

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

New Findings on Child Marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa



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Abstract

Despite increasing global attention and commitments by countries to end the harmful practice of child marriage, each year some 15 million girls marry before the age of 18. The preponderance of the evidence produced historically on child marriage comes from South Asia, where the vast majority of child brides live. Far less attention has been paid to child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa, where prevalence rates remain high. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) recently conducted research in Kenya, Senegal, Uganda, and Zambia to contribute to greater understanding of the drivers of child marriage in each of these contexts. Synthesizing findings from 4 diverse countries provides a useful opportunity to identify similarities and differences, as well as understandings that may be applicable to and helpful for preventing child marriage across these and other settings.

Across the 4 countries, ICRW's research echoes the existing literature base in affirming that child marriage is rooted in inequitable gender norms that prioritize women's roles as wives, mothers, and household caretakers, resulting in inadequate investments by families in girls' education. These discriminatory norms interact closely with poverty and a lack of employment opportunities for girls and young women to perpetuate marriage as a seemingly viable alternative for girls. We found in the African study sites that sexual relations, unplanned pregnancy, and school dropout often precede child marriage, which differs from much of the existing evidence on child marriage from South Asia. Further, unlike in South Asia, where family members typically determine the spouse a girl will marry, most girls in the Africa study settings have greater autonomy in partner choice selection. In Senegal, increasing educational attainment and labor migration, particularly by young women, has contributed to reduced rates of child marriage for girls.

Our findings suggest that improving gender equitable norms and providing more—and more equitable—opportunities for girls, particularly with regard to education and employment, are likely to improve child marriage outcomes. Providing comprehensive sexuality education and youth-friendly reproductive health services can reduce rates of early pregnancy that contribute to child marriage. Finally, identifying ways in which to improve communication between parents and adolescent daughters could go far in ensuring that girls feel valued and that parents feel heard as they make decisions together regarding the lives and opportunities of these adolescent girls.

KEY WORDS adolescents, child marriage, early pregnancy, gender norms, sub-Saharan Africa.

Funding for the Uganda study was provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (Grant #12-101957-000-INP). Funding for the Senegal study was provided by UNICEF—West and Central Africa Regional Office (Grant #43155839). Funding for the Kenya and Zambia studies, as well as the combined analysis of findings, was provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation (Grant #2014-40569).

All authors had access to the data. SP drafted the manuscript and prepared the final version. M.S., N.S.F., K.S., and A.G. contributed with substantial input. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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INTRODUCTION

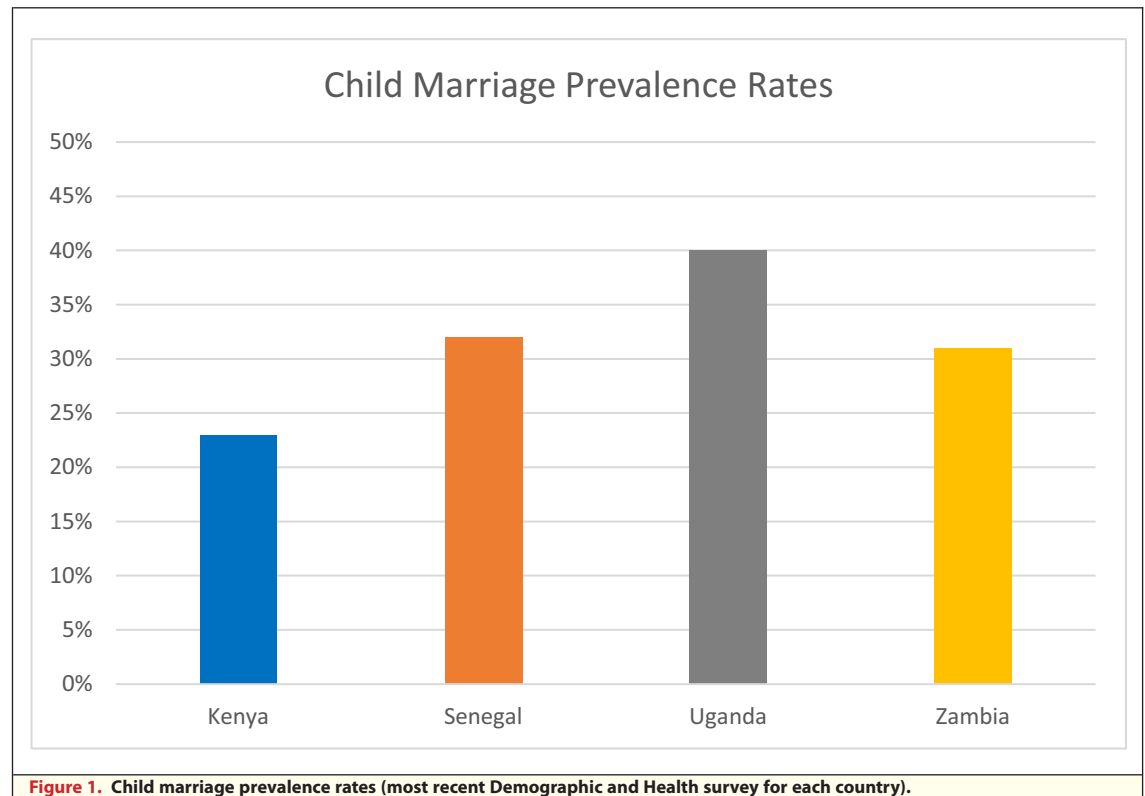
Child marriage is defined as any legal or customary union involving a boy or girl younger than the age of 18.¹ Although some boys marry as children, the practice primarily affects girls. Recent data indicate that 1 in 3 women currently aged 20-24 in the developing world has married before the age of 18, and an estimated 15 million girls under 18 marry each year.² Child marriage is not isolated to any geographic region or defined by any culture or religion. It takes place in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, and Brazil, and Niger, Nicaragua, and Nepal. Although the largest total number of child brides resides in South Asia, the majority of countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage^[1] in the world are in sub-Saharan Africa.³

