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# Taking choice seriously: Emic understandings of decision-making about child marriage

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the international community has increasingly directed its attention to reducing the prevalence of child marriage, which is defined as marriage before the age of 18. Child marriage has been shown to disproportionately affect young women in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, and to have a range of adverse health impacts, particularly for women. This special issue demonstrates empirically the complexity of drivers of child marriage, contributing to emic understandings of the circumstances in which families and young women consider an early marriage the most secure pathway. The special issue calls for moving beyond girls and families as sites of intervention, and beyond programmatic emphases on individual choice and ‘tradition.’

In this introductory article, we draw attention to the consequences of the exclusive focus on negative consequences of child marriage, arguing that this (a) obscures the complexity of the structural issues driving child marriage, (b) hinders developing understanding of (perceived) positive outcomes of a marriage before the age of 18, such as (short-term) physical and economic security, and (c) forms an impediment to efforts to identify alternatives to child marriage which can produce similarly

positive—and more long-term—results. Rather than departing from the premise that certain choices are better than others, we call for research and interventions that seek to understand and respond to the broader context in which choices are made.

**Key words:** Child marriage, gender, emic understandings, choice, securities

## I. Introduction

Writing about the impact of economic restructuring on poor communities, and particularly on young women of color, Rosen (2012) describes young women as ‘the proverbial canary in the coalmine,’ arguing that their fate is seen to ‘[prefigure] the troubles that lie ahead.’<sup>1</sup> In important ways, this relationship between young women’s fate and (the prevention of) ‘troubles’ underpins efforts to improve women’s access to health care, education, and the formal labor market, including in the field of international development. Sustainable development and economic growth in turn are widely regarded as contingent on young women’s health and educational attainment. Illustrative of this conception is the language of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) wherein the empowerment of women and girls is framed as crucial to ‘progress across all the goals and targets’ (UN, 2015: 10). The SDG document goes on to emphasize the critical importance of ‘the systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the Agenda,’ and dedicates a separate goal (SDG5) to achieving ‘gender equality and empower[ing] all women and girls.’ As Cold-Ravnkilde et al. (2018) observe, while research indicates that development organizations may not be up to the complex task of achieving gender equality, the espousal of global gender norms is increasingly regarded as a litmus test for such organizations.

Within the broader arena of global policy-making to attain gender equality, the practice of child marriage occupies a special place and forms the focus of this special issue. Child marriage is globally defined as a marriage entered into when one or both spouses are under the age of 18 (UNGA, 1979). In international development circles, child marriage is increasingly

recognized in terms of violation of fundamental rights to education, health, and freedom from violence, and particularly those of women and girls (GnB, 2014). Furthermore, under human rights law, child marriage constitutes a form of gender-based violence (UN CEDAW, 2017). To ensure the attainment of ‘full maturity and capacity to act’ and recognize the ‘important responsibilities’ marriage entails, the international community established 18 years as the minimum age of marriage (UN CEDAW, 1994: 7).

Most child marriages occur in sub-Saharan Africa, where 35 per cent of young women reportedly marry before the age of 18, followed by South Asia, where data show that 30 per cent marry before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2020). While both young women and men around the world marry before the age of 18, child marriage continues to disproportionately affect young women (UNICEF, 2019). The practice is associated with school dropout, teenage pregnancy, maternal mortality, unattained potential, and more broadly, with intergenerational poverty (UNFPA, 2012; UNICEF, 2018). In addition to these concerns, the possible impacts of early marriage on young women and men’s emotional and mental well-being receive growing attention (Koster et al., 2019; WHO, 2012). As such, high rates of child marriage, like gender inequality more broadly, are regarded as an impediment to development. In recent years, the importance of ending child marriage has gained considerable traction, the SDGs reserving a separate target geared at ‘eliminat[ing] all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage [...]’ (UN, 2015: 22).

The body of feminist scholars and activists critiquing development aid efforts to empower women and girls, including those geared to

'combating' child marriage, is steadily growing (Archambault, 2011; Boyden et al., 2012; Engle, 1992; MacDonald, 2015; Mohanty, 2003, 1988). The neoliberal underpinnings of conceptions of growth and progress, and attendant instrumentalization of gender equality, notions of individual responsibility and choice are central to this critique (see e.g., Calkin, 2015; Raju, 2005). Examining development programs such as Plan International's 'Because I'm a girl' initiative, MacDonald (2015), for example, contends that the assumption that development hinges on healthy educated families means that women's 'empowerment' initiatives place the onus of responsibility for economic progress on the shoulders of women and girls, given child care largely remains the women's remit. Esquivel (2016) argues along similar lines, maintaining that the SDGs do little to challenge (a) how inequalities are produced and reproduced through various institutions and processes at multiple levels, or (b) existing power relations between the Global North and South, within societies between haves and have-nots, between different men, and between men and women (p. 12).

