

CHILD MARRIAGE IN SIERRA LEONE, GUINEA, NICARAGUA AND INDONESIA

CULTURAL ROOTS AND GIRL CENTRED SOLUTIONS

GLOBAL RESEARCH SUMMARY



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This project is the result of collaboration between over 30 grassroots community organizations, researchers and local advocates in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Nicaragua and Indonesia. For access to the full country reports, please email:


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I. CHILD MARRIAGE AS A MANIFESTATION OF SEXUAL CONTROL



Child marriage exists across cultures; it is forced upon girls at different ages, in different places, by different people, and for different ends. It is a practice that exists irrespective of faith; the countries with the highest rates of child marriage are home to the world's three biggest religions.

It disproportionately affects poor girls, but is forced upon the girls of wealthy families too. Child marriage is intimately linked to poverty, and yet poverty reduction programs have not brought about its wholesale decline. Girls who are able to remain in school are more likely to marry later, and yet education has not been the golden solution many expected.

Child marriage occurs in countries where the political classes condemn it, and in countries where they endorse it. It is forced upon girls as young as two and as old as 17, and it is bound up with a myriad of ritual practices.

Put this way, child marriage is a complicated, confusing and amorphous issue that feels impossible to pin down.

And yet, in another sense, there is a strikingly simple explanation for the existence and persistence of child marriage, and a singular factor that unites its competing forms.

Child marriage is bound up with, and is inseparable from, patriarchal oppression. It is merely one manifestation of sexual violence against girls, and it exists within a broader universe of structural, political and economic violence against women and girls. Child marriage exists because patriarchy exists.

Child marriage is therefore an outgrowth of a set of cultural anxieties and practices that center around the control of girls' fertility, sexuality and freedom.

Of course, a range of structural factors intersect with child marriage. However, whilst it is true that – for example – girls living in poverty are much like to marry as children, it does not necessarily correlate that poverty in and of itself is a driver of child marriage.

Gendered poverty however – that is, the very precise ways in which girls' experience, adapt to, and attempt to survive within a context of patriarchal economic structures and institutions – instead requires our attention.



“Poverty has long been articulated as the foremost reason for CEFM but if poverty is the reason, why are boys not marrying as early as girls? Sexuality and gender are central concerns of early and child marriage. Yet these issues have been sidelined.”

—GREENWORKS, 2015

Ultimately, the structural drivers of child marriage exist because of, and are reinforced by, patriarchal power disparities. And therefore, any attempt to transform these drivers requires a precise analysis of the ways in which: a) these systems are constructed and b) they play out in the everyday lives of adolescent girls.

Ultimately, even if an increase in the marriage age could be achieved without a more wholesale understanding of patriarchal control, tackling early marriage in isolation would not necessarily reduce the other ways that sexual control and violence impacts girls and women. Postponing marriage does not necessarily change the unequal and exploitative nature of marriage once it is entered into. Similarly, an unwed teenage mother is not necessarily in a better position than a married one, especially if the social stigmatization of girls' sexuality (when not sanctified through marriage) persists, and when mothers' ability to provide for themselves independently is limited.

It is therefore crucial to understand the specific manifestations of patriarchy in each culture we are studying, in order not just to reduce the incidence of early marriage and associated structural inequalities, but to improve the lot of girls overall. Such strategies will aim to create the cultural conditions where early marriage is a less logical and appealing choice to girls and their families – but the real test of their success will be whether they improve, rather than just delay, girls' experience of desire, marriage, sex, and childbearing.

POST-PUBERTY EARLY MARRIAGE: A DISTINCTIVE PROBLEM

The analysis above is no doubt informed by the fact that in all of the communities studied in this project (including communities throughout Indonesia, Nicaragua and Sierra Leone, and Guinean communities along the Sierra Leone border), 'child marriage' is in fact enforced upon adolescent girls who are past the age of puberty. Whilst in countries like India and Pakistan girls are frequently married before puberty, in the communities studied as part of this project, child marriage and puberty are intimately intertwined. Throughout our fieldwork, 12 was the youngest age of marriage observed, with mean marrying ages around 15.

This means that the link between child marriage and sexual control in these communities is deeply and fundamentally entrenched: it is foundationally a method of controlling girls' burgeoning sexuality and enforcing social and sexual norms of femininity, at a time when patriarchal institutions are most sensitive to the potential loss of control over a girl's sexuality. Throughout this project, almost all parents and community leaders referred explicitly to the link between puberty and child marriage.