In the 4 study countries, child marriage prevalence rates range from 23% in Kenya to 40% in Uganda (Fig. 1).^[2]

The median age at marriage has increased across Africa in recent decades, but there has been markedly uneven progress and considerable variation

between and within countries. Senegal is a positive outlier, having seen the median age at marriage for girls increase quite significantly in the past 2 decades, from 16.2 to 19.8 years of age. Kenya's rate of change is just under half of Senegal's, with age at marriage increasing from 18.8 to 20.2 years over this time. Both Zambia and Uganda have seen far slower shifts, with the median age at which girls marry increasing by less than a year each (Fig. 2).

The slow pace of progress in ending child marriage is concerning for many reasons. First, child marriage is a violation of girls' basic human rights, including their rights to physical and mental health and well-being; to education, equality, and nondiscrimination; and to live free from violence and exploitation, including slavery and servitude; among others. Child marriage places girls at increased risk of early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, because married girls typically have limited ability to influence decision-making about condom or contraceptive use.⁴⁻⁶ Women who marry as children tend to have lower levels of knowledge about HIV and AIDS than do those who marry later, as



^[1]Child marriage prevalence rate is defined as the percent of women aged 20-24 years old who were married before the age of 18.

^[2]All figures derived from StatCompiler (Measure DHS), using data from 1992-2015.

