

CONTROL & AGENCY



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A CHILD MARRIAGE PRACTITIONERS' GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING NEW FINDINGS ON GIRLS' AGENCY AND DECISION-MAKING

Introduction

An emerging body of research related to girls' agency¹ questions the conventional child marriage framework and related programme interventions' seeking to empower adolescent girls. So far, research implications, for child marriage policy reform and programme design and implementation, remain unconsolidated. As such, findings from recent empirical evidence and insider viewpoints (e.g., those of girls, parents, and other community members) are primed to expand and later be adopted into the next generation of child marriage programmes. These programmes will emerge in the post-2020 period, one marked by the closure of several global child marriage alliance programmes.² This article suggests that moving forwards, practitioners—the development professionals operating on the ground at national and sub-national levels for programme design and implementation—play a critical role in bringing about updated national and global child marriage frameworks based on emerging evidence and insights.

This article presents the research and evidence calling for the incorporation of more contextual knowledge and insider understandings of agency and decision-making to revamp child marriage policies and programmes. The need to combine empirical evidence with lived experiences when designing policies and programmes is reinforced by the broader demand to decolonise international development. Including lived experiences and local voices opens pathways to address new, unheard narratives and "*shift the power,*" moving resources and decision-making closer to those affected by the problem. Together, these elements point towards the expansion and elevation of the practitioner role from implementers to agenda setters, from designing and delivering programmes and interventions to mobilising their agency and that of others.

The proposed shift in the policy environment and programmatic response and the possibility for practitioners, girls, and community members to be more influential in framing change require serious consideration. This article hopes to make its modest contribution by addressing a core question:

What should practitioners know about the latest finding on girls' agency concerning sexuality and child marriage and their implications for policies and programmes?

The exploration begins with a review of key findings, discussing new understandings related to the child marriage narrative, why and how girls' sexuality is controlled, how girls exercise their agency in response, and, taken together, what this implies for refreshing key concepts and programmatic responses. Findings are summarised, illustrated with quotations and case studies, and structured as core concepts. Where possible, simple tools are offered.

The underlying set of ideas informing the conventional approach to child marriage programmes needs to change.

This article is not exhaustive; rather, it constitutes the first step. These findings bring together peer-reviewed evidence on girls' agency and insider voices from the [Learning Spark Fund](#). This initiative addressed (1) eleven community learning exchanges in nine countries, focusing on what adolescents, parents, and religious, traditional, and other community leaders had to say about sexuality and child marriage; and (2) six Learning Spark Fund conversations, capturing the views of a multi-national group of researchers, activists, and programme directors, specialising in sexual and reproductive health rights, child rights, and child marriage, on issues related to girls' choice and voice, including the decision to elope. In collaboration, they

sought to find shared value in the importance of empirical evidence, the insider viewpoints of those with lived experience of child marriage, and the critical insights of sector leaders considering the breadth of the situation.

The second part of this article considers the role of practitioners in influencing new child marriage policy and programme interventions focusing on sexuality, girls' agency, and voice and choice. It proposes that practitioners exercise agency by deliberately engaging in agenda setting actions to influence new policy and practice, complementing their more traditional implementation activities.

Emergent findings and implications

This article seeks to consolidate the key emergent insights on girl's voice, agency, and decision-making in child marriage, posing six questions examined consecutively.



WHY DOES THE CONVENTIONAL CHILD MARRIAGE NARRATIVE, ON WHICH CURRENT PROGRAMMES AND INTERVENTIONS ARE BASED, NEED TO CHANGE?

Peer-reviewed evidence³, expert opinions raised in the Learning Spark Fund conversations and insider viewpoints from Africa and Asia, which show many girls decide to marry themselves, declare the need to change the child marriage paradigm. The underlying set of ideas informing the conventional approach to child marriage programmes must change.

Specifically, there is a call to move away from a child protection lens, focusing on ‘the best interests of the child,’ towards a child rights lens, asking that the girl’s viewpoint be taken seriously. The child protection lens corresponds to a focus on marriage laws. If the law is broken, the parent or guardian is criminalised because the law exists to protect the girl. Alternatively, the child rights viewpoint emphasises empowerment and raising the girl’s voice. However, during the Learning Spark Fund conversations, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and child rights activists, and legal experts in the sector agreed that the protection and rights issue is a confusing and difficult problem. It asks that the sector finds a balance.⁴

Emphasising their discomfort, some participants even used the term ‘fake agency.’ They questioned how informed a girl’s choice was and wondered how ‘voluntary’ or coerced the decision was. For instance, a law student and youth leader in Nepal challenged the notion of consent, arguing that girls are brainwashed to believe that marriage is necessary and that a successful life is making a man and his family happy. Moreover, patriarchy is the dominant accepted reality, the norm that guides decision-making. However, others in the discussion held firm, asserting that young people can choose and must be trusted to decide.

These reservations led recent research addressing the protection versus rights balance to propose that instead of walking this fine line, child marriage policy and programmes should focus on interventions that encourage girls’ participation in decision-making regarding marriage and advocate resilience in married life.⁵ This could include strengthening their capacity, alone or together with other girls, to negotiate and bring about greater equality within marriage. For example, this could mean delaying pregnancy, improving access to birth control, or returning to work or school. The message for practitioners is to pause and rethink empowerment interventions: empowerment for what?

The reservations around girls’ choice stress how complicated the issue of girls’ agency is and that it can vary from situation to situation. Case study # 1, capturing the insights of a lawyer and human rights activist providing legal aid and representation to girls, illustrates the importance of context when understanding and responding to girls’ agency in marriage.



