Measuring Social Norms Related to Child Marriage Among Adult Decision-Makers of Young Girls in Phalombe and Thyolo, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Given the importance of developing appropriate measures for assessing social norm change, this article documents the process, results, and lessons learned from a baseline survey measuring social norms related to child marriage in Phalombe and Thyolo districts in Southern Malawi.

Methods: A quantitative questionnaire was administered to a representative sample of all adults (age ≥18 years) who self-identified as a decision-maker for at least one girl between the ages of 10 and 17 years, for a total sample size of 1,492 respondents. Measures of empirical expectations, normative expectations, and sanctions related to child marriage were modeled after previously developed measures and social norm theory.

Results: Using an established social norm diagnostic process, this study found that, despite Southern Malawi having the lowest median age of first marriage in the country, child marriage may not be a strong social norm in the intervention communities. Specifically, although 89.3% of respondents expressed the empirical expectation that "Most girls in this community marry before the age of 18," agreement with the normative expectation that "Most people in this community expect girls to marry before the age of 18" was just 53.2% overall and fear of sanctions was just 36.4%.

Conclusions: Taken together, the presence of prudential reasons for child marriage and the weak evidence of normative expectations and sanctions indicate that child marriage may not be a social norm in these communities although it may be indirectly perpetuated by other norms related to adolescent sexuality and access to contraception.

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Child marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18 years, is a human rights violation so widely acknowledged that its complete elimination by 2030 was included among the Sustainable Development Goals, which were adopted by more than 190 countries in 2015 [1]. Success of this bold endeavor in such a short time will hinge on prevention programs' abilities to rapidly assess and act to change the factors perpetuating child marriage in the diverse locations where it exists. To that end, the development community has recently taken an interest in...
understanding the role that social norms play in perpetuating child marriage, believing they may represent a missing piece of the puzzle critical to prevention [2–4]. This interest in social norms related to child marriage coincides with a burgeoning research field dedicated to measuring the presence and strength of social norms, raising new insights and questions about when and how norms drive human behavior [5,6]. This article documents the process, results, and challenges from a quantitative survey that measured social norms related to child marriage in Malawi’s Phalombe and Thyolo districts.

As of the most recent Demographic and Health Survey, conducted in Malawi in 2015, 42% of women aged 20–24 married before the age of 18 years [7]. Phalombe and Thyolo are located in Malawi’s Southern region, where the median age at first marriage and median age at first sex are the lowest in the country, at 17.9 years and 16.4 years, respectively [7]. Malawi’s government has recently enacted laws to end child marriage at a national level. In 2015, parliament passed a law that banned marriage before the age of 18 years and, in April 2017, the exception allowing child marriage with parental consent was removed [8]. Despite this progress, it is uncertain whether administrators are enforcing these laws at local levels.

Previous work exploring reasons for child marriage in Malawi found that most young women married because of poverty and, to a lesser extent, unplanned pregnancy [9], while education found that most young women married because of poverty and, enforcing these laws at local levels.

To select the intervention sites, the ENGAGE team restricted their search to districts in Southern Malawi with few child marriage interventions. After visiting these districts, the team selected Phalombe and Thyolo as the two districts most comparable on relevant characteristics, using available statistics related to child marriage and interviews with key governmental and community stakeholders. Both arms including the CSO intervention were a priori assigned to Thyolo, the district with the fewest resources. Within each district, the arms were then randomly assigned to traditional authorities (TAs), the geographic division below the district level in Malawi, excluding TAs that were atypical or too challenging for program implementation. Ultimately, in Thyolo District, TA Changata was assigned both the girls and CSO intervention, and TA Mchiramwera was assigned the CSO-only intervention. In Phalombe, TA Chiwalo was assigned the girls-only intervention, and TA Nazombe was designated as the comparison site. A map of the selected TAs is shown in Figure 1.

Sample

Quantitative questionnaires were administered to a representative sample of 1,492 adults who self-identified as a decision-maker for at least one girl between the ages of 10 and 17 years. The sampling for baseline data collection followed a two-stage sampling design. First, 15 villages were randomly selected in each TA with probability proportional to size. Then, 25 eligible households were randomly selected within each village. Households were considered eligible if they contained any individual eligible for the survey. Individuals were considered eligible if they were aged 18 years or above, had lived in the community for at least 1 year, and self-identified as a decision-maker for at least one girl between the ages of 10 and 17 years. Finally, one eligible household member was randomly selected to be interviewed, without respect to the gender of the individual. If the randomly selected individual did not consent to be interviewed, they were replaced by another eligible individual in their household. If the selected household member was not home, enumerators made three visits to attempt to interview that person before replacing them with another member of the household. If an entire household was not home after three visits or if no eligible individual in the household consented to participate in the study, it was replaced with the next household on the randomized list.