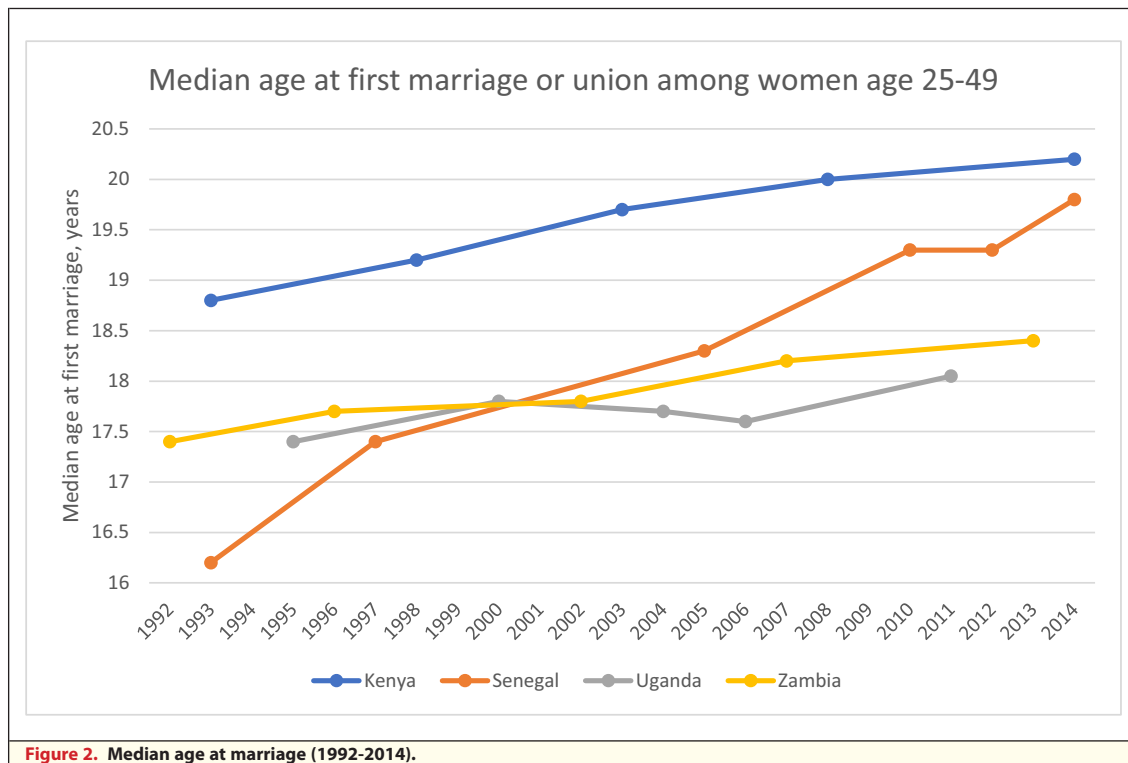


Figure 2. Median age at marriage (1992-2014).

well as higher risk of HIV infection, because they often marry men who are more sexually experienced and with whom they do not have the agency to negotiate condom use.⁵ Girls may be expected to prove their fertility early in a marriage,^{6,7} and they tend to have children not only earlier than unmarried girls but also more often over their lifetime.⁴ Findings from a recent study by ICRW and the World Bank indicate that, across 15 countries, child marriage increases total fertility rates by 0.25-1.1 children per woman and that eliminating child marriage could reduce total fertility rates up to 20% in some countries.⁴

Child marriage also has significant implications for children born to child brides. The same ICRW/World Bank study suggests that children born of mothers younger than age 18 are, on average across 15 countries, 3.5 percentage points more likely to die by the age of 5 than children born of older mothers and 6.3 percentage points more likely to be stunted. In Uganda, for example, ending child marriage and associated childbirths would reduce the predicted death rate for under-5 children from 6.58% to 6.31% and the rate of stunting for children under 5 from 33.6% to 32.6%. Although marginal at the national level, these changes could save and improve many thousands of children's lives.

Although some parents, and even girls, may believe that marriage will protect girls from sexual harassment and violence, married girls are in fact subject to more physical or emotional violence within their household than their unmarried counterparts.^{2,5,8} Evidence regarding mental health is limited, but some research finds that women who marry as children are more likely to experience depression and suicidal thoughts and behavior than are those who marry later.^{9,10} At the same time, because of limited educational, employment, and civic engagement opportunities, married girls are often limited in their ability to contribute economically to their families and to participate more widely in their communities and societies.^{1,11}

OBJECTIVES

Although child marriage has long existed, there has been a welcome increase in recent years in recognition globally and in many affected countries of the harms of the practice, alongside greater political, donor, programmatic, and research attention to the issue. The inclusion of ending child marriage as a target in the Sustainable Development Goals, the high-profile 2014 UK-UNICEF Girl Summit, the exponential growth of the global Girls Not Brides civil society network

to now more than 700 organizations in 90 countries, and increased donor funding for research and programmatic interventions are some examples of this increased attention. But although the evidence base regarding child marriage has grown, important gaps remain.

In 2013, the World Health Organization convened a group of experts to discuss priority areas for research on child marriage.¹² Among the research priorities identified were the following:

- *Intra- and intercountry differences in child marriage prevalence and trends:* The experts called for more specific analyses to address diversity regarding geography, ethnicity, religion, education, and socioeconomic status, among other things.
- *Consequences of child marriage:* Child marriage is closely associated with early childbearing (some 90% of births to adolescents globally take place within the context of child marriage),¹³ and the evidence base regarding the impacts of child marriage on reproductive, neonatal, and child health is expanding. Less well understood are the consequences of the practice in terms of mental health and interpersonal violence and on issues related to broader social, development, and gender equity outcomes.
- *Effective ways in which to prevent child marriage:* A systematic review of interventions conducted by ICRW in 2011 provides some evidence regarding “what works” to stem the practice,¹⁴ but the experts noted the relatively small number of rigorous evaluations from a limited number of countries included in this review and called for more attention to how best to respond to different drivers of child marriage in diverse settings, as well as how best to scale up effective programs.
- Most importantly for the present analysis, the experts pointed to a need for a greater understanding of the *drivers of child marriage* across diverse settings.