CASE STUDY # 1

Many factors influence girls' agency and marriage in Uganda

Northern Uganda is a post-conflict setting. Here, child marriage is generational, as its roots are deep and embedded in historical, cultural, and legal perspectives. Parents were wiped away during the war, and girls are left to care for the men and children. When there is a short period of peace, girls get married to access resources. Girls don't have the privilege to say, "I will go to school" because they have to look after their siblings. Also, girls don't have mentors to help them choose whether to marry or not.

In this context, a girl does not have the option to choose. When accessing pro bono legal support, girls tell their lawyers: *"This person [the husband] is the one feeding me. I cannot stand in court and talk against him."* Human rights lawyers feel it is unfair to ask a child to be a witness against the person they see as their protector. Moreover, the interviewed lawyer believed child marriage has been overly politicised in Uganda, where the legal age of marriage is 18 and marriage under that age is considered a crime. She mentioned that organisations receive much backlash when advocating comprehensive sexuality education because it is perceived as promoting defilement, sexual intercourse with a child under the age of 18.

Furthermore, in Uganda, as in most African countries, choice is collective. It becomes difficult to say whether girls can exercise choice and agency. There are many circumstances and determinants that influence the choice that girls make. The aspiration to be married is not an individual choice as it is a multi-generational social expectation and a source of status for girls. Girls see this everywhere while growing up. What might appear as 'agency' could be decisions made collectively by family members.

The complicated nature of girls' agency requires greater insider understandings of local perspectives and bottom-up knowledge of the contexts that surround girls' choices.⁶ A greater understanding of the situational aspects of agency and related *power dynamics* is necessary. *Situational aspects* include social pressures and possibilities that existed when a marriage decision was taken. Power dynamics refer to the relational aspects between girls and their parents, extended family members, and communities. Both are illustrated in the story above. Keep in mind, girls' agency around whether to marry or not to marry is not 'one size fits all.' Each case must be appreciated independently. Therefore, an investment must be made in understanding the lived reality in a given community. This level of detail and nuance needs to be met to develop relevant and impactful interventions. This investment takes time and costs money; however, it is imperative for the project design and inception phases.

WHY DO PROGRAMME DESIGNERS NEED TO UNDERSTAND AND RESPOND TO GIRLS' AGENCY IN A NEW WAY?

As shown above, girls' agency related to child marriage is complex, demanding practitioners understand the local context and develop interventions that are responsive to situational aspects and power dynamics. However, that is not all. The evidence and insider knowledge, including the accounts of those affected, confirm that girls do exercise agency (as messy and complicated as that can often be) when entering marriages.⁷ This fact is uncomfortable insofar as it requires policymakers and programme designers to make a 'U-turn.' This article calls them to reserve their opinion of what girls' agency is and their course of action in response. This is not a small request, but it is a potential game-changer.

In telling the child marriage story, the long-standing child marriage narratives refer to 'harm' and 'danger': health problems, termination of education, exposure to violence, and limiting life opportunities for girls. Framed this way, child marriage is a negative force to reject. There is a *right choice* (do not accept marriage) and a *wrong choice* (accept it). Guided by this premise, programmes target girls at risk of marriage. Interventions seek to empower her through confidence building, skills transfer, information provision as well as peer support, which, in theory, should enable her to decide not to marry. Current findings on girls' decision making agency, however, suggests that marriage for some girls in some contexts can be a *good choice*. For some girls, marriage makes sense. Learning Spark Fund conversations, and community learning exchange narratives, reveal that marriage can be an aspiration for some girls, a source of protection for others, and a desirable livelihood strategy, even if the benefits are short term. Other girls see marriage as inevitable. For some, marriage is a platform or opportunity to negotiate a better deal towards greater equality and the satisfaction of her needs and desires.

Focus on interventions that encourage girls' participation in decision-making regarding marriage and advocate resilience in married life.

The proposition that for some girls in some situations, marriage is a 'good choice' invites policymakers and programme designers to move away from a binary view, that child marriage is the 'wrong choice' and rejecting marriage is the 'right choice,' toward appreciating the child marriage decision as a 'ledger.'⁸ The ledger is a record, accounting harm and dangers as well as benefits or opportunities. It places health risks, exposure to violence, restrictions on education, and diminished life opportunities alongside other considerations, such as a girl's status, her freedoms, the promise of love and care, and protection and economic security. These are pros and cons that, when taken together and calculated, constitute a decision. As detailed in the two points below, this shift⁹ from a binary view has several practical implications for programmes and interventions.

1. A shift in mindset regarding how agency is understood implies that the target group of child marriage programmes has to expand to include girls outside of marriage (i.e., those at risk of marriage) and girls (couples) in a young marriage.
2. If 'no marriage' or 'girls rescued from marriage' is no longer the indicator of success, programmes will need to come up with new measures and a new metric for learning, monitoring, and evaluation based on the possibility that marriage can be a 'good choice' for some girls in some contexts. For example, this could be increased participation in the child marriage decision and gender equality within young marriage.

Programme interventions might need to assist girls in choosing whether to marry or not and support her if she chooses to marry. While this may sound rather innocuous, the sentiment behind it is far from bland. When five NGO Executive Directors from Pakistan, India, Nepal, Nigeria, and Uganda, joined by other activists and researchers, started to reflect on child marriage programmes in the Learning Spark Fund conversations, they opened a Pandora's box. Candid and self-critical, they examined the shortcomings of existing programmes and questioned: "Do empowerment programmes set girls up to fail?" Their conversation is summarised in case study #2.