This special issue builds on these critiques of postfeminist efforts to 'empower' women, with a focus on recent investments in preventing child marriage. It is important to note from the outset that in drawing on these critiques, it is not our purpose to minimize in any way the heightened risk of adverse short- and long-term health impacts of child marriage, particularly for young women (see e.g., Louie et al., 2009). Additionally, our critical reflection on development interventions builds on a recognition of the complexity of 'translating' academic research into actionable recommendations and concrete interventions. The purpose of this special issue is to contribute to debates on child marriage by offering an emic understanding of decision-making processes and choices of various sets of actors in different parts of the Global South. By shedding light on the complexity of structural drivers of child marriage, we hope to elicit

discussion on the limitations of mainly focusing on girls and families as sites of intervention, and of programmatic emphases on individual choice and countering harmful 'traditions.' The research presented in this special issue furthermore demonstrates the importance of moving beyond the view of child marriage as always and unvaryingly harmful, and to take seriously the choices young women and their families make. We argue that doing so will lead to greater understanding of the circumstances in which a marriage is deemed the right or best available choice. Such insight can be drawn on to identify viable alternatives to child marriage, specifically those that can produce different kinds of securities that a child marriage is expected to offer.

The remainder of this introductory article proceeds as follows. We begin by providing an overview of the special issue articles, all of which offer an analysis of the ways in which gender, sex, class, and caste can play out to increase child marriage in contemporary societies. Building on the empirical data presented in the papers in this special issue, we then engage with the structuring of choice by economic, political, and socio-cultural processes and institutions. Finally, we briefly reflect on the directions in conceptualizing choice offered by the contributors to this special issue, and the possibilities these generate for developing a more comprehensive approach to expanding young women's range of choices.

## **II. Overview of Contributions to the Special Issue**

The articles present rich empirical engagement with child marriage and emic understandings of notions of choice and decision-making—of caregivers, and young women and men—in contexts of poverty and insecurity, which tend to be characterized by a lack of access to services and (contraceptive) products. All contributions to the special issue focus on settings where prevalence rates of child marriage are high. Building on data derived from

a range of different study designs, including ethnographic case study (Van Raemdonck and De Regt), (large-scale) mixed method (Jones et al.; Miedema et al.), and qualitative design (Saul et al.; Horii), and a range of different theoretical tools, the authors of this special issue examine how choice and decision-making are understood within different contexts and how these understandings relate to development initiatives geared to young women's empowerment and tackling 'child marriage'. The author affiliations are equally diverse, ranging from researchers attached to bilateral agencies, research and academic institutions, and international development organizations in different parts of the world. In most cases, research conducted by academic and research institutions has been done within the framework of broader applied research programs geared to supporting policymakers and practitioners working in the field of child marriage.

The special issue opens with Grace Saul et al.'s article 'Voice Without Choice? Investigating Adolescent Girls' Agency in Marital Decision-Making in Niger,' which examines the context in which young women's understanding of their own agency evolves. Drawing attention to the emphasis placed on girls' obedience, parental and community approval, and the limited economic opportunities, particularly for women, in the four communities studied, the authors ask what it means for young women to have a 'choice'.

Next, Hoko Horii presents qualitative data gathered in Bali, Indonesia. Horii highlights the fundamental role that child marriage plays in response to out-of-wedlock pregnancies, which have been shown to constitute a key driver of child marriage worldwide (Greene et al., 2018). The author challenges the perspective that marriage at an early age is a 'traditional' practice. Framing child marriage in terms of 'tradition' arguably limits our abilities to understand that for many young people, particularly those with limited access

to accurate sexual and reproductive health-related knowledge and modern contraceptives, marriage constitutes a means to resolve the 'problem' of pre-marital unplanned pregnancies.