Indeed, to develop context-specific interventions to prevent and respond to child marriage, we need better information about the causes and consequences of the practice in specific and diverse contexts and settings. This synthesis of findings from 3 different research studies in sub-Saharan Africa aims to provide such evidence.

METHODS

We present findings from 3 distinct research projects undertaken by ICRW researchers between 2013 and 2016 in 4 countries for which the evidence base regarding the drivers of child marriage is currently somewhat limited.

In Kenya and Zambia, we undertook qualitative research, including 16 focus group discussions (FGDs), 55 in-depth interviews (IDIs), and 17 key informant interviews (KIIs) in rural and peri-urban sites. The study took place in Kisumu County, Kenya, in partnership with the Kenya Medical Education Trust, and Central Province of Zambia, alongside Plan Zambia. This study, funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, was designed with a deliberate focus on understanding the factors that promote and prevent child marriage.¹⁵

In Uganda we used mixed-methods research to generate a better understanding of the role of adolescent pregnancy in persistent gender gaps in school attainment and dropout in 2 districts in the West Nile subregion of Northern Uganda.^{3,16} The study was conducted in partnership with the Federation of African Women Educationalists-Uganda and funded by the MacArthur Foundation. We administered a face-to-face survey to 805 girls ages 14-18 using a multistage, stratified design. In addition, qualitative data were collected from men and women in the study sites across 2 generations through 16 FGDs, 40 IDIs, and 10 KIIs.

In Senegal we undertook an in-depth qualitative study, engaging with 79 participants, including young women, parents of either married or unmarried daughters, and men in urban Dakar and in Niakhar, a rural area in the Fatick region of the country. A total of 13 FGDs, 22 IDIs, and 13 KIIs were conducted. This study aimed to explicate the factors driving the sharp decline in child marriage rates seen in the country in recent years. This was complemented by analysis of existing datasets to identify core drivers, trends, and relationships between child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Senegal, as well as across West and Central Africa. The study was funded by and undertaken in partnership with UNICEF's West and Central Africa Regional Office.¹¹

RESULTS

Synthesizing findings from 3 studies in 4 diverse country contexts provides a useful opportunity to

¹³We note that, although this region has been affected by conflict, the studies included in this paper were not deliberately designed to build on the growing evidence base regarding the effects of conflict, natural disasters, humanitarian crises, and so on.

identify similarities and differences, as well as understandings that may be applicable to and helpful for preventing child marriage across these and other settings. Following are some of the key findings:

- Sexual activity among unmarried adolescents is common.** In all 4 African study contexts, but less so in Senegal, we found that sexual activity among unmarried adolescent girls is—and has historically been—less closely associated with marriage as compared with other regions, particularly South Asia. As seen in Figure 3, a significant proportion of sexual activity among 15-19-year-old girls in Uganda, Kenya, and Zambia takes place before marriage. Although the median age of marriage has increased sharply over time in Senegal, the median age at first sex has not risen quite as fast, suggesting higher rates of premarital sex among girls and young women here than in the past. These data are

confirmed through our qualitative research, where we found parents lamenting the change in culture and tradition that permits sex before marriage, as expressed by a father who told us: “You know these days, we see everything—girls who are pregnant outside of marriage, divorced women, men who no longer want to get married, even women! It’s nonsense. Marriage is not what it used to be.”

