be talked to. Maybe a woman advises the girl to just stay, deliver and then go back to school. But the father gives a condition that the girl has to go to an aunty or grandmother, she can't stay in his home. The girl gets so stressed [out] even if she has gone to stay with the aunty. She feels her dad could kill her after she delivers the baby. You really need to talk to fathers.
— Woman 20-30 married before 18, IDI, rural Kenya

Interviewer: What made her get married?
Respondent: She disagreed with her dad then she ran away. Later on she called and said she is already married.
Interviewer: What conspired between her and the dad?
Respondent: Adolescent issues.
Interviewer: What adolescent issues?
Respondent: She was sleeping in the kitchen so she would sneak out at night. That is what brought the fights between her and the dad.
Interviewer: Where was she sneaking to?
Respondent: To visit boys and go to the disco.
Interviewer: So the dad knew?
Respondent: He found out and threatened to cut her with a panga. So she ran away.
Interviewer: What did her mother say?
Respondent: Nothing, her father is very harsh.
— Unmarried, out-of-school girl age 15-17, IDI, rural Kenya

Emulation of peer behaviors

Our research found that peers also influenced adolescents' desire to engage in relationships and/or marriage. Key informants and some parents felt that the increasing influence of peers in adolescent girls' decision-making processes could lead girls to early pregnancy. Usually, this was discussed as "peer pressure," but in most descriptions it does not appear that the girls were actually being pushed or encouraged to do things by their peers. Rather, it appears that adolescents see peers marry or having relationships and emulate their choices or behavior.

And let me repeat this, peer pressure can also contribute. Friends can cheat one another and as you see your friend engaging in this act, you feel you are old enough and yet you are not.
—Religious leader, KII, urban Kenya

Oh yes some other reasons are that the girls themselves, they sometimes get inspired in a very bad way, because my neighbor is married, maybe if I get married also A,B,C,D.
— Deputy head teacher, KII, rural Zambia

Ambivalence towards the concept of child rights

In both Kenya and Zambia, interviews with key informants as well as focus groups with parents indicated that adolescents' increasing awareness of laws and rights protecting them is encouraging them to have a greater role in making individual choices and decisions, particularly around marriage practices. These laws, combined with a persistent lack of communication between parents and adolescents, are perceived to challenge parents' authority. In addition, teachers were blamed for further reinforcing children's rights.

This perceived erosion of parental control over children and the gaining of children's individual autonomy were, at the same time, seen as contributing to a change in children's behavior and parents' ability to discipline their children.

But right now, I had told you we have now something called human rights. It has come a long way and reached children's rights. So you find that even you as a parent, the child knows

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their rights. And these rights on one side has effects, because the child can tell the parent that after all they can decide on the things they want. So you find that in the past, there was respect and a lot of it, I can say that. But right now, the respect has gone down in this system in which we are seeing our youths of today. On both the girls and the boys.
— Paralegal, KII, rural Kenya

Sometimes it's because of this human right thing, you find that you just slap your child and she reports you to the police. So we are scared to even discipline them even when they are misbehaving. A long time ago it used to be known as police force but now it's called police service so even the police are afraid to hit a person for fear of being accused of assault. Even our children now know their rights and they know that if my mother beats me I can report her to the police. And the police will not even ask any question but will get the mother arrested you see, but you were just controlling the child in the right direction. A long time ago we did not know about these rights and just used to listen to our parents but now even in nursery school they teach them about these rights. They tell them that if your mother or anybody beats you, you can take them to the police.
— Mother, PFGD, rural Zambia

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that the two direct precursors to child marriage in our study sites are pregnancy and school dropout, but also that both of these factors stem from the socioeconomic environment in which girls' lives are embedded. Additionally, we found that adolescents are in the midst of navigating a changing social landscape and a disruption of traditional marriage practices, as well as changing relationships with their parents, communities and peers.

While the research was designed specifically to understand how and why girls are married before age 18, it is necessary to recognize the importance of adolescence as a life stage when interpreting our findings. During adolescence, an individual "acquires the physical, cognitive, emotional, social and economic resources that are the foundation for health and wellbeing later in life."[27] Adolescents are primed to engage with and become highly influenced by environments outside the home.[27] To navigate the challenges of this life stage, adolescents need their families, peers, schools and health service providers for affirmation, advice, information and skills.[29]

In this section, we attempt to understand how child marriage persists in the face of social change. We first present the current desires for marriage practices as expressed by participants and then suggest a model of the pathways to child marriage in these communities.

