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Editorial

The Opportunity to End Child Marriage Throughout the World



With this issue of the Journal, we bring readers our second supplement on child marriage. As was so clearly stated in our December 2021 supplement, “The Diversity and Complexity of Child Marriage,” child marriage is a global problem with a prevalence that is highly variable by region and country [1,2]. The supplement opens with an editorial from Das, Guedes, Moles-tane, and Svanemyr—the supplement’s guest editors—which brings additional clarity to our dialogue by defining the issue as Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU) [3]. This language is helpful in developing strategies for preventive interventions for young people.

The supplement’s first commentary is written by the Regional Coordinators of Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage [4]. These coordinators work at the regional level supporting civil society organizations and advocacy for the global movement to end child marriage. The authors describe many successful programs that have developed regional tools to tackle child marriage. Examples include the Montevideo Strategy on Gender Equality in Latin America and the Caribbean and the Maputo Protocol, a framework to ensure equality between men and women in the African Union.

The second commentary, by Kimball and Dwivedi [5], articulates a number of strategies increasing the effectiveness of foundation support. The authors emphasize the importance of engaging local organizations with first-hand knowledge of the problem. By working with local organizations, foundations gain a better understanding of child marriage at the local level. This knowledge is essential for the development of local and regional approaches to solving CEFMU. Another strategy was reframing the problem as more expansive and nuanced than simply “child marriage.” CEFMU includes all those who are “too young to marry” and focuses on confronting factors that underpin century-old cultural norms. The authors advise moving away from the development of innovative programs and service delivery that are time-limited to “local engagement as the center of our approach to social transformation, where communities and girls should be involved in defining their challenges and aspirations and in promoting community dialogue.” The final point of this commentary is the need to more fully engage boys and men on the impact of masculinity on their aspirations.

The first article, by Siddiqi and Greene [6], is systematic scoping review intended to identify the evidence, gaps, and future directions for the field of CEFMU. The depth and breadth of publications over two decades (2000–2019) is remarkable, with 36 articles in the 5-year period of 2000–2005 rising to 1,068 in

2015–2019. Most of the publications over the past two decades focus on prevalence, trends, causes, and determinants of CEFMU, with few focused on identification of prevention or support for individuals married as children. Almost all of these articles are written in English, which speaks to whom is conducting the research. With the wealth of data that we now have on CEFMU, Siddiqi and Greene recommend that we move from prevalence, determinants, and consequences to a focus on preventive interventions. They advocate transforming the field so that more research is conducted in settings with high prevalence of CEFMU and includes the voices of those who live in these areas, and the resulting knowledge is shared with these high-prevalence regions.

The 11 original articles in this supplement highlight geographic differences in the prevalence, with sub-Saharan Africa accounting for the largest share of CEFMU, followed by South Asia, Latin America, and North America.

From Kenya, Muthengi et al. [7] uses longitudinal qualitative data to identify key differences between formal marriages and cohabitation, where informal unions and cohabitation without parental approval was more likely to end in dissolution. And from Malawi, Naphambo [8] uses data that were collected through an ethnographic study to document the critical role of chieftans’ authority in legitimizing girls’ sexuality as they go through adolescence. Both of these studies affirm the roles that parental approval and institutional control play in early marriage in these two countries in Africa.

From South Asia, different perspectives and similarities emerge in India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, East Timor, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Syria.

From India, Nanda et al. [9] highlight the intersection of education, sexuality, and marriageability, showing that conditional cash transfer programs supporting education actually increase the girl’s value for marriage. Although girls are attending school, their families are more engaged in managing their daughter’s daily routines so as not diminish her worth. Additional work from India by Jejeebhoy et al. [10] highlights variability among young women who were in marriages that had some form of self-arrangement. These women showed higher levels of satisfaction with marriage, but marital violence was independent of their degree of control over their marriage. Harvey et al [11] used data from nine countries to document the critical role of premarital/preunion conception as a powerful driver of CEFMU. From Bangladesh, Naved et al. [12] document the importance of social norms that are primarily engineered to control the girl’s

sexuality, with restrictions on their mobility, their engagement with male peers, and their decision-making around marriage.

Two studies arising from the civil war in Syria provide a perspective on the impact of growing up in a country that is not your homeland. Shaheen et al. [13] provide opposing perspectives: the first is that the increased intermingling of Syrian refugees with the Jordanian community has increased the vulnerability that leads to child marriage as a possible solution, and the second is that displaced young people have demonstrated increased agency by not wanting to be married. From a more dire view, El Nakib et al.'s [14] work with Syrian refugees in Lebanon indicates that one-third of these adolescents has transitioned to child marriage.

From Latin America, Pacheco-Montoya et al. [15] brings the perspective of Honduran adolescents, parents, teachers, and community members. Similar themes present in Africa and Southeast Asia emerge here as well: traditional gender norms promote regulation of girl's behavior and sexuality and play a major role in a girl's decision to enter into marriage. In some cases, girls view marriage as a way out of a restrictive environment controlled by their family.

An important contribution to this supplement and one of the first to explore the drivers of CEFMU for boys, Edmeades et al.'s [16] central finding is that economic factors affirming manhood dominate decision-making: you are ready to marry when you are in the labor force and not in school. The factors driving early marriage for boys are those that increase the likelihood of dropping out of school for early employment. These factors are the opposite of those for girls, who may be protected from dropping out of school and early employment to preserve their desirability.

As the Guest Editors state from the outset, CEFMU takes a variety of shapes and forms, and the experiences of girls who are married or living in union vary across settings and contexts [3]. Van Roost et al. [17] raise the question, Is it child marriage or statutory rape? The article identifies a major problem in the United States, where laws are inconsistent across the states, and some children can marry at a younger age than they can legally consent to sex. In 14 states, child marriages potentially violate statutory rape laws. In 33 states, some or all statutory rape laws exempt sex between those that are married. Van Roost's analysis examines whether marital exemptions to statutory rape laws incentivize a substantial portion of child marriages in the United States. This article brings further attention to the fact that all 50 states have unique laws, and many do not protect young people from adverse consequences of CEFMU.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of human society. Yukich et al [18] in our December 2021 supplement identified the profound impact that the pandemic has had on CEFMU throughout the world. In this supplement, Baird et al. provide some early data on the impact of COVID-19 on girls from Bangladesh and Jordan in refugee settings [19]. Married girls' outcomes were worse than those of their unmarried peers. Formal sources of support for married girls are less than those for unmarried adolescent girls. Baird et al. show that married girls in contexts of displacement are disadvantaged in multiple ways leading to poverty and food insecurity, job loss, worse health, and violence.

As Das et al. [3] state in their editorial, "child marriage takes a variety of shapes and forms, and the experiences of girls who are married or living in union vary significantly across settings." These 16 manuscripts identify a number of challenges and

opportunities for moving forward. This supplement and our earlier supplement published in December 2021 are emblematic of an unprecedented degree of interest in CEFMU as a global problem. In order to build upon the impressive and growing body of evidence on CEFMU, research and interventions need to be focused on regions with high rates of prevalence. Meaningful engagement with regional and local partners, including young people, is critical to the development of effective new preventive interventions. These young people must have a meaningful role in providing new solutions. We have learned that similar to war and famine, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on child marriage. We must be vigilant that future societal disruptions do not threaten the progress that we have made toward ending CEFMU.

But the true drivers of CEFMU are not these periodic cataclysms. The true drivers are long-standing traditions, laws, cultures, and norms. It is now, equipped with good evidence, productive interventions, and compassionate policies, that we can begin to dismantle the structures that support CEFMU and promote self-determination and autonomy for young people everywhere.

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