

Summary: Child marriage, exploring choice and agency

Latest research, showcasing new perspectives on child marriage and its drivers

By: Linda Barry

Introduction:

On December 12th 2017, Share-Net Netherlands and Girls Not Brides the Netherlands, organized the expert meeting 'Child Marriage, Exploring choice and agency' where researchers shared the outcomes of the child marriage alliance baseline studies in Asia and Africa, with a focus on choice and agency.

During the first part of the meeting, researchers from the Her Choice-, More than Brides- and Yes I Do Alliance, shared the outcomes of their research, focusing their presentation on choice and agency. The second part of the meeting consisted of a "World Café", where participants had in-depth discussions in smaller groups, on 7 topics related to child marriage. More than 60 researchers, policy makers and practitioners had the opportunity to meet, exchange and dive deeper into the nuances of the underlying factors of child marriage.

Welcome by Jeroen den Tex on behalf of Kinderpostzegels

Managing Director at Kinderpostzegels

Jeroen den Tex welcomed the participants on behalf of the host Stichting Kinderpostzegels Nederland. "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. Only by collaborating can we address child marriage."

Opening by Ellen Travers

Head of the learning team Girls not Brides (GNB) Global Alliance

Although there is global progress in ending child marriage the number is not declining fast enough. We know what works on a small-scale but need to understand what works on the sub-national level as well. How do trends such as climate change affect child marriage. The GNB Learning team aims to build an understanding of how child marriage happens, and what needs to be done to address it, by sharing the latest research and evidence about what works, identifying and building consensus about solutions needed, and using this to support the work of members and partners.

The aim of this meeting is to discuss the importance of girls' choice and agency, based on presentations by three CM Alliance base line studies in Asia and Africa and interactive discussions in small groups called World Café's.

Presentation by Kees van Baar

The Netherlands Human Rights Ambassador

Kees van Baar emphasized the need for multi-actor and multi-sectoral approaches in the prevention of child marriage. The Worldbank/ICRW study on the economic impact of child marriage (June 2017) confirms that ending child marriage is not only the right thing to do but it is also a very smart thing to do in macro economic terms. It is necessary to jointly convince Ministries of education, finance and health that domestic budget should be made available for the prevention of CM as educated healthy girls benefit the entire society.

Gender inequality, poverty, lack of good information on the negative consequences of child marriage, cultural practices and safety issues are well known drivers for CM. We need to continue researching these CM drivers, as they are context specific. Sharing research results will provide more value and may give way to further analysis and interventions that will work. It is also important to constantly evaluate the effect and impact of interventions, what works and what does not. Provision of (secondary) education is important, but we also need to talk about sex. "We cannot talk about ending Child Marriage without Comprehensive Sexuality Education. Not only for girls, of course, but for all young people."

Research Presentations

[Contextualizing young women's choice and agency related to child marriage in five countries in West Africa – by Winny Koster and Esther Miedema \(Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research of the University of Amsterdam – Her Choice Alliance\)](#)

A choice is always made within a context and different levels of agency is always restricted to the context you are living in. Choice is not dependent but interdependent and our study explores the interdependencies that exist around 17-year-old adolescents choice to marry in 11 countries. The study found that choices of girls in four West African Countries (Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Ghana) are constrained by context of poverty, little decision-making space given by parents, low schooling, norm of marriage, and norm of pre-marital sexual abstinence. The highest restrictions for girls are seen in Mali. Agency of girls in all countries is thin (even if they make their own decision to marry): their actions are carried out in a restrictive context with few available alternatives. The question is not if to marry but "when" and "whom."

Being dragged into adulthood? Young people's agency around sex, pregnancy and marriage in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia — Maryse Kok Royal Tropical Institute, KIT – Yes I Do Alliance)

This study defines agency as the capacity of individuals to make purposeful choices and transform these into desired actions and outcomes within the social, cultural economic and political context specific to their daily lives. (Bell, 2011, p. 283). Thin and thick agency are about one's ability to access a number of different options and make choices based on that. The study found that girls have thin agency where they are perceived as an economic burden (a risky investment) and where there are not enough job opportunities or unfulfilling jobs. Girls have thick agency due to migration (makes them wanted for marriage), transactional sex/self-determination, stability and adulthood. When it comes to knowledge and information on sex, agency is very limited. There's a complex and dynamic relationship between teenage pregnancy and child marriage. Young people often take initiative in teenage pregnancy and marriage themselves, but make uninformed/misinformed decisions.