Before the start of data collection, enumerators completed a 1-week training facilitated by two ICRW staff members covering topics including research ethics, the study purpose and methodology, a question-by-question review of the tool, including review
of the accuracy of the translation, and piloting. During data collection, enumerators sought informed consent after ensuring individual eligibility and before beginning the interview. Interviews were conducted in a location where privacy could reasonably be expected, out of earshot of other family members. Informed consent and the surveys were administered in the local language, Chichewa, with translated survey instruments. Data were collected on tablets, and no identifiable information was collected. At the end of each day, all data collectors submitted their tablets to the field supervisor, who uploaded the data to a secure laptop and backed up all data onto an online, secure server. The tablets, laptops, and server were all password-protected, and the passwords were only known to members of the study team. Ethical approval of the research protocol and tools was obtained from both the Institutional Review Board of ICRW and Malawi’s National Commission for Science and Technology.

Measures

The social norms measures were based on previously established measures and social norms theory [16,17]. As shown in Table 1, in this study, measures of social expectations and sanctions related to child marriage were adapted from measures developed for CARE’s Abdiboru project in Ethiopia, which aims to reduce marriage among young adolescent girls and was the closest topical fit to the present study. The measures of empirical and normative expectations were used almost verbatim, whereas the measure of sanctions was refined in conversation with the ENGAGE project’s local implementation team to relate specifically to what they perceived as the most common social sanction for families that failed to marry their daughters young in these communities—loss of respect.

Behaviors related to child marriage were assessed by asking respondents about their past decisions and intentions for one unmarried or recently married girl aged 10 to 17 years, called the “reference girl.” To select the reference girl, participants were asked to complete a roster of all unmarried or recently married girls of that age under their decision-making influence. They were then asked to identify the girl over whom they had the most decision-making influence, who was used as the reference girl during that module of the interview.

Personal normative beliefs were assessed by measuring agreement with the statement “it is wrong to marry a girl before the age of 18” and other related questions about personal opinions of whether a girl should have a say in when and whom to marry.

Questions about prudential reasons for child marriage were asked as part of Plan International’s Child Marriage Acceptability score, a 23-item score developed in 2015 to assess child marriage acceptability at the individual level that had previously been adapted to the Malawian context by KIT Health as part of their Yes I Do project [18,19]. The five individual questions used to assess prudential reasons for child marriage include statements such as “Marrying girls at a young age can help provide them security” and “Marrying girls young can help prevent sexual violence, assault, and harassment.”

In addition to data collected as part of the questionnaire, enumerators were asked to document their own observations of relevant information about local child marriage bylaws or interventions that they opportunistically observed in the field.

Analyses

All statistical analyses were conducted in Stata 14.0 (StataCorp. 2015. Stata Statistical Software: Release 14. College Station, TX).

To assess the presence of a social norm related to child marriage, descriptive statistics for each component of the norms measures were calculated. Chi-squared tests for significant differences by gender and simple logistic regression to test for differences by age were performed on key outcome variables. Then, the structured diagnostic process established by Bicchieri et al. [16] was followed, as explained in more detail in the Results section. When these results suggested that child marriage may not be a social norm, opportunistically collected contextual information was reviewed to hypothesize explanations for this unanticipated result. Other data from the survey, particularly data on decision-makers’ attitudes toward adolescent sexuality, were also analyzed to inform alternative explanations for child marriage in these communities of Malawi. Unfortunately, although analyses linking these potential factors with behavioral outcomes were planned, very few (<2.0%) adults selected reference girls who had ever been married, rendering this line of investigation inadvisable.

Results

Sample characteristics are shown in Table 2. Most respondents were parents, grandparents, or adult siblings of their
### Table 1

| Concept | ERCW’s ENGAGE measure | CARE’s AbdiBoru project measure | Bicchieri’s measure | Abdiboru project measure |
|---------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Beliefs about what others do | Most adolescent girls marry before the age of 17 | Most girls marry in this community marry before the age of 18 | Most people in this community marry before the age of 18 | Most people in the community expect adolescent girls to marry before the age of 18 |
| Number of women | Not provided | Number of women: 0–100 | Number of women: 0–100 | Number of women: 0–100 |
| Number of men | Not provided | Number of men: 0–100 | Number of men: 0–100 | Number of men: 0–100 |
| Sanctions | Marrying early avoids social stigma | Marrying early avoids social stigma | Marrying early avoids social stigma | Marrying early avoids social stigma |
| Social consequences (positive or negative) of an action | Not provided | Not provided | Not provided | Not provided |

**Beliefs about what others do**

- **Most adolescent girls marry before the age of 17**
- **Most girls marry in this community marry before the age of 18**
- **Most people in this community expect adolescent girls to marry before the age of 18**
- **Most people in the community expect adolescent girls to marry before the age of 18**

**Number of women and men**

- **Number of women**: 0–100
- **Number of men**: 0–100

**Sanctions**

- **Marrying early avoids social stigma**

**Social consequences (positive or negative) of an action**

- Not provided

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Responses to the measures required to assess whether child marriage is a social norm are shown in Table 3. We found very high empirical expectations in all four sites; almost 9 in 10 adult decision-makers (89.3%) agreed that most girls in their community marry before the age of 18 years. However, there was less evidence of normative expectations and even less evidence of sanctions across most sites. Agreement with the normative expectation that “Most people in this community expect girls to marry before the age of 18” was 53% overall and did not vary significantly by age or gender. Agreement with the statement about sanctions, “If I do not ensure my daughters and/or nieces are married early, my family will not be respected in the community,” was 36% overall and decreased slightly but significantly with age (odds ratio = 0.99; no significant difference by gender).

