



## Commentary

## The Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium: Connecting Data and Evidence for Action



Yvette Efevbera, Sc.D.<sup>a,\*</sup>, Suzanne Petroni, Ph.D.<sup>b</sup>, Mary Beth Hastings, M.I.A.<sup>c</sup>, Claudia Cappa, Ph.D.<sup>d</sup>, Karen Austrian, Ph.D.<sup>e</sup>, Stephanie Psaki, Ph.D.<sup>f</sup>, Thoai Ngô, Ph.D.<sup>g</sup>, Christina Misunas, M.Sc.<sup>f</sup>, Momoe Makino, Ph.D.<sup>f,h</sup>, Fatima Zahra, Ph.D.<sup>i</sup>, Arwyn Finnie, M.Sc.<sup>j</sup>, Fraidy Reiss<sup>k</sup>, Anita Raj, Ph.D.<sup>l</sup>, Nicole Johns, M.P.H.<sup>l</sup>, Benjamin Leo, M.A.<sup>m</sup>, and Marissa Block, M.P.P.<sup>m</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Gender Equality Division, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Seattle, Washington

<sup>b</sup> Gender Equality Solutions, Arlington, Virginia

<sup>c</sup> Iris Group, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

<sup>d</sup> UNICEF, Data and Analytics Section, New York, New York

<sup>e</sup> GIRL Center, Population Council, Nairobi, Kenya

<sup>f</sup> GIRL Center, Population Council, New York, New York

<sup>g</sup> Population Council, New York, New York

<sup>h</sup> Institute of Developing Economies, JETRO, Chiba, Japan

<sup>i</sup> GIRL Center, Population Council, Washington, District of Columbia

<sup>j</sup> Girls Not Brides, London, UK

<sup>k</sup> Unchained At Last, Westfield, New Jersey

<sup>l</sup> Center on Gender Equity and Health, Department of Medicine, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, California

<sup>m</sup> Fraym, Arlington, Virginia

Over the past two decades, there has been remarkable growth in the child, early, and forced marriage evidence base, paralleled by increased global awareness of the magnitude and harmful effects of these practices in different contexts. Despite this, researchers, implementers, advocates, and donors [1] have identified substantial remaining gaps in knowledge. New, more nuanced, and context-specific evidence is needed to eliminate child marriage (before age 18) by 2030, the deadline set under the Sustainable Development Goals.

This supplement fills a few of these evidence gaps, including, for example, by looking at the practice of child marriage among girls in high-prevalence settings and among populations and in contexts that have thus far been under-researched and under-represented in the literature. It aims to summarize recent work on the distinct and context-specific drivers of child marriage to better inform interventions and advocacy efforts to prevent and respond to the practice and also considers the potential long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriage globally.

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\* Address correspondence to: Yvette Efevbera, Sc.D., Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 500 5th Ave N, Seattle, WA 98109.

E-mail address: [yvette.efevbera@gatesfoundation.org](mailto:yvette.efevbera@gatesfoundation.org) (Y. Efevbera).

As the previous editorial [2] and following commentary [3] note, the studies in this supplement build on the research priorities identified at an expert convening held in Geneva in 2019. (This supplement is also closely aligned with a forthcoming *Journal of Adolescent Health* supplement, also focused on child marriage, which is made possible by the flourishing of new research and evidence related to the diverse nature of child marriage worldwide.) We focus this commentary on another global priority: supporting the coordination and utilization of child marriage research. In addition to filling evidence gaps, the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was created to do just this.

The Consortium was designed to test whether aligning a set of research partners and coordinating joint advocacy and learning activities could maximize learning and minimize duplication of efforts. It brought together seven organizations—Fraym, Girls Not Brides, the GIRL Center at the Population Council, Iris Group, UNICEF, Unchained at Last, and the University of California San Diego's Center on Gender Equity and Health—with the aim of fostering coordinated evidence-driven actions. This collaboration not only informed the articles in this supplement but also seeded the creation of new partnerships that are poised to address some of the many persistent barriers to ending child marriage.