“From that time of puberty she is sanctioned to get married. If you don't do it and she become pregnant you will be judged by God and by the community”

—IMAM, GUINEA

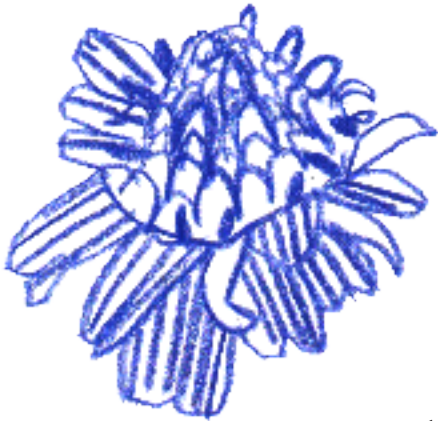
In parents' and authority figures' minds, the drive to child marriage is a negative one, based not on a positive articulation of what marriage is or can be, but on a fear of what lies outside it for teenage girls. Romantic or optimistic narratives about marriage may be deliberately deployed by authority figures to coerce or persuade girls into early marriage; and consequently, they are parroted back by girls. However, when we spoke to parents and religious or community leaders directly, their language focused around fear, not hope.

The need to curtail sexual freedom, and curb 'dangerous' or liberalizing norms, was the lead concern in many conversations. In poorer communities, where 'marriage as economic concern' is cited more frequently, it is raised mostly where it intersects with pre-existing narratives about gender and the dangers of 'free sex'.

This analysis also means that the anxieties and motivations which fuel child marriage across all countries coalesce around one central factor: pregnancy. Pregnancy, as the very visible manifestation of a girl's sexuality on her body, represents the ultimate fear across these communities. The relationship between child marriage and early pregnancy has often been pointed to in studies, and the risk of early pregnancy resulting from child marriage is one of the primary public health motivations for raising marriage age.

Less examined, however, is the way that early pregnancy – both actual and feared – can fuel child marriage. As a religious and civic ritual marker, marriage has the power to bestow upon or deny the social legitimacy of pregnancy – within marriage it is safe, clean and of benefit to society as a whole, outside marriage it is chaotic, dirty, and a threat to the social order. Marriage is thus an explicit solution to a girl's unbridled sexuality, it is a containing force that makes sense of pregnancy – makes pregnancy good, useful, productive and of significant social importance.

This is not merely theoretical – across the fieldwork for this project child marriage was explicitly categorized by girls and their communities into two key patterns, in which marriage is always linked to pregnancy, either as a precursor or a response. It is clear too that it is not pregnancy in and of itself that is feared – or we would see expect to see parents enabling rather than restricting girls' access to contraception – but rather what pregnancy indicates about a girl's sexual freedom.



In Indonesia and Guinea particularly, but in communities across the globe, religious and customary marriages often take place relatively quickly after the emergence of the visible signs of puberty, in an attempt to ensure that a girl is married before there is any risk of pregnancy out of wedlock. Following social discourses of sexual control, many families truly believe that early marriage of girls is a safeguard against premarital sex and pregnancy and indeed even sexual violence, helping protect family honor and reputation. In Indonesia, child marriage as a response to the mere fear of teen pregnancy is socially and legally sanctioned: such a fear is sufficient to enable parents to apply to a religious court for a dispensation for a marriage below the official legal age of 16.

Elsewhere, informal union acts as a specific response to pregnancy. In Indonesia, an estimated 70% of dispensations from the religious court are because of unwanted pregnancy. We heard that 90% of child marriages overall are in response to pregnancy.

In certain communities in Sierra Leone too, marriage, or some form of union, almost always exists as a response to pregnancy. From the community's perspective (and especially amongst traditional authorities and institutions), teenage pregnancy per se is not the problem. Rather, it is the fact that it exists outside of a sanctified union that causes alarm: a social inconsistency that needs to be managed. The fallout of this is an almost bewildering array of imperfect solutions to teenage pregnancy referred to in colloquial Sierra Leonean krio as "answer belly" [literally to acknowledge the pregnancy].

Post-puberty early marriage, therefore, is a problem foundationally bound up with sexual control. As such, solutions to it, but also ways of describing the issue, must reflect that.

THE TERMINOLOGY AROUND ‘CHILD MARRIAGE’



When child marriage was named as such, almost nobody believed it to be a problem in their society or community. This was the case amongst all the geographies explored, but particularly acute in Nicaragua. This is based on the slipperiness of both definitions of ‘childhood’ and definitions of ‘marriage’: with either or both of these words seen in many cases not to apply to girls in union before their 18th birthday.