- Gendered expectations of exchange in relationships can place girls at higher risk of pregnancy, HIV, and child marriage.** Premarital relationships are often structured by the same widespread gendered expectations as marital relationships: men are expected to provide material and financial support to their partners, and in exchange, women should provide domestic and sexual services.¹⁷ These expectations, together with women’s unequal access to economic resources and livelihood opportunities, mean that sexual relationships are

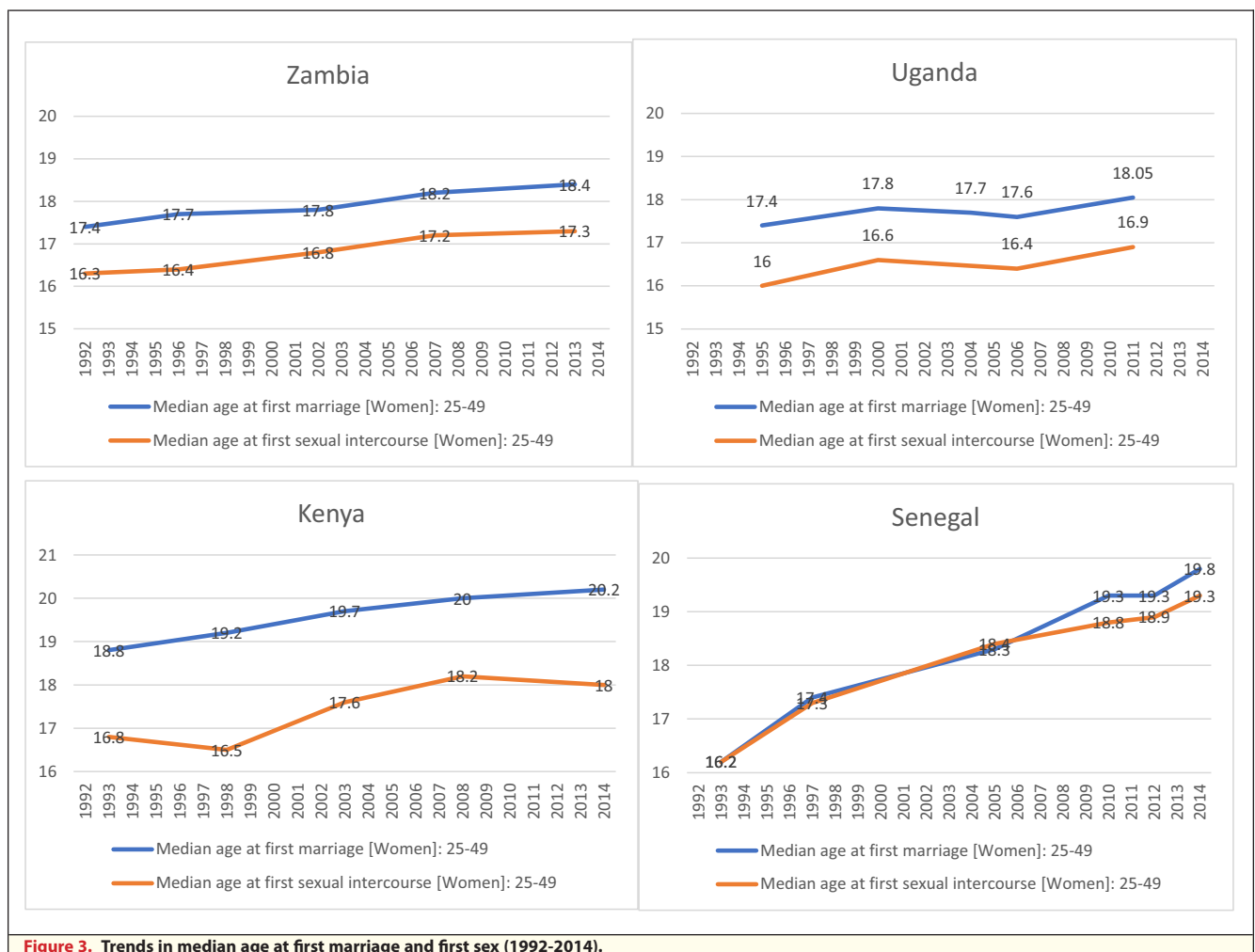


Figure 3. Trends in median age at first marriage and first sex (1992-2014).

among a limited number of ways that adolescent girls can access money or materials. Indeed, in all 4 study sites, girls engaged in sexual relationships with men or boys as a way of obtaining financial or material support. In Kenya and Zambia, girls spoke of getting lotions, perfumes, or money for such necessities as sanitary napkins from their boyfriends, whereas in Senegal, girls and young women in urban settings engage in a practice that is now commonly known as *mbaraan*, wherein they obtain money for either material resources or for savings that some use to pursue an education prior to marriage. In the context of communities with highly limited access to comprehensive sexuality education and youth-friendly reproductive health services, including contraception, sexual activity very often leads to pregnancy, and particularly in Kisumu, which has the highest prevalence of HIV in Kenya, places girls at high risk of HIV infection.