No one wants girls to marry early
A testament to the increasing awareness about and action to end child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa is the evident sensitization of the

communities and individuals we spoke with for this study. Respondents used terms like "the girl child" and demonstrated familiarity with both previous and ongoing campaigns by local community-based organizations, as well as larger international non-governmental organizations working on the issue of child marriage. They demonstrated acute awareness that, ideally, girls should marry at later ages and after completing secondary school. They could also name many consequences of child marriage, including disruption of girls' education, trickle-down effects on the education of the children of child brides, the fact that early childbirth presents health risks to both the mother and child and that early marriage perpetuates cycles of economic insecurity, as well as a greater likelihood of child brides experiencing domestic violence and having lower decision-making power.

Parents and community members also reported increased action in their communities to prevent and respond to child marriages, mainly through increased reporting by neighbors and teachers and through the use of formal policing and legal services. This sensitization may, in part, explain why some respondents felt that child marriage was increasing in their community, despite quantitative evidence from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) showing it has actually decreased in both countries (in Kenya, 26.4 percent of women aged 20-24 married before 18 in the 2008-09 DHS, as compared to 22.9 percent in the 2014 DHS; in Zambia, 41.6 percent married before 18 in the 2007 DHS, as compared to 31.4 in the 2013-14 DHS).

At the same time, as part of our objective to understand the process of marriage, we included questions to girls about their aspirations related to marriage. In total, 23 unmarried girls ages 15 to 17 were interviewed individually across both countries. Every girl was asked whether or not she wanted to marry someday. In both countries, girls' desired age of marriage ranged from 20 to 35, with a median age of 27.5 in Kenya and 25 in Zambia. Notably, three girls in rural Kenya stated that they never wished to marry, calling marriage "miserable."
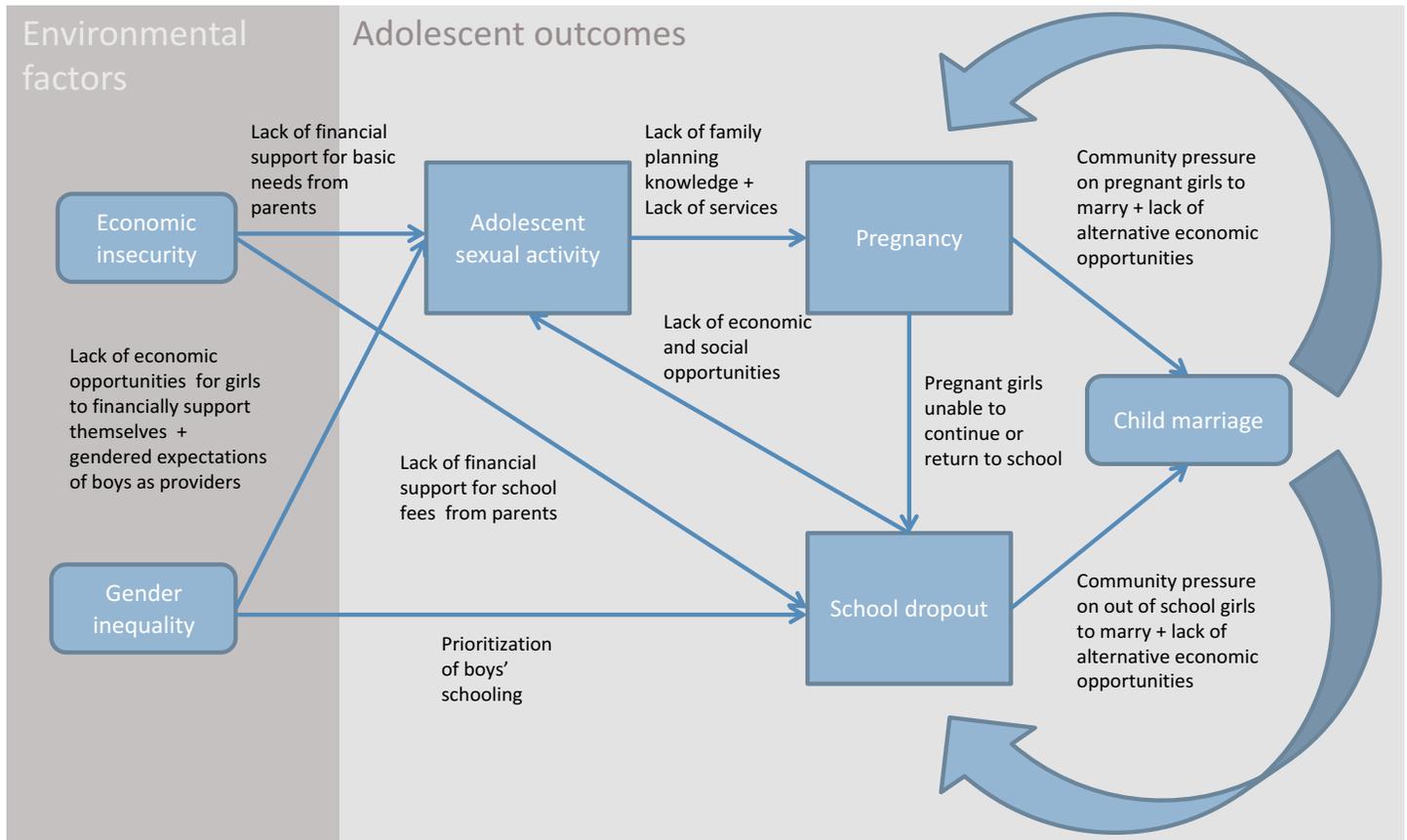
The marriage aspirations expressed by these girls stand in sharp contrast to the realities of marriage in Kenya and Zambia. According to the most recent DHS data, the percentage of women 25 to 29 married by the exact age of 25 is 79.1 percent in Kenya and 84.7 percent in Zambia. This means that, more likely than not, the girls that we interviewed will marry earlier than they desire.