Supporting this self-reflection, another group, this time technical advisors and programme managers working in Mali and Niger, raised broader concerns about the relevance of programme interventions to the realities and sensemaking of local people and the potential they even cause harm. After sharing their own stories of interactions with girls and community members on the decision to marry, one group member observed that we don't do an adequate psychosocial or anthropological analysis of the situation. Resultingly, we fail to understand exactly *"what is the light that illuminates in the heads of young girls that orients them toward child marriage."* In other words, we don't fully understand how girls decide. Another picked up this thread, asking, *"what then is the nature of the offer that we are proposing to girls?"* Answering his own question, he observed that *"our offer is seen as alien or foreign to the community as it does not fit their context or meet the needs and aspirations of girls and families preparing for marriage."* Another jumped in and recounted that a young girl once said to his project team: *"Why don't you want me to marry? You caused me harm in my community; now I'm rejected."* One advisor said that practitioners are perceived *"as intruders who come with something extraordinary, that the community does not even understand the merits of, let alone the young girl or boy who is a victim, if you will, or who is the survivor of a child marriage."* He summed up: *"So that's my little baggage, that very often you find yourself between a rock and a hard place."*

CASE STUDY # 2 **Do empowerment programmes set girls up to fail.**

The Executive Director of an NGO in Pakistan, seeking to improve SRHR access in school for youth, added to the discussion that agency as a platform in short development interventions (rather than tackling root causes) is potentially dangerous for girls and needs to be revisited. Joined by the Executive Director of an SRHR centre in Nigeria, they asked whether programmes are doing enough? They ask practitioners to reflect on whether interventions could be exposing girls to additional risk by creating expectations that cannot be fulfilled, violating the central principle in development, 'do the least harm.'

On the one hand, they note that we advocate girls' empowerment, for example, through education, including comprehensive sexual education. However, we do not have the quality schooling or curriculum from which girls can benefit. In Nigeria, girls in the south benefit from a more comprehensive sexual education curriculum than girls in the north due to inequality in access and opportunity. The difficult question was posed: *"Are programmes disadvantaging girls by telling them this option [child marriage] is wrong without giving them anything else to better their lives?"* The discussion gestured at hypocrisy, challenging practitioners to ask whether we have done enough to provide the advantages, for example, protection and economic security, that marriage can offer them? The participants detected a level of deception or dishonesty in child marriage programmes.

Concerns about setting girls up for failure took another turn when a youth representative of a Nepalese NGO supporting girl leaders suggested that programme design can favour some girls and exclude others. She asked herself and others a poignant question: *"Are programmes designed with girls in mind, or are they designed for those who have access to opportunities?"* She went on to say: *"It is disheartening to*

see that a lot of our interventions (such as training) are catered to people who can afford to dedicate their time and effort to the problems and possible solutions.” She emphasised that at the intersection of the girl and a programme intervention, life events and factors get in the way of participation, such as school, work, or dealing with daily vulnerabilities. Not everyone she said can leave things behind to attend programmes. As a result, they drop out or are uncomfortable joining the programme in the first place.

A feminist researcher and activist from India exposed another side of programming shortfalls when she pointed out two blind spots failing girls. She argued that despite the prevalence of depression globally, empowerment programmes rarely focus on girls’ mental health, a situation worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. She also pointed out that divorce is neglected in child marriage programmes. Even where it is legally possible, for many women and girls, divorce is an unthinkable option. In the future, this issue must be discussed, and the sector needs to develop strategies to engage with the typically contested issue of divorce.

3 GIRLS SEXUALITY AS A CENTRAL CONCERN OF CHILD MARRIAGE

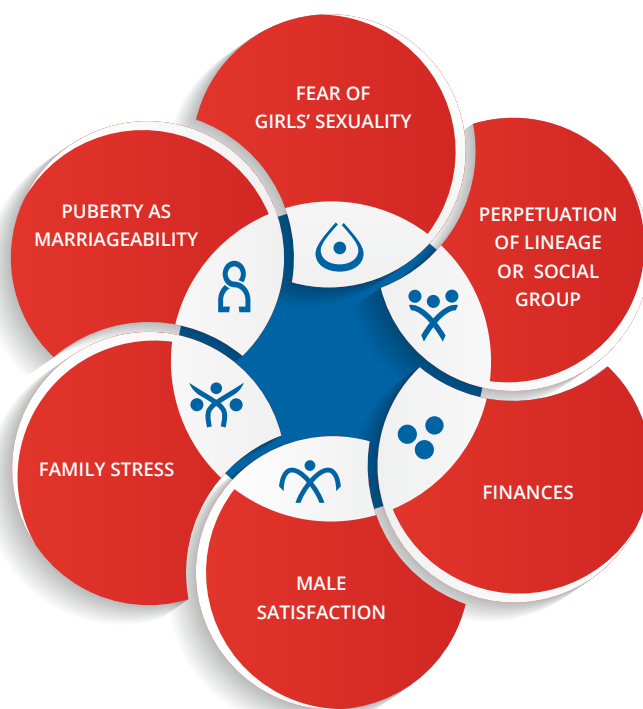
Sexuality is a crucial, though largely overlooked, factor underpinning child marriage. However, a strong lobby of advocates, including influential US-based foundations and NGOs, have worked hard to correct this and make a case for a more robust programmatic focus. A convening report of international NGOs and foundations entitled ‘Breaking the Taboo’ and a research report, ‘The Centrality of Sexuality: for understanding child, early and forced marriage,’ ask for a better understanding of the links between adolescent sexuality and child marriage and for this driver to receive more attention in programmes.¹⁰ The MWWWK project was inspired by these reports seeking to explore the topic further, particularly from a practitioner perspective.