In all the countries studied, there are a number of possible markers signaling the end of childhood, including:

- The visible onset of puberty (breasts and hips development)
- The onset of menstruation
- Ability to earn money independently
- The ability to hold a coin underneath one’s breasts (Sierra Leone / Guinea)
- Initiation into the Bundo society (Sierra Leone / Guinea)

The fact that this point can be marked in so many different ways points to the difficulty of defining the end of childhood in a clear-cut way. And even if there is agreement amongst communities as to what constitutes a child vs. an adult, rarely is the age of 18 – the marker generally used amongst the development community – invoked.

The concept of marriage is, in some ways, even less easy to handle. Throughout the research, a wide array of damaging arrangements and unions were observed. In Nicaragua, as in other countries in Latin America, there is widespread practice of informal unions. These exist instead of legal or religious marriages, and are usually between adolescents and other adolescents or men in their twenties, rather than children. In Sierra Leone too, as we’ve seen, particularly in some parts of the south of the country, marriage as traditionally understood simply doesn’t exist.



“Marriage is when you have a ring and a dress. No, our sisters never got that”

—GIRL, 13, MOYAMBA DISTRICT, SIERRA LEONE

The fact that this language gap exists, not just in the minds of girls and their families, but throughout the NGO community, indicates that there may be a rationale for rethinking the way that language is used in the sector. If ‘child marriage’ does not accurately describe the perceived reality on the ground – and especially if this is driving perceptions that early unions, since they are not ‘child marriage’, are not a problem – there is a case to be made that new terminology should be found.

Terminological disputes must not dominate analysis, but it is important that the language we use most accurately reflects the cluster of disparate experiences it is attempting to describe – and does not exclude those it is trying to help.



“Child marriage is bad, but answer belly [acknowledging the pregnancy] is good. We do sensitization training against child marriage... and we make boys answer belly”

—ELDER WOMEN, MOYAMBA, SIERRA LEONE.

Of course, language also reflects ideology, and the particular power of ‘child marriage’ as a phrase lies in its implicit communication of the harm that befalls girls through these unions. Many alternative phrases – ‘early unions’, for example – do not necessarily carry this implicit condemnation; the semantic challenge is therefore to communicate harm at the same time as accurately describing reality as it is seen on the ground. However, for the sake of brevity and consistency, we will continue to use the term ‘child marriage’ for the remainder of this report.

SEXUAL CONTROL AND ITS MANIFESTATION: FEWER CHOICES FOR GIRLS



In short then, the cultural root of child marriage is the social control of girls' sexuality. This social control meets its ultimate apotheosis in pregnancy – the visible (and therefore social) manifestation of girls' private sexuality.

While the control of sexuality manifests at the level of symbolic cultural life, it has direct consequences for girls' lived experience. The cultural norms of control affect the choices a girl is offered and, even more foundationally, the choices she can imagine for herself.

Cultural narratives about control make it more appealing for families, parents and communities to close off options for girls, and more frightening for them to leave them open.

They encourage schools to stress the importance of traditional femininity even as influences of modernity encourage them to advocate high ambition, creating a dissonance that means that girls struggle to understand how they would access the options putatively being offered them.

And ultimately, they affect the choices a girl can envisage for herself: creating not just ambivalence but fatalism about child marriage.

In this context, cultural narratives of control affect the concrete choices that are on offer to girls in their lived experience. Our task now is to understand where they encounter this control, and what forms it takes. When it appears, how does it restrict and depreciate girls' options, and how could we build in more, better, and healthier potential choices for girls?

CHOICES SHE CAN ACCESS AND IMAGINE:

Our primary aim then, should be to increase and improve the choices on offer to girls. In order to do this, we need to challenge norms on a cultural level – expanding cultural possibilities for girls – as well as improving access to assets on an individual level. While educational, economic and informational access, reproductive rights and social capital expand possibilities for girls in a very concrete way by expanding the opportunities she can access, cultural change expands the possibilities she can imagine for herself.

Across the research we saw girls who appeared to be choosing to marry, but in reality, had not been given the cultural tools to conceptualize alternative pathways. We also saw girls who were resigned to marriage, not just as the only pathway they could practically access but as the only pathway imaginable.



“At first, I thought there was no way I would ever get married, but what else could I have done?”

“I had a boyfriend which means you get married. What else would you do?”

—MARRIED GIRLS IN INDONESIA.