Opportunity Structures to Promote Voice and Choice — by Sajeda Amin (Population Council – More Than Brides Alliance)

What does choice look like (marriage as opposed to what else)? The drivers for girls to get married at different levels offer valuable insights on what choice and agency mean for programming. Within arranged marriages girls can have the opportunity to exercise agency over: partner selection, timing of marriage, bride price and dowry etc. You can drive a wedge in these elements but not in the concept of arranged marriage itself. Where alternative pathways exist, choice is more expansive (go to school instead of getting married). Where alternative pathways don't exist, choice is narrow (choice over partner characteristics).

World Café's summary

World Café	Challenges	Lessons Learned	Recommendations
Adolescent sexuality in relation to Child Marriage in Indonesia	Adolescents are taught abstinence only but the minute they get married they have to be 100% available and have children as soon as possible.	Teenage pregnancy is a big reason to get married in Indonesia.	Indonesia is a very diverse country. As such it is important to build in time and money contextualise research initiatives and programmes.
The Role of Community Bylaws in addressing Child Marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happens if the chief that signs the bylaw is choosing a girl as his next wife? • Who enforces / monitors the enforcement of the bylaw? 	Bylaws are not the starting point, but the end of the process of awareness raising campaigns with different actors reaching consensus which is formalized in a bylaw.	Focus not only on bylaws, also focus on strengthening on formal structures and addressing issues on the ground, having a multi-sectorial approach working with other partners.
Edutainment and Child Marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • local perspectives and practices encouraging child marriage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You need to co-create, conducive environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local respected and accepted people create the stories • Don't bombard people with messages
Examining the utility and ethics of universalist frames in child marriage research, policy and programmes (Will the real expert stand up)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is really local? • What does it mean to involve the local? • Power dynamics leading to people blindly follow the so-called expert. 	We are hung up on age. We need to look at the difference in ages girls get married. What is the difference between getting married at 12 vs. 17 vs. 18?	Local validation before and after research and implementation is necessary.

World Café	Challenges	Lessons Learned	Recommendations
Divorce after Child Marriage	Young girls are married and divorced often more than once at a young age, which makes them more vulnerable.	To talk about child marriage as an one-off event does not reflect the reality; it changes the whole discourse	Programs needed to target child marriage as a process, rescuing girls from child marriage may not help, if there are few other options.
Between Marriage and the Market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dowry increases when girls are older and more educated. • Early child birth limits the opportunities of girls. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth understanding is required of the local way of thinking and why parents see child marriage as the best future for their children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The costs calculation of girls needs to be changed through for instance nudges or career counselling. • We have to delay child birth through amongst others CSE.
Child Grooms? Towards broadening and nuancing understandings of child marriage using recent research from Nepal	The difficulties of engaging with a topic that is under represented and under researched in comparison to child brides.	The participants made the argument that mixed groups are harmful during a needs assessment stage of a programme, but are useful as a means of creating critical reflection and common ground between community members later.	More research into child grooms, and extending understandings of marriage, manhood, boys own motivations for early marriage, and societal roles and relationships between families, members of the opposite sex, and community.

Key Takeaways by the Dutch Youth Ambassador SRHR — Melodi Tamarzians

- We should place more attention on the role Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) can play in the prevention of child marriage. CSE may offer insightful perspectives in dealing with challenges of girls being perceived as a financial burden, not knowing enough, or not knowing the alternatives to child marriage.
- We should also give attention to child marriage happening in Europe. E.g. young Syrian refugees are being given away in arranged marriages to Syrians in Netherlands. Without knowing how things will play-out for the girls. CSE may also help with issues like these.
- Additionally, we should use the business model for the prevention of child marriage to induce governments to give budget for the prevention of child marriage and change perspectives that view girls as financial burdens.