- **Pregnancy is a major driver of child marriage and is highly correlated with school dropout.** These studies provide solid evidence of the very complex interrelationships among pregnancy, school dropout, and child marriage for girls in sub-Saharan Africa. The Uganda study was deliberately designed to elucidate the temporality of these 3 events, and there we found that pregnancy is nearly as likely to be a cause as a consequence of dropout—it follows dropout as often as it precedes it. For girls in all the study sites who become pregnant while in school, dropout is nearly universal, a reflection of policies or norms that proscribe school retention for pregnant girls. Both social stigma and limited parental and financial support for girls once they become pregnant contribute to high rates of child marriage in the study communities. In the Senegal study sites, girls and young women had good knowledge of and access to contraception, which very likely contributed to delayed marriage, because, according to one young woman, “Today, young people can be sexually active without the risk of the woman getting pregnant. They avoid a lot of marriages that way.” This was most decidedly not the case in the other countries of study, however, where girls had extremely limited access to information and services that could meet their sexual and reproductive health needs, including contraception. In large part, these limits were enforced or reinforced by parents and community leaders who opposed such information and services, believing that if girls had such access, they would become more promiscuous.
- **Limited economic opportunities for girls and women make early marriage a viable option.** Although economic hardship was found to drive sexual

activity, perhaps at an earlier age than would otherwise be the case, an absence of viable economic opportunities for girls and young women also contributed to child marriage, particularly for poorer girls. This dynamic played out particularly in Uganda, Kenya, and Zambia, where girls dropped out of school in many cases because they or their parents did not see practicable employment opportunities for them that would result from their education. In the more gender-inequitable societies of rural Uganda, Zambia, and Kenya, traditional gender roles position men as the family breadwinner and often preclude women from working in the formal economy (where those opportunities exist) or from being independently economically productive in the informal economy, because many must first meet the demands of their roles as wives and mothers and confront gender norms in agricultural ownership or land inheritance practices, for example. Women’s economic dependence on men in the context of such gender inequality thus implicitly encourages child marriage. According to a social worker in our Kenya study site, “Some ladies will get into marriage as a source of survival. They know eventually they will find their meals and everything, so this is generating child marriage.”

- **The costs of investing in education are too high for many parents of girls.** ICRW’s findings echo the literature base: in all 4 countries, formal education is highly correlated with delayed marriage. Particularly in the more urban study settings, girls recognized the need to obtain a formal education in order to be competitive in pursuing paid employment and viable careers. However, secondary and tertiary education are not free in these countries, and with limited financial resources, even as parents increasingly understand the importance of education and even express a desire to educate their daughters, they are choosing—whether intentionally or not—to prioritize boys’ education over that of girls. In Uganda, a key driver of school dropout was that families continued to emphasize girls’ household domestic chores and responsibilities, often to the detriment of their schooling. Girls who had dropped out of school were more likely to indicate that domestic chores had limited their ability to attend school. Indeed, in all the study sites, girls face a heavier burden of household responsibilities than boys do, as explained by an 18-year-old girl in Adjumani: “I used to do (household work) while my brother went to school without having to do anything first. I would reach school late and find the teacher already in class.” In this, one of

the more extreme cases we found, the unequal burden of household chores led the girl's academic performance to decline and her parents to stop paying her school fees, which, combined with an unintended pregnancy, forced her to drop out of school at 16. Alternatively, our study in Senegal found that increasing formal education for girls was a significant contributor to the country's overall increase in the age of marriage for girls and also contributed to girls' empowerment and their ability to negotiate their aspirations. (Senegal also has stronger laws, known as "la parité," aimed at promoting and protecting women's rights.)