II. GEOGRAPHICAL MANIFESTATIONS: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Differences in the type of country analyzed determine the exact ways in which patriarchal societies attempt to contain girls' sexuality, and therefore the shape of child marriage practices.

Across all of these cultures and communities, there are structural similarities in child marriage practice and the beliefs that drive it. It is, at its root, a manifestation of the cultural fear of female liberation and pleasure.

This overarching insight helps us to understand the social drivers of child marriage in each geography studied. However, each country interprets them differently, and indeed, they play out differently at the level of different community types within particular countries. Social drivers of child marriage intersect with other cultural practices and social factors – poverty and economics, education, religion, politics and the nation state – to create distinct patterns of behavior, even where patriarchal beliefs take largely similar forms.


We spoke to girls in Catholic and Muslim countries, in war-torn and relatively stable communities, in rapidly developing and totally left-behind economies. Moreover, we investigated cultures with immense internal differences, from the vast and diverse archipelago of Indonesia to the Sierra Leone / Guinea border, where communities' access to stable cultural institutions varies dramatically according to their geographies and their exposure to war and disease.

It is therefore not surprising that the manifestations of patriarchal beliefs differed across our research. However, the fact that they did does remind us of the need for community-based solutions which aim to transform behavior and indeed social norms with a sensitivity to their context.

Every country had its own unique set of historical, political, social and religious contexts, and it is thus important to understand each in isolation and explore the nuance within them; however, placing them in relation to each other as far as is possible does allow for the development of a more cohesive framework for imagining solutions. This is the aim of the rest of this section.

'FLUX' VERSUS 'FIXED': VISUALIZING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Broadly, we can conceive of the countries explored as sitting along a spectrum ranging from those more in 'flux' to those more 'fixed'.



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THIS?

'Flux' countries are those where, straightforwardly, elements of social life and cultural practice have changed more significantly in recent history. This could be because of civil war, disease, regime change, or rapid economic decline. As such, cataclysmic shifts have seen behavior decoupled to some degree from socially normative beliefs. In this context, basic survival strategies trump all else. The desire to regulate social life remains, but the means to do so are more limited. Sierra Leone is the archetypal 'flux' country, particularly those communities in the Northern and Southern provinces and in the eastern border provinces, which were particularly hard-hit by the 1991-2002 war. And it is here that the least regulation of social control exists. Nicaragua has also struggled through decades of war, rapidly changing regimes, and multiple economic crises, and all this gives rise to a pervasive sense of precariousness and fragility.

On the other hand, more 'fixed' countries are those where social life and cultural practice have remained more stable – and as such more tightly in line with socially normative beliefs. This is especially the case in Guinea and Indonesia. Whilst the fall of the Suharto regime may have marked a major political shift in Indonesia, there is a sense in which many of the regime's core elements – particularly a significant role for government and oversight of the population – continue to this day. In both countries too, unlike Nicaragua and especially Sierra Leone, which are more religiously pluralistic, Islam has absolute authority, and has been effectively appropriated by the state to serve its end.

LIFE IN 'FIXED' VS 'FLUX' COMMUNITIES

This has direct implications for girls, because wherever the cultural need to contain girls' sexuality exists, 'fixed' countries are able to do so more effectively. As we know, marriage is a key 'containing' tool within a society's toolkit, and as such we see more traditional or customary marriages of girls before pregnancy within fixed geographies.

On the other hand, in more 'flux' geographies, especially Sierra Leone, a generation of teenage mothers have been allowed to become pregnant before they can be – in the eyes of society – safely 'contained' within marriage. This doesn't mean that society does not try to contain them somehow, but instead a range of informal unions act as social solutions that come into play after the fact of pregnancy.

This impacts the solutions required. Whilst those more 'fixed' countries have been lucky, relatively, having avoided the horrors of war, disease and economic decline, they do provide a more challenging cultural context for creating change for girls, with behavior more tightly linked to socially normative beliefs that are deeply entrenched.

On the other hand, in the more 'flux' countries, and particularly those most 'flux' communities within them, structural factors intersect with gendered poverty to create a chaotic landscape for girls. In this context - where girls are forced to extract value from their bodies in order to survive - transactional sex is rife. At the same time though, the extreme misalignment of behavior and beliefs means that cultural norms have already become unstuck – which could present an opportunity.



“It is now widely recognized that conflict throws gender roles and relations into flux, and that women and men are affected differently by conflict. As a result, space can be created for the renegotiation of gendered stereotypes and the consolidation of gains made by women during conflict”

—INTERNATIONAL ALERT, 2007

Broadly therefore, in more 'flux' communities, economic imperative intersects with harmful norms to significantly restrict the choices a girl can access. Whilst in more fixed communities, even if economic progress ostensibly offers up more opportunities, cultural norms significantly limit the future pathways she can imagine for herself.