That girls’ sexuality is tempered by social fear and surrounding family and community members, linked to notions of shame and honour and pre-marital pregnancy, is an established position elaborated upon elsewhere. This section of the article elaborates on both of these points. It draws on insider viewpoints found in community learning exchanges to nuance how and why sexuality is managed and presents these as models that can be used as a simple tool. These can help practitioners understand the context, including situational aspects and power dynamics as described under question two, and grasp programme design.



Grassroots voices from learning exchanges suggest that families and communities control adolescent girls' sexuality for several reasons.¹¹ These situational factors are illustrated in Figure 1, including the following: fear of girls' sexuality¹², family stress, finances, male satisfaction, puberty as the physical stage of readiness for marriage, and the perpetuation of lineage or a social group.

Figure 1
Situational aspects
informing the control
of girls' sexuality



Fear

When exploring why sexuality is controlled, insider accounts confirm that girls' sexuality can have the power to dishonour the standing of the girl and/or her family if, for example, she engages in sex outside of marriage or has an unplanned pregnancy. A mother in Ethiopia said the following: *"I will never allow my daughter to use any family planning service before she is married. This isn't something right which I can tolerate. I would be ashamed in the eye of my community."* This concern is corroborated by a woman in India, who stated: *"If marriage is delayed, girls run away and parents lose their honour."* Parents in Bangladesh also feel insecure. The high rate of sexual harassment and the increasing number of love affairs between adolescents puts Bangladeshi parents under pressure to protect daughters from physical vulnerability. One father from Bangladesh said this: *"My wife and I have to work outside. My older daughter is alone at home. I feel insecure for my daughter, so it was better to marry her early."*



Finances

Fear, as stressed in the grey literature,¹³ is certainly a key factor; however, it is not all. Money is another major concern for families. This issue of economic concerns is elaborated elsewhere. For now, it is key to know that a girl's sexuality can either improve a family's economic situation or be a drain on it. In India, a family can pay a lower dowry, bringing less to the husband's family if the bride is younger, whereas, in Uganda, it is possible to secure a higher bride price if the daughter is married to a husband in a different region or in a cross-border setting with a different marriage market. Also, as recounted in Ethiopia, child marriage can create marriage relationships with families of higher wealth status. This strategy brings economic gains for parents and reduces a family's economic burden. Furthermore, looking beyond the family, child marriage can be a way for traditional authorities or officials to receive payment from a family if they 'look the other way' regarding the legal age in marriage law.



Perpetuation of lineage or social group

Building up the understanding of why girls' sexuality is controlled, cases from Africa and Asia emphasise girls' fertility as powerful. Bearing children is valued in promoting family, clan, or group interests. In Mali, a girl's sexuality can be controlled through fertility testing. She must fall pregnant before marriage. Whereas in India, caste endogamy, a social custom of marrying within one's clan or group, can force girls to enter into an arranged marriage with little or no consent.



Family stress

Others talk about the psychological stress on parents leading to control. Indeed, the responsibility of a family to find a suitable husband for their daughter can be concerning. A father in Bangladesh shared this lament: *"I have three daughters. I am in a hurry because if they get older, it will be more difficult to get them all married. My daughters are very close together. They are 13 and 15 years old, they look similar, and the one of 13 is very grown-up. If I get a good groom, I will let the oldest marry."*



Male satisfaction

The pleasure and preference of men is an additional consideration when understanding control. In India, where 'a docile, unopinionated wife' is sometimes desirable, parents worry that their daughter might not get a good match if they delay marriage because, through education, girls become critical thinkers. Furthermore, Malawi has a rich set of cultural practices that isolate and profile girls during puberty, signalling to men that they are 'ripe.'



Puberty

The final consideration relates to the widespread social norm that reaching puberty is the minimum threshold marker or condition for marriageability. Other considerations, for example, finding a suitable groom, might depend on age ranking protocols where the older sibling marry first. Community learning exchanges in nine countries suggest that adolescents, parents, and religious and community leaders consider a girl or boy fit or capable of marriage once they have reached puberty. Learning exchanges referred to breast development and menstruation for girls and the development of a beard and muscle (physical strength) for boys as signs of marriageability. Community conversations in Islamabad, Pakistan, among adult couples married as children, emphasised the importance of physical development over other considerations. Their readiness, in terms of emotional maturity or financial stability, did not inform marriageability. They noted that at the age of marriage, they were sexually awkward and unaware (boys and girls), not ready for motherhood (girls), not ready to financially support a family (boys), and not ready to integrate into another family and marriage home (girls).



Mapping why sexuality is controlled

A message from researchers is that understanding the situational aspects of a particular context that inform the control of a girls' sexuality and hence, the context in which she exercises her agency is crucial. It can help practitioners design programmes and interventions informed by a nuanced understanding of social norms related to control in the community in which they work.

For example, practitioners in consultation with girls and other community members can discuss the circumstances around sexuality and child marriage and capture, using a set of circles, what is said visually. Using circles, cut from paper, computer-generated, drawn in the sand, or sculpted from pebbles or stones, is a participatory way to explore behaviour norms and involve people in collectively developing a better understanding of the situational aspects that inform the control of sexuality.