Our study demonstrates that community members don't want girls to marry early, parents don't want girls to marry early, and girls don't want to marry early, so why does child marriage persist?

Adults directed much responsibility toward the girls themselves. They blamed girls for dropping out of school, for having boyfriends, for getting pregnant and for getting married. They expressed helplessness and a lack of control over girls' decisions. At the same time, girls themselves also expressed these very feelings of helplessness and a lack of control over their life choices.

If no one feels they are in control, what is driving child marriage, and who is capable of stopping it? In the next section, we synthesize our findings into a model of pathways to child marriage in our study communities (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. PATHWAYS TO CHILD MARRIAGE IN KENYA AND ZAMBIA

Pathways to child marriage

Based on our analysis, the two direct precursors to child marriage in the study sites are pregnancy and school dropout, but the trajectories leading to child marriage start in the socioeconomic environment. Our figure shows how, on the left, two environmental factors, economic insecurity and gender inequality, set adolescent girls on a path leading to child marriage. Each arrow represents one step along the pathway, as well as a potential point of intervention to disrupt this process. In the diagram, most arrows represent either the mediating actions of adolescent girls' parents or community-level norms and attributes, or both.

Pregnancy

The pathway to adolescent pregnancy stems from both economic insecurity and gender inequality.

The majority of sub-Saharan African youth grow up in a context of pervasive economic insecurity and high rates of unemployment.[30, 31] As shown in Figure 1, economic insecurity results in parents' inability to provide basic financial support to their daughters. Simultaneously, gender inequality manifests in fewer economic opportunities for girls to support themselves and gendered expectations of boys and men to be providers in their relationships. Together, these factors combine to drive girls to become sexually active, stemming from the need for basic financial support.

In the context of our study sites, the lack of adequate age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information and services creates a strong link between girls' sexual activity and adolescent pregnancy. Emerging global evidence shows that comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), particularly CSE provided through schools, has the potential to significantly improve knowledge and attitudes, as well as behaviors, among adolescents regarding sexuality.[32, 33] Of particular relevance to this study is the finding that CSE programs that emphasize gender and rights are more effective than those that ignore issues of gender and power, providing further support for the association between gender empowerment and positive sexual and reproductive health outcomes.[34]

Our findings show that currently, discussing sex and sexuality in the study communities is avoided, or is done only to express disapproval of girls having relationships at all, and there is little to no sexuality education taking place in schools or other formal settings. The few respondents who mentioned family planning viewed adolescent girls' use of family planning as unacceptable. In this environment, girls' sources for information on pregnancy avoidance are greatly curtailed, with no clear understanding of who is responsible for providing adolescents with appropriate information. This echoes the findings from recent research in Malawi that found adolescents very often rely on friends and informal sources for information rather than

schools, health-care providers or parents, with each of these groups expecting the other to pass on the relevant information.[35] These findings underscore a contentious, if somewhat obvious, conclusion— if communities and parents are not willing to provide accurate sexual and reproductive health information and services to adolescents, in an environment where girls are driven to become sexually active, adolescent pregnancy ensues.

