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Letter to the editor

Multidimensional Measures are Key to Understanding Child, Early, and Forced Marriages and Unions

**Dear Editor:**

The COVID-19 pandemic could reverse decades of progress on gender equality and the rights of women and girls, including global efforts to prevent child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU). Estimates indicate that up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of marriage in the next decade as a result of the pandemic [1]. Even before the pandemic, very few countries were on course to end the practice of child marriage by 2030, which is one of the targets tracked as part of Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower women and girls.

In this context, the May 2021 article in the Journal of Adolescent Health, “20 years of the evidence base on what works to prevent child marriage: A systematic review” [2], is a timely attempt to identify interventions that are effective in preventing child marriage. However, we find many of the assumptions, main findings, and recommendations problematic. We echo the principal critique raised by Chandra-Mouli and Plesons [3] in their JAH Commentary: the review draws bold, sweeping conclusions from an evidence base that is currently too limited and insufficiently robust to inform policy and programmatic decisions. We concur therefore that “it is too early to change the entire orientation of programming for child marriage prevention” (p. 834).

We are concerned by the review’s conclusion (based on limited evidence) that multicomponent interventions are characterized by low rates of success and require reconsideration. As Malhotra and Elnakib state, these programs have multiple, interconnected goals including personal empowerment, changing social norms, and structural shifts (p. 848). Although the authors acknowledge these as important goals of child marriage programming, in their review programmatic “success” is limited to one indicator: delaying the age of marriage to 18. That sends a reductive and possibly misleading message.

Child marriage is a manifestation of gender inequality [4], and the patriarchal forces that drive control of girls’ and women’s sexuality and stymie their agency, autonomy, and decision-making do not disappear when a girl turns 18. For example, if a girl who participated in a program then enters marriage at age 18 against her own will, and if that marriage is an unequal, repressive, and violent relationship, the systematic review would still classify the intervention as successful. The same is true for a

girl forced to leave secondary school to get married at 18. Likewise, a program that results in a girl marrying after turning 18, without any increases in her mobility, decision-making over childbearing, or other matters would be categorized as a success by the criteria of this review. Thus, although age of marriage may provide a partial view into the lives of girls and women, it cannot *on its own* comprehensively capture whether or how the power dynamics that underpin CEFMU may be shifting to promote real empowerment.

A definition of programmatic success that centers exclusively on girls’ age at marriage ignores the root causes and drivers of CEFMU, which include norms that diminish women’s and girls’ value in society, regulate their sexuality [5], and limit their control over their own lives. Preventing CEFMU requires addressing these root causes through gender-transformative approaches that challenge these norms and unequal power within the family, communities, and institutions [6].

Programs that incentivize families to keep girls unmarried until age 18, such as the conditional cash transfers the review concludes to be among the most successful, might just delay the inevitable if they are not accompanied by gender-transformative interventions. For example, girls may get married once they turn 18 and the cash stops coming in, without any positive changes to their status or life options [7]. Furthermore, the pressures to show results can incentivize organizations and governments to pursue short-term, highly visible outcomes—like delay in marriage—with the risk that the fundamental structures of oppression remain untouched and other essential investments are not made. Interventions to prevent child marriage should be deliberate entry points for promoting empowerment, bodily autonomy, and equity.

We understand the appeal of an easy-to-tally indicator, but a problem as complex as child marriage requires multifaceted measurement approaches to determine program effectiveness [8]. This includes tracking changes in girls’ agency, mobility, decision-making, and life opportunities, as well as changes in the attitudes and practices of parents, community leaders, teachers, service providers, and others with influence over girls’ lives. Because interventions that take this approach can take more time to demonstrate results, measures reflecting incremental change are important to capture effectiveness.

Successful gender-transformative approaches require investment in research, particularly longitudinal studies, that

All authors are members of the Child, Early & Forced Marriage & Unions and Sexuality Working Group.

determine whether and how they promote lasting transformations in the unequal power structures and gender norms that systematically undermine the voice and power of women and girls. This multidimensional approach is more nuanced than a single age-of-marriage indicator, and key to generating a richer understanding of the processes required to promote girls' and women's empowerment and achieve gender equality. Recent initiatives like The Social Norms Atlas [9] have made great progress toward measuring changes in the social norms that sustain harmful practices such as CEFMU, and they provide opportunities to integrate more robust indicators and measures of success. Local women's rights and youth organizations often know the norms and challenges in their contexts [10] and may be best placed to lead gender-transformative interventions, yet they often lack the resources to evaluate their work [11]. These groups should have a voice in identifying and operationalizing what indicators of success should be tracked in future research.

Measures that track incidence and trends in child marriage at the global level are helpful signals of where we are moving in the aggregate. But as researchers, evaluators, and others work to promote effective interventions to advance girls' rights, we need to avoid the temptation to compress complex, multidimensional realities into convenient indicators that do not, on their own, capture meaningful, sustainable change. Furthermore, if we invest only in interventions that meet an age-of-marriage benchmark regardless of whether they achieve gender-transformative results, we risk a suboptimal allocation of resources away from many programs that are effective in advancing rights and equality.

As a global community, we must work together to better understand, measure the impacts of, and adequately resource interventions that address child marriage by shifting agency, decision-making, and power so all girls and women can reach their full potential.

Ana Aguilera, M.P.H.

*Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health
EngenderHealth
Washington, DC*

Sarah Green, M.Sc.

*Sexual Health and Rights, American Jewish World Service
New York City, New York*

Margaret E. Greene, Ph.D.

*GreeneWorks
Washington, DC*

Chimaraoke Izugbara, Ph.D.

*Global Health, Youth and Development
International Center for Research on Women
Washington, DC*

Erin Murphy-Graham, Ed.D

*University of California
Berkeley, California*

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