As illustrated below in Figure 2, the situational aspects that inform why girls' sexuality is controlled in a specific context can be drawn from people's stories or descriptions and then represented by each factor's own circle. The circles' sizes can vary to capture the different weight or importance of each factor. Finally, the circles can be organised to indicate how they are related. The diagram below, imagining a mapping exercise in India, based on quotations from community conversations, suggests that three situational factors, caste endogeneity, economic considerations and fear, inform the control of girls' sexuality. They are considered roughly equal in importance, with economic consideration given a little less weight, hence its smaller circle. Rather than sitting alone, they overlap, suggesting they influence one another, for example, the significant interplay of fear and caste endogeneity. Quotations capture key elements of the conversation, giving some shape to each element. This technique can also explain the relationships that people observe in how situational factors interact with each other. This exercise could be one way to capture the context in which girls and those around them make a marriage decision. This will help designers understand the decision and develop appropriate responses.



FEAR FACTORS

Violence against women is a huge concern as the environment is not "good for females".

"Girls and boys are vulnerable in this age. Several incidents happened in and around the community. Such incidence creates fear in the mind of parents which lead to settle for early marriage" – BVHA India



CASTE ENDOGENY

"Control on the choice of marriage of girls is mainly to maintain caste purity. If a girl marries to an upper caste boy, then parents do not have a problem. Girls' parents cannot accept the marriage of their daughter if she marries a boy from a lower caste, it can create violence in the family which might even lead to murder." – RJVS India



ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

Girls do not belong to the natal house – so money is not invested in them. A good way to save money in poor contexts is to marry her early as this saves on the dowry that has to be paid to the groom's family.

Also, "early marriage might lead to a more docile wife. Hence, mostly girls are forced to drop out of school, and poverty is cited as a reason for it." – ASHA India

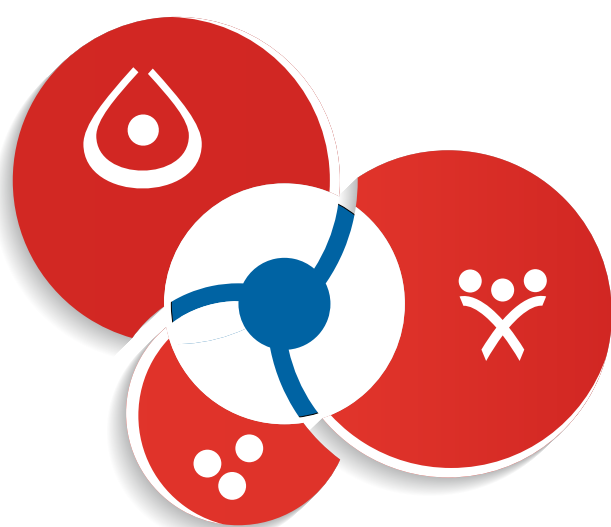


Figure 2.
Mapping why girls'
sexuality is controlled

5 HOW IS GIRLS' SEXUALITY CONTROLLED?

Community voices and viewpoints captured in the community learning exchanges show that how girls' sexuality is controlled varies from context to context. For example, girls' actions and opportunities can be strictly regulated or restricted. Or, it might be that decisions on who, if, and when to marry or stay in school are made with consultation and consent, for example, between the girl and her parents. However, in some instances, families can listen to what their daughter needs and wants, trust her, and respond by following her wishes.

While it appears to hold true that men, fathers, brothers, husbands, suitors, traditional authorities, etc., control girls' sexuality, descriptions of norms indicate a loose set of control markers. These different levels of control are illustrated in figure 3 as four markers constituting a control spectrum. The markers, consulting, guiding, protecting, and restricting, suggest that control can range from a lighter touch to oppressive restrictions. This spectrum presents the four markers as different power dynamics, which can vary depending on context.

Figure 3:
The sexuality control spectrum



While not definitive, this spectrum offers an adaptable tool that programme designers and implementers can use when learning more for themselves through community dialogue about the control of girls' sexuality in a specific context. Appreciating different markers or shades of control and mapping them can 1] lead to better insider understandings of control, i.e., what is going on in a locale; 2] inform customised responses or interventions, and 3] offer a normative standard from which changes in power dynamics can be gauged.

Table 1 describes the four control markers and provides an illustrative example from the community skyrocket learning exchanges.

Table 1
The sexuality control spectrum – marker description

CONSULT	
Descriptive features <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Actions value girls' needs, wishes, and desires, taking them into account through consultation and conversation.• There is concern for what she wants. Advancing her best interests as she frames them.• The parent/daughter relationship is one of trust.	Illustration <p>In Rajasthan, India, a father recounted how he fought with the community and relatives to educate his five daughters to their dreams and have the courage to face life with confidence and dignity. The family prioritised and realised the girls' wants and needs.</p>

GUIDE

Descriptive features

- Actions meant to guide a girl's behaviour.
- The action is often to 'keep a watchful eye' on her and the behaviour of those around her.
- For example, being watchful of her engagements with boys and men to guard against pregnancy.

Illustration

In Mali and Uganda, religious and traditional leaders shared how they use 'tricks' (beliefs and curses) as deterrents to prevent early sexual debuts and the risk of unplanned pregnancy.

PROTECT

Descriptive features

- Practices, measures, even documents and laws that preserve her bodily integrity or rights.
- Practices and measures that preserve the honour of a girl and her family - prevent harm to dignity.

Illustration

In Mali, custom allows an older woman/grandmother to provide a girl with education and a set of prohibitions (things she cannot do). She reinforces this by appointing a boy to be her friend that watches out for her. He automatically becomes her 'protective man' (i.e., the guarantor of her virginity until marriage).