Once a girl is pregnant, she is usually expected to leave her familial home. This expectation is compounded by community pressure. Without economic opportunities to support herself financially, a pregnant girl has little choice but to marry. This confirms previous research that found that, "for most adolescents below age 18, and especially for those younger than 15, pregnancies are not the result of a deliberate choice. To the contrary, pregnancies are generally the result of an absence of choices and of circumstances beyond a girl's control. Early pregnancies reflect powerlessness, poverty and pressures—from partners, peers, families and communities."[19]

School dropout

The pathway to the second direct precursor of child marriage, school dropout, also stems from both economic insecurity and gender inequality.

Previous research has documented a strong association between economic insecurity and gender inequalities in the domain of education. Inability to pay school fees, the costs of uniforms, shoes, transport, and stationery, combined with the opportunity costs of what out-of-school children can contribute to household labor, push students out of school or may hinder them to even enroll. Additionally, a girls' education may be de-prioritized due to the perception that her role as a wife and mother will not require formal education or because her parents feel that, since their daughter will marry into another family, her education is not worth their investment.[36, 37] Thus, it has been shown that families are more likely to give boys precedence over girls to attend school while only preparing their daughters for domestic responsibilities as future spouses and mothers.[38]

In our study, respondents described similar instances of parents devaluing girls' education, but the most frequently mentioned driver of school dropout was parents' inability to pay school fees. Without reliable financial support for schooling, girls' enrollment is precarious, and disruptions and delays in schooling were common.

Once out of school, in some cases just for a few days, our respondents reported intense community pressure on girls to marry. In environments where out-of-school girls have other opportunities, like pursuing vocational school or entering the workforce, school dropout in and of itself does not drive child marriage. In the study communities, however, girls who cannot complete their secondary education find themselves with few viable options except marrying or entering a sexual relationship as a means of financial support.

Outcomes for adolescent girls are ultimately driven by economic insecurity and gender inequality, but are also mediated by their parents, communities and peers. If we wish to address child marriage, our focus must be on the environmental factors and the mediating power of community norms, services and parental support.

Recommendations

Our findings demonstrate that adolescent girls in the study sites in Kenya and Zambia face tremendous barriers to achieving their aspirations and avoiding early marriage, and in many cases have very little support from their parents and community.

Every arrow in Figure 1 represents a pathway that can be disrupted by effective programming, reducing the drivers of child marriage and enabling girls to pursue other life aspirations and opportunities. To address child marriage and its precursors in these settings, both additional research and pilot programmatic interventions are needed to further understand and begin to address the issues explored in this study. In addition, larger and more robust programs and policies are needed to address some of the clear and well-established issues faced by adolescent girls that result in child marriage in these settings.

For each of the recommendations below, the following principles (originally designed for programs that address adolescent pregnancy) apply: 1) Take a rights-based approach and respect girls' rights; 2) Include men and adolescent boys, as they are part of the solution and are also affected by harmful gender norms; and 3) Include adolescents in the development and implementation of programs.[39]

Improve intergenerational communication and support by parents and families

Findings from this study draw attention to the poor communication and lack of support experienced by both girls and their parents. Parents shared stories about challenges they face in guiding their adolescent children. This finding is not surprising or unusual, since puberty is a time when young men and women want to become independent of their parents, and conflicts arise.[40] However, in both Kenya and Zambia, parents expressed difficulties in communicating with their children, indicating a need for more effective strategies to help them navigate this process.

Specifically, programs to assist parents in better supporting their sons and daughters as they transition into adulthood are needed. Such programs should involve parents in developing ways of coping with conflict and improving communication in order to develop and maintain good relationships with their children. This must include strategies designed to help parents to understand and meet the needs of adolescents for both independence and support. It must also help parents identify the gender norms and resulting inequities their children may face and how to address them. An example of an effective, evidence-based program implemented in Kenya that could be adapted to respond to the specific communication challenges identified in this study is the *Family Matters! Program*, which focused on promoting positive parenting and parent-child communication about sexual risk reduction.[41]

Address barriers to adolescent sexual and reproductive health and family planning access

In both Kenya and Zambia, few respondents mentioned anything about preventing pregnancies, despite pregnancy being cited frequently as a primary pathway to child marriage. The few times family planning was

mentioned, it was described as something dangerous that encourages promiscuity. On the contrary, the evidence shows that ensuring adolescents have correct information about reproductive health and family planning is vital to adolescent health and well-being. Based on our findings, access to such information, as well as youth-friendly reproductive health services, would prevent child marriages by avoiding the early pregnancies that lead girls to marry.