- **Girls want alternatives to marriage.** In all study sites, girls indicated their strong interest in remaining in or returning to school and obtaining meaningful employment. In Kenya and Zambia, not one of the unmarried girls aged 15-17 who were interviewed indicated they wanted to marry before the age of 18; in fact, the median desired age of marriage shared by these girls was 25 years in Zambia and 27.5 years in Kenya. These desires stand in sharp contrast to the realities of their countries, where roughly 4 in 5 girls are married by the age 25. In Uganda, 81% of girls who had dropped out of school expressed an interest in returning if given the opportunity. Here, as well as in Kenya and Zambia, however, it was clear to girls that once they were married, pregnant, or parenting, this was a nearly impossible goal because of restrictive or discriminatory policies, stigma, and shame associated with early childbearing and the pure burden of household responsibilities.
- **Conceptions of childhood and adolescence are shifting to reflect changing norms and behaviors—and parents are generally not pleased.** As it is globally, adolescence in the 4 study countries is just coming to be understood as a distinct phase of life through which children transition to adulthood. Historically, the physiobiological changes that accompany puberty, such as breast development and the onset of menses, signaled the end of childhood, readiness for marriage and reproductive roles, and initiation into adulthood. With increasing attention to the importance of formal education (for both girls and boys), a growing recognition of the concepts of child rights and gender equality, and, in some cases, explicit recognition of the harms of child marriage (as communicated by media or government-led campaigns, as in the case of Zambia), adolescence is increasingly recognized as a discrete time between childhood and adulthood, during which children should be allowed

to grow and mature into young adults. This shift, along with a growing understanding by adolescents, parents, and community leaders of adolescents' rights to make individual choices and decisions, does not necessarily sit well with all, including parents who perceive an erosion of their control over their children. A parent in rural Kenya told us,

"...the child knows 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... But right now, the respect has gone down in this system in which we are seeing our youths of today."

And a mother in Zambia said,

"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."

- **Bridewealth is becoming less relevant, though in Senegal, rising bridewealth may be contributing to increased age at marriage.** Unlike in South Asia, where a girl's family typically pays a dowry to the groom's family, in most sub-Saharan African contexts, the opposite occurs—it is the groom's responsibility to pay the parents of the bride, and he is expected to establish a residence and be able to care for a new family before marriage. In our study in Senegal, we found that inflation of bridewealth, combined with economic insecurity, has contributed to men's inability to afford marriage, which has, in turn, contributed to delays in marriage. In the West Nile region of Uganda, although marriage involving bridewealth is still considered ideal, formal negotiated bridewealth has become increasingly rare. In Kenya, Zambia, and Uganda, we found evidence that elopements or marriages forced by pregnancy are expanding, and the bridewealth being paid may include a premium for "damages" (a euphemism for premarital sex resulting in pregnancy).
- **Internal migration is contributing to delayed marriage in Senegal.** In Senegal, migration by girls and young women from economically insecure rural to urban areas for education or work served to provide young women with greater autonomy than in the past because they are now able to gain a measure of financial independence and find alternatives to marriage. This migration and the

subsequent increase in female education and formal employment is effectively raising standards for eligible husbands, contributing to increases in the age of marriage for both women and men as a result of a marriage squeeze that works both ways: It reduces the number of women available to marry but also the number of eligible men, as young women express a preference to marry more educated men.

DISCUSSION

Although the studies reviewed here each found nuanced and context-specific reasons for girls to be married before the age of 18 in diverse regions of Kenya, Senegal, Uganda, and Zambia, there are several commonalities that enable the perpetuation of this harmful practice. As we find in the literature on child marriage globally, so too in these sub-Saharan settings do we see that poverty and gender inequality work precariously in tandem to allow the practice to endure.

In the different contexts of our study, as in many other parts of the world where child marriage is prevalent, girls are viewed as an economic burden because their low status and a dearth of viable economic opportunities prevent them from earning wages that can provide them with a level of independence outside of marriage. As a result, although parents may not make the decision to marry off their daughters as often they did in the past—or as remains common in parts of South Asia today, for example—they do often choose to stop paying for the costs of girls' education. Further, in several of our study contexts, girls themselves recognize the fact that there exist few opportunities for them outside of motherhood, marriage, and domestic caretaking responsibilities and thus become resigned to the fact that continuing their education is not a viable option. At the same time, however, remaining in school is highly protective in terms of child marriage. Being in school allows girls to continue to be seen as the children they are, rather than as "marriageable" young women by community members. Schooling provides girls with hard skills that can be applied throughout life and with soft skills that enable them to learn, listen, negotiate, and engage meaningfully beyond their families.