RESTRICT

Descriptive features

- Regulations and constraints that are highly restrictive of girls' movements and choices. Girls' mobility (leaving home, going to school or work) and engagement with others (real and virtual) are strictly limited.
- No or very limited choice is given to her.
- Decisions are taken for her – with relative disregard for her needs, interests, or wishes. What is in her best interests (avoiding harm or danger, e.g., sexual harassment) as defined by others and upholding family name and honour constitute the core objectives.
- Expectations are directive and 'non-negotiable,' presided by the needs and beliefs of others.
- Parental relationships, particularly paternal relationships, are strained. The girls feel oppressed.

Illustration

In Bangladesh, tight restrictions on girls' mobility and engagements with others are used to guard girls against eve-teasing (that is, staring, stalking, passing comments, and inappropriate physical touch) and other forms of prevalent sexual harassment, for which she will be embarrassed, degraded, and blamed for and which will cause familial problems.

In Mali, the practice of fertility testing can regulate a girl's sexuality and reproduction. The demonstration of fertility by falling pregnant becomes a precursor to marriage.






6 HOW DO GIRLS USE THEIR AGENCY TO RESPOND TO CONTROL?

Girls' agency in the context of child marriage has received attention from the research community.¹⁴ Research from Latin America,¹⁵ found that by exercising their agency in three particular ways detailed in Table 2, girls do decide and can choose marriage.

Table 2

Three types of girls' agency in child marriage

	TYPE OF AGENCY	DESCRIPTION
	Oppositional agency	Girls deny or resist the restrictions placed upon them.
	Accommodating agency	Girls see marriage as inevitable and enter into this practice accepting the social norms and inequalities that it brings.
	Transformative agency	Girls enter into marriage and, from within, seek to improve their situation by negotiating the terms in a way that challenges social norms and the inequality between women and men.

In order to understand how programmes should respond to these findings, more must be known about how girls make decisions about marriage and how different types of agency intersect.¹⁶ For now, a Learning Spark Fund conversation on love marriages and elopement in Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, described in case study #3, demonstrates that girls' agency is complex, and situational aspects and power dynamics can result in girls drawing on multiple types of agency. Accounts such as this are important. They not only reveal the complexity of agency but show researchers and practitioners that much more needs to be known about the decision-making processes of young girls, including how different types of agency co-exist.¹⁷

CASE STUDY #3 Love Marriages and Elopement in Asia as expressions of girls' agency and decision making

Discussants, senior programme officers, or directors of organisations from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan used a Learning Spark Fund conversation as an opportunity to explore the contexts and experiences of girls' agency concerning elopement and love marriages. They were comprehensive in their coverage, reflecting on rural, urban, and tribal settings, and agreed that all four countries shared a common issue. Their reflections suggest that many situational factors inform girls' decision to engage in a love marriage or elopement. Moreover, her response can draw on different types of agency.

Discussants agreed that a key issue is that many girls cannot talk to their parents about issues regarding their life because of high levels of mutual mistrust. Parental relationships deteriorate, and girls feel oppressed and depressed, which may motivate them to enter into a love marriage as a way to find some freedom – to be able to move outside the home and engage with others freely, including boys and men. As stated by one of the participants: *"A girl is like a bird in a cage. There are restrictions put on her mobility and opportunities for education and development."* By choosing marriage, girls may exercise their agency in oppositional ways and defy their parents' authority. Furthermore, participants noted that parents, children, and siblings do not talk about sexuality. This can lead to love marriage and elopement because girls are not fully aware of risks and opportunities. In short, poor communication between parents and the girl can lead her to turn to boys to be heard and understood.

Additionally, discussants agreed that a girl's agency and their decision to enter a love marriage can be influenced by social media as it makes marriage look attractive. One participant emphasised: "Girls are living in a fantasy world of social media and TV where marriage is portrayed as a bed of roses, but people in it [marriage] know it is actually not." This suggests an element of transformative agency – with girls seeing marriage as a way to improve their situation by receiving love and care.

In Pakistan, as one discussant explained, parents believe that social media is a key reason for girls having romantic relationships, engaging in love marriages, or eloping. It was also noted that girls are under strong peer pressure to have a boyfriend. In Nepal, peer influence was considered very significant. One participant stated: "Girls see their friends getting married, going out with their husbands, having nice ornaments, good clothes and looking beautiful. This attracts them, and they want to be happy like that too." Furthermore, the social insecurity of girls in India – through the risk of eve-teasing (a form of sexual harassment) – was also raised as a concern. Participants pointed to accommodating agency and marriage as a way to seek protection from this.

Discussants reflected on the implications of girls agency and decision-making and several responses:

- Interventions that focus on the actual reality of getting married for a girl's life -career and purpose, to fill what could be a gap in her knowledge as no one tells her how hard marriage can be (offer a reality check);
- Make use of couples counselling, an intervention already piloted in India, to educate young couples about relationships and sex;
- Develop more peer networking and peer pressure management responses;
- Mobilise community health workers, as attempted in Pakistan, to educate mothers and girls on sex;
- Support empowerment clinics, as in Nepal, to facilitate parents and children to talk about sex and sexuality;
- Hold joint sessions with parents and girls, allowing girls to say what they need to their parents and how they want their parents to communicate with them. This would help facilitate intergenerational dialogues and could help to build up a good environment in the family.