Programs are needed in schools, in communities and for parents and guardians, to ensure that adolescents have access to correct information about sexuality, risky sexual behaviors and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and services. As outlined by the WHO, "adolescent friendly health services need to be accessible, equitable, acceptable, appropriate, comprehensive, effective and efficient" and require several components, including adolescent and community involvement, to provide adolescents with the information and support necessary to access services.[42] Furthermore, parents and community members need programs to address myths, misconceptions and stigma associated with family planning use overall and, in particular, among adolescents.

Overcome barriers to accessing education
Access to secondary school must be ensured if the economic and health outcomes of young men and women in these contexts are to be improved.[43, 44] Many studies have shown that staying in school reduces early pregnancy and early marriage, and contributes to a range of other positive outcomes.[45]

School fees repeatedly came up as a reason that adolescents do not complete secondary school. For boys this often meant leaving school to find work, while for girls this often meant having to find financial support outside her household, often resulting in early marriage. Free secondary education, vouchers, cash transfers and support for transportation and essential school supplies, such as stationery, uniforms and books can all help to overcome financial barriers to education. In addition, given that respondents frequently mentioned that girls engage in sexual relationships with men in order to obtain basic hygiene products such as sanitary napkins and underwear, programs and policies that provide support for sanitary napkins, underwear and hygienic facilities should be implemented.

Policies enabling pregnant and parenting girls to remain in or return to school are also important ways to lower barriers to education.

Provide opportunities for out-of-school girls to support themselves financially
The findings show that out-of-school girls are, by and large, unable to support themselves financially, forcing them to rely on support first from their family, and then from boyfriends or husbands. As shown in Figure 1, this is one reason girls become sexually active, and are then exposed to the risk of pregnancy. Providing alternate opportunities for girls to independently support themselves would remove an incentive to engage in sexual activity, thereby reducing the likelihood of adolescent pregnancy and, ultimately, child marriage. As also shown in Figure 1, alternate economic opportunities for girls could break the progression

from pregnancy or school dropout to marriage by providing girls with an alternate means of supporting themselves outside their familial home, even after they have become pregnant or left school.

Addressing inequitable gender norms

Ameliorating inequitable gender norms could reduce child marriage, as shown in Figure 1. Adolescents, their parents and their communities need gender-transformative programs to enhance the value of girls and women. This could include open conversations about girls' aspirations and how inequitable gender norms prevent girls from reaching their goals. Gender-transformative programs are needed in schools to address inequitable attitudes by teachers and administrators, as well as by the students themselves . An example of an effective evidence-based program from India that could be adapted to these settings is the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) program, which has been evaluated to show improvements in gender norms and relationships among girls and boys.[46] In addition, the SASA! program, implemented and evaluated among adults in communities in Uganda, could be adapted to address gender norms at the community level in Kenya and Zambia that perpetuate child marriage.[47]

Conclusion

The findings presented here confirm that adolescent girls in diverse communities of Kenya and Zambia face many of the same challenges as girls in areas where more evidence about child marriage exists, in deciding when and whom to marry, in achieving their aspirations and in feeling supported by their parents and communities.

However, the pathways to child marriage, and therefore the types of interventions that could be used to interrupt those pathways, are contextually-specific. Innovation and adaptation of existing programs will be necessary to meet the unique needs of adolescent girls, their families and communities in Kenya and Zambia. Furthermore, our findings echo the importance of the Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing's recommendation to guarantee and support "access to free, quality secondary education" as the "single best investment for health and wellbeing" for all adolescents, as well as addressing barriers to access to health care, and in particular, family planning information and methods.[27]

While the information shared through this study provided, in many cases, a fraught picture of life for young girls in these communities, the common understanding that child marriage is not desirable for girls, or for their communities, provides a platform for engagement, adaptation of existing programs and developing new, contextually-relevant programs to address these drivers of early marriage.

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