



Editorial

A Clear Message: Child Marriage Is a Significant Global Problem Requiring a Collaborative, Contextual, and Evidence-Based Response



With this issue comes a first for the Journal of Adolescent Health: a comprehensive review of child marriage throughout the world. The supplement begins with an editorial from the supplement's guest editors Muthengi, Olum, and Chandra-Mouli highlighting the magnitude of this public health and social challenge—globally, approximately 12 million girls are married before the age of 18 each year [1]. The editorial also clarifies that all of our data on child marriage are from pre-COVID-19 pandemic estimates where there was optimism about declining rates of child marriage globally.

Seven original manuscripts emphasize the unique contextual factors in each region of the world and the need to develop child marriage policies and programs that are responsive to each region [2–8]. An eighth paper raises an alarm about the projected impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriage [9]. In addition to these eight papers, three commentaries provide insight on the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium: Connecting Data and Evidence [10,11] and the critical importance of engaging young people in the development of preventive interventions [11]. A final commentary outlines the complexity of child marriage within the United States [12].

The first of the articles, by Psaki et al. [2] uses three case studies drawn from qualitative data in Bangladesh, Malawi, and Niger to develop a framework for understanding the core drivers of child marriage for girls: social norms and poverty, lack of agency and opportunity, and pregnancy/fear of pregnancy. Misunas et al. [3] build on Psaki's framework by identifying factors at the individual, household, and community level that influence child marriage in Burkina Faso and Tanzania. Within this framework, community norms that are unique to these countries play a strong role in determining outcomes [3]. Four of the papers in the supplement use data from married girls in Malawi, Zambia, and India to provide additional understanding of child marriage within the unique contexts of different regions [4–7]. Zahra et al. [4] report that in Malawi and Zambia, pregnancy before marriage has worse health outcomes than in India. Working with data exclusively from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, India, Raj et al. [5] identify the importance of progressive gender role beliefs in achieving safety in marriage through freedom of movement and digital connectivity. Tomar, in a further exploration of early child marriage in Niger, shows that older age at marriage is strongly correlated with increased participation in decisions related to economics. But these data also reveal low

satisfaction with their control over these decisions, leaving these girls with little agency over decision-making [6]. In a similar vein, Soler-Hampejsek et al. provide evidence of educational disparities in Malawi, with boys receiving 3 more years of education than girls. But even with this disparity, girls receiving 6 years of education increased their access to paid work [7]. The paper by Makino et al. uses data from a randomized controlled study in Bangladesh and Zambia to confirm the importance of local context: in Bangladesh providing academic skills training had a significant impact on discouraging child marriage, while in Zambia, providing an empowerment intervention and safe spaces for girls had a significant impact on delaying pregnancy [8].

The remaining original manuscript of this supplement looks forward to the projected impact of COVID-19 on child marriage rates in 5 countries with the largest burden of child marriage: Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, India, and Nigeria [9]. The findings present a bleak picture, with the number of excess child marriages in these countries ranging from 1.8 to 4.9 million. This elevated risk could last until 2035. It is important to remember that this projection represents data from only the 5 countries included, which account for just 50% of the child marriages in the world. These numbers need to be doubled to predict the true impact of the pandemic on child marriage.

Given the scale and intractability of the problem outlined in the supplement's original manuscripts, the supplement's commentaries provide valuable insights. The first commentary, by Reiss, focuses on child marriage in the U.S., where she reports that 300,000 children were married between 2000 and 2018, with trends on a downward slope. Data for this analysis are complicated because of state reporting mechanisms and the inability to get good data regarding age differences between the child and the male husband. The U.S. is further complicated by the differences among 56 states and territories regarding statutory rape laws [10].

The remaining 3 commentaries describe how the Child Marriage Learning Partnership came to fruition [11], other unique efforts to prevent child marriage, and the importance of engaging with young people in a meaningful way in order to sustain current and develop new initiatives. Efevbera and Petroni [11] highlight The Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium, which came together to deepen our understanding of the differences and similarities of child marriage throughout the world. In an effort to

avoid duplication and encourage collaboration, the Consortium brought together 7 organizations: Fraym, Girls Not Brides, the GIRL Center at the Population Council, Iris Group, UNICEF, Unchained at Last, and the University of California San Diego Center for Equity and Health. The Consortium created a continuous learning environment for collaboration among investigators using new methods while working with country-specific agencies and organizations of young people. A commentary by Chalasani et al. [12] brings our attention once again to the importance of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its goal of decreasing child marriage. Two relevant initiatives speak directly to this goal. The first is the Child Marriage Research to Action Network, which is similar to the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium in that it is an open platform for agencies and organizations to track progress and share what they have learned. The second is the Child Marriage Monitoring Mechanism, an effort led by UNICEF that “brings together international and regional organizations, civil society, and young people around a shared commitment to strengthening monitoring and accountability on ending child marriage” [12]. A fourth commentary recognizes the importance of engaging young people not only in dialog but also in the programmatic and research planning around child marriage. This engagement is having a profound impact on the current generation of adolescents and young adults. The 3 young women who have written this commentary were brought together by the Adolescent Girls Investment Plan youth network. Each of them provides an unique perspective: an 18 year old advocating for child prevention marriage laws in Guatemala, a 24 year old building child marriage prevention into medical training in Lithuania and beyond, and a 23 year old designing participatory research approaches to strengthen data collection and programming for married girls in a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan [13].

This unique supplement focused exclusively on child marriage expands our understanding of this critical public health and social challenge throughout the world by bringing together the work that was done by Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium over the last decade [11]. Four messages are either reaffirmed or enhanced by the articles presented in this supplement: first, context matters for prevention and intervention efforts. What works in one region may not work in another [1,2]. Second, we must tailor our responses to the local context, where different drivers in different settings will influence the success of interventions [1,3–8]. Third, young people (both girls and boys) must be engaged at all levels of our individual and collective efforts focused on preventing child marriage [13]. And fourth, the

COVID-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on child marriage in all segments of the globe, but it is disproportionately affecting families in Africa, Asia, and South America, which account for over 50% of child marriage throughout the world [9]. Given these clear messages, it is incumbent upon us to double our efforts in these regions and seek ways to inform international organizations, government agencies, public policy advocates, investigators, and supporting foundations of the critical need for sustained support to develop evidence-based preventive interventions for decreasing child marriage throughout the world.

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