In 'Constrained choices: Exploring the complexities of adolescent girls' voice and agency in child marriage decisions in Ethiopia,' Nicola Jones and colleagues examine the patterning, drivers, forms, and impacts of child marriage in urban and rural settings in three different regions in Ethiopia: the highlands of Amhara, the lowlands of Oromia, and pastoralist Afar. The authors highlight the complex interplay of social norms, economic factors, and young women's capacity to exercise choice in the different settings, and the considerable variation that exists depending on individual, family, and community characteristics. Similar to Horii, Jones and colleagues article furthermore offers an important reminder that child marriage also affects many young men. These two articles thus contribute to the small body of literature on young grooms (see also Bowe, 2017). Jones et al. article clearly illustrates the limitations of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to prevent child marriage, an argument that returns in a very different setting in the subsequent article by An Van Raemdonck and Marina de Regt on child marriage among Syrian refugees in protracted displacement in Jordan. Drawing on a literature review of development agencies, conceptions of child marriage, and ethnographic research conducted in two cities in Jordan, the authors reflect on references to notions of 'culture' and 'civilization' in relation to child marriage. When development interventions are underpinned by an understanding of child marriage as indicative of a lack of civilization, Van Raemdonck and De Regt assert, the tendency is to fall back on 'old' development formulas of awareness raising, oftentimes geared to transmitting pre-defined normative messages regarding 'properly modern' families and women. Instead of a focus on transmitting messages, the authors call for a focus on dialogue and space for women's own perspectives, arguing that doing so may generate more adequate forms of support.

The final paper in the special issue similarly troubles the notion of choice, and, similar to contributors such as Van Raemdonck and De Regt, questions the development logic at work in responses to child marriage. In this final contribution, Esther Miedema and colleagues examine qualitative data gathered in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Senegal to reflect on the role of 'shame' and 'honor' in decisions regarding child marriage. Rather than drawing on the narrative of shame and honor as a competition between dominant men and subordinate women that underpins many development interventions, the authors conceptualize shame and honor as idioms through which gendered socio-economic inequalities are created and maintained. Doing so sheds further light on how marriage functions as a means to secure young women's social-economic future and highlights the limitations of emphasizing individual choice as a means to tackle child marriage.

### III. Taking Choice Seriously

A common thread running through the articles in this issue pertains to the rationales underpinning young women's (and, albeit less frequently, young men's) decision to marry young, and those of their caregivers, which complicate simplified conceptions of choice and 'informed' decision-making. Dichotomies of victims and violators, and of modernity and tradition, are frequently used in international development policies, including those geared at tackling child marriage. As the papers illustrate, a 'child marriage' may be decided on by caregivers and/or young people themselves. In most cases, these decisions are made in response to critical needs and pressures, some of which might be defined as contemporary, others as of all ages. Examples include teenage pregnancy in contexts where having a child out of wedlock presents very real risks to already precarious livelihoods (see e.g., Horii; Jones et al., this issue). The framing of child marriage as a primarily 'traditional' practice of which girls are 'victims'

is thus not helpful: the label of 'traditional' or 'girl as victim' forecloses an examination of what combination of factors and circumstances leads families and girls to opt for what seems like a 'traditional' choice.

As the various contributions show, in varying degrees, a young woman's respectability and marriageability are crucial in ensuring her as well as her families' socio-economic and political position and security in a community, particularly in contexts of poverty (see e.g., Saul et al.; Miedema et al., this issue). The apparent centrality of women's perceived respectability brings into sharp relief the relationships between sexuality, livelihoods, and development (Richardson et al., 2009). While marriage, gender equality, and sexuality continue to be regarded largely as 'women's issues,' the articles illustrate the need for more explicit attention to the linkages between sexuality, livelihoods, and poverty within research and (global) policymaking (see Harcourt, 2009; Jolly, 2000).

This special issue seeks to (a) shed light on complex structural factors and processes driving individual and household decisions on child marriage, and (b) initiate debate on alternative options for young women and families that could produce the kind of securities that child marriage may be expected to offer. We do so by recognizing the adverse impacts of child marriage on particularly young women's lives, livelihoods, and well-being, and thus, the clear imperative to address child marriage. The articles presented in this special issue contribute to debates in the field of international development by extending knowledge regarding meanings attached to child marriage, decision-making processes leading to child marriage, and specifically, families and young people's views of child marriage as a means of carving out more secure livelihoods and lives. As noted earlier, drawing on existing postcolonial feminist literature and the empirical data presented in this special issue, we argue that an exclusive focus on negative outcomes of child marriage within policies and programs is

counterproductive. Specifically, such a focus may mean that:

1. complex structural processes and drivers of child marriage are insufficiently addressed in programs;
2. positive outcomes of child marriage are overlooked, such as (short-term) social, physical, and economic security; and
3. too little is done to identify alternative arrangements that could generate the kinds of securities families and girls may seek, while mitigating the negative (longer-term) consequences (e.g., establishing delays between marriage agreements and co-habitation and/or childbearing, and creating necessary conditions for young women to pursue relevant educational and job opportunities)

With regard to the first issue, as Giaquin (2016) has noted, throughout much of the literature on child marriage, the family is seen as the central location where drivers of child marriage come together, with little analysis directed at the effects of higher-level sites, institutions, or developments, such as labor markets and states. As the various contributions illustrate, the broader context in which child marriage decisions are made needs to be attended to more carefully, which includes examining the role of higher-level sites and structures in producing the social inequalities and insecurities that constrain women's choice and propel child marriage practices. Historicized account is furthermore needed to understand continuities in gendered inequalities, and what kinds of changes have occurred when, and to the benefit of whom. Tackling child marriage thus also requires broad partnerships, which extend beyond the level of communities to include key actors in economic sectors, the domains of social protection, legal support, and law enforcement. Concerning the latter, emphasis on enforcement of legislation against child marriage has been found to drive the practice

underground (see e.g., Boyden et al., 2012). In referring to law enforcement, we argue for enforcement of legislation and protection against the forms of violence which may lead to child marriage, such as sexual harassment (see e.g., Kohno et al., 2020), and are more likely to occur when a woman marries at a young age, such as intimate partner violence (see e.g., Kidman, 2017; Yount et al., 2016).

Concerning the second issue, that is, the potentially positive outcomes of child marriage for young women and their families, the papers in this special issue offer a compelling addition to existing literature that shows that in many contexts, marrying young may be the better choice. These contexts include those where sexual violence may be common, where a woman's respectability forms a fundamental cornerstone of her future livelihood, where practicing safe(r) sex and planning pregnancies are complex achievements, particularly for unmarried women, and where there are few opportunities to apply formal education in livelihood strategies (see Chattopadhyay, 2015). A marriage may thus offer a young woman—temporary—respite from the precarity and violence she may face as a single young woman. Choices may thus be made in highly constrained settings.

A more focused analysis is required to understand when and how child marriage offers relief. Doing so will not only generate greater understanding under which circumstances marrying young constitutes the better alternative but can also—and this brings us to the third point raised above—open up the realm of possible policy and program responses. In other words, an open mind is required to identify, with young women, men, and their communities, the alternative means which could respond to gendered norms, poverty, and insecurities in different settings. At local levels, participatory methods geared to safely stimulating meaningful dialogue between different sets of actors would be critical to such efforts, both to generate greater understanding of women and men's lives and

struggles, and to identify actionable pathways to address challenges faced (Reid et al., 2006). In so doing, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers need to take the choices made by young women and their caregivers seriously, which requires looking beyond explanations in terms of 'tradition' or limiting sites of analysis to micro-levels. This form of analysis and response also requires the space to openly examine definitions of gender equality and emancipation underpinning policies and interventions, and where these build on and entrench colonial racialized logics. Ultimately, the question is whose interests are being served, when, where, and how.

As the papers in this special issue demonstrate, reproduction and sexuality constitute sites of political struggle regarding governance, gender roles, and generational relations. Participating in social change processes can thus entail risk for participants, particularly when they already occupy more marginalized position within society, and these risks need to be considered carefully in both research and interventions. To return to Rosen's analogy of the canary in the coalmine, rather than conceive young women's fate as foreshadowing 'troubles,' the logic needs turning around: it is structural 'troubles' that shape young women's constrained fate, wherein child marriage represents the best available option. As other authors have similarly argued, albeit in different contexts, rather than focus on 'troubled' youth or their families, greater responsiveness is needed to 'what is troubling' the young people or families in question, and how they cope with, and respond to, the 'troubles' they face (Parr, 2017; Smith, 2015). Meaningful analyses and interventions related to young women's choices cannot be emptied of broader questions concerning structural inequalities and violence at global, local, and intermediate levels, as these form the foundations for the kind and range of choices available to young women and their families.

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## Note

1. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2012/05/11/the-sexual-politics-of-poverty/>

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