Insider views from community learning exchanges and themes raised in the Learning Spark Fund conversations illustrate that girls can reconcile social norms and gender inequality and enter into marriage. In some contexts, girls might decide that marriage is inevitable. Elsewhere, marriage could be considered a 'good decision' by the girl, given her circumstances, because it can improve her and her family's situation or offer some reward or benefit, even if only temporarily. An SRHR activist explained that marriage can be a form of protection in a precarious or post-conflict setting, such as northern Uganda. A Learning Spark Fund conversation on transactional sex suggests that in contexts of economic vulnerability, marriage is a desirable livelihood strategy with men acting as 'providers.' An SRHR researcher from Malawi stated: "When one gets

married, they are under the care of their husband. If they are not getting this from their parents, marriage, in the end, tends to be that comfort zone for a lot of girls." Furthermore, girls might consider marriage a way to get social awards and status.¹⁸ A child marriage programme practitioner from Kenya explained: *"We live in a society that glorifies marriage, and there is a premium to be a married woman. You are looked down upon if you are unmarried. This [marriage] is something that girls aspire to."* Some research¹⁹ refers to accommodating agency as a coping strategy with which girls engage in marriage and accept social norms and gender inequality.

Lastly, examples of transformational agency were also found in grassroots accounts of marriage. In these cases, girls enter into marriage but attempt to shift the social norms and gender inequalities that harm them. One example from community conversations illustrates how a girl tried to negotiate her rights and equalities by negotiating a return to school or a delayed pregnancy with her husband or in-laws. Insider accounts also focus on the girls' transformation agency by acting as role models or mentors to one another. Moreover, examples from India show how some organisations use couples counselling to engage young married or cohabiting couples to educate them about gender and sexuality. These types of interventions provide emotional support for the couple and help them grow in the marriage alliance.

Going forward – key messages

Building on the six key findings of girls' agency and decision-making detailed in part one, this concluding section of the article reflects on implications. This article proposes that emerging empirical evidence and insider insight on girl's agency and decision-making has 'pivot' potential to bring about two changes:

- **A new child marriage framework²⁰:** This would offer a basis for refreshing empowerment interventions to enhance girls' participation, rights, and wellbeing²¹
- **An expanded role for practitioners:** This would see the professionals responsible for programme design, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation, focusing on implementation and policy based on their expert knowledge and access to girls and other community members' insider viewpoints

These points are expanded below with a summary of implementation actions and agenda setting actions that practitioners might consider when involving themselves in the evolution of the post-2020 child marriage frameworks and the next generation of child marriage programmes and empowerment interventions.



Implementation actions:

Throughout programme design and development, practitioners should:

Stop doing:

- *Seeing success in terms of ending child marriage:* Focusing programmes and interventions on the prevention of marriage and the girls at risk of marriage.
- *Thinking in terms of the right choice:* Assuming that girls don't want or will not choose marriage.
- *Using a narrow framing of agency:* Emphasising girls' individual agency and decision-making.

Start doing:

- *Focus more on transformative agency:* Target married girls and young couples by developing programmes and interventions seeking to support transformative agency to achieve greater equality within marriages.
- *Emphasise girl's participation in decision-making:* Develop empowerment interventions that enhance girls' participation in collective decision-making or shared agency concerning marriage and other life-changing decisions.
- *Start taking choice seriously:* Focus on understanding young girls' decision-making processes by mapping situational aspects and power dynamics. Talk to girls and their parents.

Do differently:

- *Let go of the default that more information is the solution:* Don't assume that a lack of knowledge is the problem or gap that will bring about positive change in the lives and rights of girls.
- *Listen more:* Maximise proximity and access to communities to understand their viewpoints. Listen and respond, ideally by co-producing appropriate interventions.

Agenda setting actions:

These are actions that inform and influence policy and framework decisions in the child marriage sector. This can be at the global, national, state, or district levels. They are based on what emerging research and insider viewpoints mean for solid understandings of each context, the starting point for frameworks, programmes, and interventions.

In using their agency to inform new policy and programmes, practitioners should:

Stop doing:

- *Focusing largely on implementation:* Restricting the practitioner role to largely a technical or implementation one.

Start doing:

- *Influence what the sector needs to know:* Exercise practitioner agency and positioning based on their knowledge and access to communities to influence the research agenda and policy directions. Use participatory tools, such as community dialogues, learning exchanges, and youth-led research.
- *Make your voice louder:* Be more proactive in raising practitioners' voices and viewpoints, for example, through blogs, webinars, and other information-sharing and engagement platforms.

Do differently:

- *Push back on what is not working:* Challenge conventional narratives and approaches that are not appropriate or risk causing harm. Identify blind spots and propose solutions that are grounded in girls' lived realities.
- *Engage in the critical debates emphasising practitioners knowledge:* Weigh into the 'child protection vs child rights' debate more heavily.

References:

- 1 *Girls agency in the context of child marriage is a topic that researchers are actively engaging. Numerous peer review articles have emerged in 2020 and 2021. While it is beyond the scope and purpose of this article to engage in the robust definitional debates – agency is a contested idea. It is understood in many different ways. There is not one standard definition. Hoko Hori, 'Child Marriage as a 'solution' to Modern youth in Bali'. Progress in Development Studies, 20, 4 (2020) pp. 282-295.*
- 2 *This includes the three alliances funded by the Government of the Netherlands: More than Brides, Yes, I do and Her Choice.*
- 3 *Alice Y Taylor, Erin Murphy-Graham, Julia Van Horn, Bapu Vaitla, Angel Del Valle, Beniamino Cislighi. 'Child Marriages and Unions in Latin America: Understanding the role of Agency and Social Norms.' Journal of Adolescent Health, 64 (2019), S45-S51.*
- 4 *A central discussion around girls' agency, choice and voice centres on the protection – child rights debate or dilemma. Suzanne Petroni, Madhumita Das & Susan M. Sawyer. 'Protection versus rights: age of majority versus age of sexual consent'. Lancet Child Adolescent Health, 2019 274-80.; Ruth Dixon Mueller. 'How young is 'too young'? Comparative perspectives on adolescent sexual, marital and reproductive transitions. Studies in Family Planning, 2008; 39; 4;247-262.*
- 5 *Hoko, Hori. "Walking a thin line: Taking children's decisions to marry seriously.' Childhood, 2020 vol 27 (2). 254-270.*
- 6 *Esther Miedema, Winny Koster, Nicky Pouw, 'Talking choice seriously: Emic understandings of decision- making about child marriage'. Progress in Development Studies, 20, 4 (2020): 261-269.*
- 7 *Alice Y Taylor, Erin Murphy-Graham, Julia Van Horn, Bapu Vaitla, Angel Del Valle, Beniamino Cislighi. 'Child Marriages and Unions in Latin America: Understanding the role of Agency and Social Norms.' Journal of Adolescent Health, 64 (2019), S45-S51.*
- 8 *Michelle Lokot, Munshi Sulaiman, Amiya Bhatia, Nour Horanieh, Beniamino Cislighi. 'Conceptualizing 'agency' within child marriage: Implications for research and practice'. Child Abuse and Neglect, 117 (2021), 1056.*
- 9 *Michelle Lokot, Munshi Sulaiman, Amiya Bhatia, Nour Horanieh, Beniamino Cislighi. 'Conceptualizing 'agency' within child marriage: Implications for research and practice'. Child Abuse and Neglect, 117 (2021), 1056.*
- 10 *Margaret E. Greene, Stephanie Perlson, Jacqueline Hart & Margo Mullinax. The Centrality of Sexuality: for understanding child, early and forced marriage. Greene Works. 2016; The Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions and Sexuality Working Group and the Kendeda Fund. Convening Report: Tackling the Taboo: Taking a Gender-Transformative Approach to Realizing Adolescent Girls' Rights. January 222, 2020.*
- 11 *The presentation of situational aspects (figure 1) that control marriage elaborates using grassroots narratives from community learning exchanges, the position found in the literature that there are many cross-cutting dynamics to child marriage and that shame and honour (the fear factor) while significant is but one force at work. Miedema, Esther, Winny Koster, Nicky Pouw, Philippe, Meyer, & Alben Sotirova, 'The Struggle for Public Recognition: Understanding Early Marriage through the lens of Honor and Shame in Six Countries in South Asia and West Africa'. Progress in Development Studies 20, 4 (2020), pp. 328-346.*
- 12 *Fear of adolescent sexuality is emphasised in the grey literature on the linkages between adolescent sexuality and child marriage and informed the child marriage narrative on controlling girls' sexuality. Margaret E. Greene, Stephanie Perlson, Jacqueline Hart & Margo Mullinax. The Centrality of Sexuality: for understanding child, early and forced marriage. Greene Works. 2016.; Child, Early and Forced Marriage and the Control of Sexuality and Reproduction. A Briefing Note, American Jewish World Service; The Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions and Sexuality Working Group and the Kendeda Fund. Convening Report: Tackling the Taboo: Taking a Gender-Transformative Approach to Realizing Adolescent Girls' Rights. January 222, 2020.*

- 13 Margaret E. Greene, Stephanie Perlson, Jacqueline Hart & Margo Mullinax. *The Centrality of Sexuality: for understanding child, early and forced marriage*. Greene Works. 2016.
- 14 Of note is the 2020 Special Issue of *Progress in Development Studies*: “Governing choice and child Marriage: Young women, marriage and development aid programmes”
- 15 Alice Y Taylor, Erin Murphy-Graham, Julia Van Horn, Bapu Vaitla, Angel Del Valle, Beniamino Cislighi. ‘Child Marriages and Unions in Latin America: Understanding the role of Agency and Social Norms.’ *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 64 (2019), S45-S51.
- 16 Researchers challenge the view found in the conventional child marriage narrative and programming that the practice of child marriage is “traditional” and not modern enough by demonstrating that in some instance’s girls see marriage as “a solution”.; Esther Miedema, Winny Koster, Nicky Pouw, ‘Talking choice seriously: Emic understandings of decision- making about child marriage’. *Progress in Development Studies*, 20, 4 (2020): 261-269.; Hoko Hori, ‘Child Marriage as a ‘solution’ to Modern youth in Bali’. *Progress in Development Studies*, 20, 4 (2020) pp. 282-295.
- 17 The lack of understanding of the decision-making processes of girls was identified in earlier research on girl’s agency in child marriage and remains relevant today. Erin Murphy-Graham and Graciela Leal. ‘Child Marriage, Agency and Schooling in Rural Honduras’, *Comparative Education Review*, vol 59, no. 1
- 18 The links between social recognition and status and marriage are noted in the literature. Miedema, Esther, Winny Koster, Nicky Pouw, Philippe, Meyer, & Alben Sotirova, ‘The Struggle for Public Recognition: Understanding Early Marriage through the lens of Honor and Shame in Six Countries in South Asia and West Africa’. *Progress in Development Studies* 20, 4 (2020), pp. 328-346.
- 19 Michelle Lokot, Munshi Sulaiman, Amiya Bhatia, Nour Horanieh, Beniamino Cislighi. ‘Conceptualizing ‘agency’ within child marriage: Implications for research and practice’. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 117 (2021), 1056.
- 20 Offer a child marriage narrative or paradigm that differ from the norm – what has been conventional to date.
- 21 The range of empowerment interventions found in conventional child marriage programming is robust and comprehensive. They include safe spaces (e.g., girls clubs), increasing the individual and collective confidence, wellbeing and negotiating power of girls, the provision of information on rights and harms, access to comprehensive sexuality education and other services, as well as education and skills training for increased economic and life opportunities.



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