Working through the Consortium enabled deepening of partners' collective understanding of the different ways in which

existing data sets could be analyzed and utilized to expand our global understanding of child marriage. Consortium partners shared their learnings, refined their analyses, and considered broader applications of the evidence. This included novel state-level data analysis to elucidate the incidence of child marriage in the United States, hyper-localized (1 km<sup>2</sup>) analysis of geo-tagged survey data to identify child marriage hotspots and correlates in Asian and African contexts, deep qualitative understandings of how community-level norms associated with child marriage in diverse rural and urban poor settings lead to individual-level impacts, and a global analysis of trends in child marriage and key indicators of well-being, among others. A key message emerging from partners' activities, consistent with previous research on this topic, is that context matters for understanding the drivers and impacts of child marriage. Beyond this insight, partners took a step further, demonstrating (through a new conceptual framework laid out by Psaki et al. [4]) how understanding and describing the context of child marriage can help to inform better targeted and more effective interventions.

The work of the partners created space for complementarity. Partners that conduct research learned about new methods and collaborated with advocates to translate findings in ways that could most effectively inform policy and practice. Partners that work primarily with advocates and policymakers accessed different types of research and are now better positioned to apply new evidence to their work. Several partners are working together, for example, to design and implement workshops with stakeholders in high child marriage prevalence countries, applying learnings generated through Consortium efforts on the political economy and dynamics of child marriage in those respective countries.

This supplement includes just a selection of learning products generated by the Consortium. Among other work, for example,

- UNICEF has produced a report that analyzes global child marriage trends over time, highlighting countries that have made notable progress. It also released country briefs and subnational case studies designed to inform country programming, including examples of interventions within different sectors that hold promise to end child marriage at scale.
- Girls Not Brides has developed policy briefs, including on the relationships between child marriage and female genital mutilation, on how social protection programs can be better designed to reduce economic stresses that contribute to child marriage, and on why taking an intersectional approach is needed to ensure no girls are left behind.
- Fraym has created high-resolution maps for seven countries that apply spatiotemporal patterns to illustrate child marriage trends and risk segmentation at subnational levels.
- The Population Council is analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage and related outcomes for adolescent girls in two counties in Kenya.
- Iris Group has conducted political economy analyses that offer a high-level view of the environment for child marriage policies and programming in eight countries, helping to

contextualize the findings of the partners' projects in the same geographies.

To ensure the widest possible reach and application of the evidence, these products will be accompanied by accessible briefs, blogs, and innovative visualizations. These materials will be open-access and hosted on the respective organizations' websites, as well as on a dedicated page on the Girls Not Brides website (<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-learning-partners-consortium/>).

In addition to producing new evidence, the Consortium has promoted new voices and highlighted a need for redefining data, evidence, and expertise. Partners, such as the Population Council GIRL Center and UCSD Center on Gender Equity and Health, have, for example, intentionally expanded the engagement of country-based and early career researchers in designing and carrying out research, with several of the lead and co-authors of the articles in this supplement from low- and middle-income countries.

As the number and type of researchers, implementers, advocates, and donors in the child marriage field continue to evolve, coordination and collaboration are increasingly urgent. By bringing together partners with different strengths in research, data analysis, advocacy, and policy, the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium has demonstrated that concerted coordination and collaboration can be useful tools for maximizing resources and minimizing duplication.

Our hope is that the partnerships, collaborative opportunities, and learning the Consortium has generated will extend into the future, informing and informed by a wealth of stakeholders working to end child marriage. Even as the Consortium itself comes to an end, we see opportunities to close remaining knowledge gaps, use evidence in context-appropriate child marriage interventions, mobilize resources for adolescent girls' development and well-being, and create spaces for new voices and champions—including adolescents themselves. Embracing these opportunities can in turn generate new scholarship, revitalized activism, and strengthened approaches that can mean true progress for the elimination of child marriage and, more broadly, for adolescent girls.

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