III. TOWARDS SOLUTIONS: MODELLING ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

Overall, solutions must build meaningful choice into girls' lives by challenging cultural norms (expanding the choices she, and her community, can imagine) and building her economic and social assets (expanding the choices she, and her community, can access).

BUILDING ACCESS IN DIFFERENT SOCIETIES: 'FLUX' TO 'FIXED'

Across geographies, there are certain key assets we want to build girls' access to: assets which are missing cross-geographically, and without which girls will not be able to thrive.

An example is contraception. Girls' control over their own fertility is absolutely crucial if they are to access and exercise real choices – across geographies, cultures, religions and social demographics. Without it, it's hard to even begin to imagine how girls would construct themselves alternative, positive futures, outside of exploitative early unions. Our geographies were united in their severely restricted access to contraception.

It's also true however, that the biggest barriers to assets can vary across the spectrum of 'fixed' to 'flux' cultures. Basic infrastructural barriers prevent access to contraception in many of the communities on the 'flux' end of the spectrum; with health centers located too far away, communities isolated and transport lacking. Meanwhile, in our more 'fixed' geographies, the barriers might be more legislative, with contraception available, for example, only for married couples.

Broadly, 'flux' communities generate extra barriers to asset provision, and girls there are in need of more comprehensive packages of support, in which information, agency, self-esteem and relationship education come alongside the provision of more basic survival assets.

As such, in 'flux' communities, building choices must start with basic, vital survival assets: access to transport, income generation activities, basic safety and security. Starting here will be vital if we are to disrupt the entrenched culture of transactional sex that is the reality of survival for so many girls. Simultaneously, we should be working on the interpersonal tools she needs to make choice a reality – building safe spaces and helping foster solidarity is especially key.


In more 'fixed' communities, some of these basic survival assets can be taken for granted, and programming can take on the more sophisticated task of girls' future development. These can include education in its traditional sense, but should also encompass wider training and development programs for adolescent girls, which can offer them a broad portfolio of future options. Programming can build up girls' access to information and provide relationship and sex education. This will help girls navigate the world and relationships, build their self-esteem and teach them how to spot the warning signs of abuse and exploitation. Here, we can focus on utilizing social structures and infrastructure to build girls' access to social networks, solidarity, information and training; providing them with resources to start building towards an alternative future.

For communities closer to the 'fixed' end of our spectrum, the foundational challenge with modelling positive deviance is to reassure around social cohesion. The culturally relevant, powerful woman must still demonstrate inclusion in the community, indeed contribution to the health of the community; role models must show up in the fabric of girls' lives, not just in distant media where her social connections are not demonstrated.

Other important challenges exist around breaking down existing and solidified barriers which impact social solidarity: for example, class, or marital status – with married girls in many of our communities having extremely limited contact with non-married girls or the ability to build social solidarity or share information with them. In short, examples of positive alternatives in 'fixed' communities must be extremely sensitive to existing social structures.



THE CONCLUSION: BUILDING A RIGHTS MOVEMENT FOR GIRLS



Ultimately, our strategy is girl-centered, with two approaches:

- To challenge restrictive gender norms to help girls imagine new possibilities
- To expand the spaces and options girls have access to

These are designed to feed back into the psyche of the individual girl. Moreover, the two elements work to complement each other, creating a virtuous circle: girls who have basic survival assets can think long-term about their futures; girls who have access to social networks can draw inspiration from other girls as to their choices; and girls who have alternative hopes for themselves are more able to demand access.

Our goal is to unite these two girl-focused strategies to amplify the voice and power of girls in their communities, and ultimately to build a movement of girls to demand change from power.

Cultural authorities do not give up their power unprompted, and so change must be demanded from below. When we give girls a vision of what change could be, and the spaces in which their united and amplified voices can be heard, we create the possibility for a girls' movement which can advocate for itself, agitate for change and, in the end, provide a cultural example in itself of female solidarity, power and agency.

Such a movement will not merely help to increase the age at which girls marry. Instead it can enable girls to exercise more choice over their lives more broadly, improving (rather than just delaying) their experience of desire, marriage, sex, and childbearing.

Sexual control is at the root of child marriage – and as such, strategies to end it must undermine this control, aiming for a world in which girls can access and imagine more choice to live in their full power.