Overcome Barriers to Education. Given these findings, it is critical to ensure access by girls to both primary and secondary school in order to improve their health, economic, and relationship outcomes. Truly free secondary education, which may require

cash transfers and support for transportation and essential school supplies, has been reported to overcome financial barriers to education.¹⁸ Providing sanitary napkins, underwear, and clean and safe sanitary facilities can also help overcome barriers to girls' education after puberty. Given the real or perceived violence, harassment, and intimidation that many girls face in or on their way to and from school, ensuring that girls are safe when going to school is also essential. Shifting gender norms such that girls are not disproportionately subject to household chores can help girls continue and succeed in their education. Finally, policies that enable pregnant and parenting girls to remain in or return to school can lower barriers many girls face to education.

Provide Opportunities for Out-of-School Girls to Support Themselves Financially. Although urban Senegal is an outlier in this regard, the findings from the other settings indicate that out-of-school girls are largely unable to support themselves financially, leading them to rely on their families, boyfriends, or husbands. This financial dependence is one reason girls become sexually active and are then exposed to the risk of pregnancy that leads, in almost all cases, to marriage. Breaking this cycle of dependency by providing alternate opportunities for girls to support themselves would remove an incentive to engage in early sexual activity, thereby reducing the likelihood of adolescent pregnancy and, ultimately, child marriage. Such economic opportunities could also help break the progression from pregnancy or school dropout (or dropout to pregnancy) to marriage by providing girls with an alternate means of supporting themselves even if they are outside their familial home and even after they have become pregnant or left school. There are some promising examples, such as the Safe and Smart Savings and *Filles Eveillées* programs, but further intervention research is needed to identify just what these opportunities might look like and how effective and cost-effective they are.^{19,20}

Improve Intergenerational Communication and Support by Parents and Families. These studies draw attention to the poor communication and lack of support experienced by both girls and their parents, particularly as norms and expectations around childhood and adolescence shift. The challenges faced by parents in sub-Saharan Africa in understanding and guiding their children through adolescence are not unique, and they are not surprising, given that adolescent girls and boys experience great emotional shifts, are "hard-wired" to seek independence, and often seek out conflict during and once through

puberty.²¹ However, many 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 supporting their children, coping with conflict, and improving communications as their sons and daughters transition into adulthood are needed. This must include strategies designed to help parents to understand and meet the needs of adolescents for both independence and support, as well as helping parents identify and counter the gender norms and resulting inequities their children may face. Here again, piloting interventions and documenting their impact and cost would be a useful contribution to the literature and programmatic evidence base.

Address Barriers to Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Family Planning Access. Despite the significance of pregnancy as a driver of child marriage in our study settings and a preponderant evidence base regarding the importance of providing adolescents with access to sexual and reproductive health information and services,²² such access was extremely limited, particularly in Kenya, Zambia, and Uganda. Our research indicated that many parents and community leaders view providing sexuality education and reproductive health services to adolescents as encouraging promiscuity, thus posing a barrier to their expansion. To the extent that providing such information and services in schools, in communities, and for parents and guardians could be conveyed to these gatekeepers as effective measures for preventing child marriage (by preventing the early pregnancies that lead girls to marry), this may be a way to overcome this barrier. Indeed,

when ICRW presented the study findings to community leaders in Kisumu, Kenya, this point seemed to resonate quite positively.

Tackle Inequitable Gender Norms. The studies suggest a need to understand and tackle child marriage within highly gendered contexts and to transform the ways in which girls and boys, men and women, are valued in their societies. Gender-transformative interventions could include, for example, mass media or community-, school-, or group-based programs and engaging norm setters, such as parents, teachers, and community leaders, to recognize and confront gender-inequitable attitudes and actions. The Population Council's *Berhane Hewan* and *Biruh Tesfa* programs in Ethiopia, ICRW's Gender Equitable Movement in Schools in South and Southeast Asia, and Amref's Alternative Rites of Passage Program in Kenya and Tanzania are a few examples of such programs.

CONCLUSIONS

This set of studies contributes to the evidence base regarding child marriage by synthesizing research across 4 diverse country contexts in sub-Saharan Africa. In all 4 countries, we found that inequitable gender norms and economic insecurity contribute to a cycle of unintended pregnancy, school dropout, and child marriage, particularly for girls living in poverty. The example of Senegal, which has experienced steep increases in the age of marriage over the past 2 decades, demonstrates that educating girls, providing women with economic opportunities, and providing access to sexual and reproductive health information and services can provide a path forward toward the goal of ending child marriage in a generation.

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