These results were cross-checked with contextual information observed by the study team during data collection. They documented many instances of intervention by local leaders against child marriage. For example, just as data collection was starting, the District Executive Council for Phalombe adopted district-wide laws setting the age of marriage at 21 years for men and 18 years for women and officially annulling all marriages that did not meet these criteria. Several village chiefs in both districts had also set by-laws with higher ages of marriage and other local leaders. However, not all local leaders sanctioned child marriage, and some had married children themselves.

We then explored alternative explanations for child marriage in these communities. First, we verified that personal normative beliefs were not supportive of child marriage. More than 9 of every 10 respondents (92.3%) agreed that it is wrong to marry a girl before the age of 18 years and, similarly, about 95% of adult decision-makers agreed that a girl should have a say in who she marries, and nearly 90% agreed that a girl should have a say in when she marries.

Then, we explored the possibility that child marriage occurs for prudential reasons. We found little evidence that respondents considered child marriage protective for girls, either by providing them security (8.0% agreement) or by preventing sexual violence, assault, or harassment (10.1% agreement). However, many respondents reported that child marriage sometimes happens for financial reasons, and more than three in four (78.2%) reported that child marriage “mostly happens because there is a lack of education and job opportunities.”
Finally, given that more than four in five respondents (84.9%) reported that child marriage may happen because of pregnancy in their community, we investigated the possibility that child marriage occurs because of social norms and sanctions related to adolescent sexuality and access to contraception. Although we did not have measures of social expectations related to these topics in our baseline dataset, we did measure adult decision-makers’ attitudes toward adolescent sexuality and girls’ access to sexual and reproductive health services, as shown in Table 4. More than 9 of 10 (92.7%) adult decision-makers agreed with the statement “Unmarried girls who get pregnant are naughty,” and fewer than 1 in 20 felt it was acceptable for boys (4.1%) or girls (3.8%) to have sex before marriage. In addition, less than half (44.5%) agreed with the statement “All girls have a right to access contraceptives/family planning services,” and even fewer (37.9%) agreed that unmarried adolescent girls should have access. Fully four of five adult decision-makers (79.7%) felt that “Giving unmarried girls access to contraceptives makes them promiscuous.”

Discussion

Our results indicate that child marriage may not be a social norm in these communities in Southern Malawi. Other studies indicating strong child marriage norms have shown high levels of both empirical and normative expectations [20], with participants reporting that there are sanctions when the norm is not complied with [6]. In addition, social norms theory suggests that as social norms relax or shift, empirical expectations should decrease before normative expectations [21]. Instead, the majority of our sample had high empirical expectations, weak normative expectations, and little concern for sanctions, indicating that child marriage is likely a descriptive norm, defined as one that people follow because they think others are doing it or because they lack alternative options [4,16]. As explained further below, we specifically hypothesize that child marriage occurs because of a lack of alternative options for adolescent girls. Therefore, although norms may provide a partial explanation for...

Table 2
Baseline demographic characteristics of respondents by site, Malawi, 2017

|                        | Chiwalo (n = 375) | Mchiramwera (n = 375) | Changata (n = 372) | Nazombe (n = 370) | Total (n = 1,492) |
|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Sex                    |                   |                       |                   |                   |                  |
| Male                   | 133 (35.5)        | 59 (15.7)             | 101 (27.2)        | 117 (31.6)        | 410 (27.5)       |
| Female                 | 242 (64.5)        | 316 (84.3)            | 271 (72.8)        | 253 (68.4)        | 1,082 (72.5)     |
| Age (y)                |                   |                       |                   |                   |                  |
| Mean                   | 39.0              | 40.0                  | 43.0              | 40.9              | 40.7             |
| Median                 | 35                | 37                    | 40                | 38                | 37               |
| Range                  | 18,84             | 18,92                 | 18,85             | 18,86             | 18,92            |
| Respondent’s highest level of education |                   |                       |                   |                   |                  |
| None                   | 90 (24.0)         | 78 (20.8)             | 97 (26.1)         | 85 (23.0)         | 350 (23.5)       |
| Primary                | 244 (65.1)        | 248 (66.1)            | 226 (60.8)        | 235 (63.5)        | 953 (63.9)       |
| Secondary              | 39 (10.4)         | 46 (12.3)             | 46 (12.4)         | 44 (11.9)         | 175 (11.7)       |
| Higher                 | 2 (0.5)           | 3 (0.8)               | 3 (0.8)           | 6 (1.6)           | 14 (0.9)         |
| Paid employment, past 12 mo |                   |                       |                   |                   |                  |
| No                     | 165 (44.0)        | 113 (30.1)            | 135 (36.3)        | 159 (43.0)        | 572 (38.3)       |
| Yes                    | 210 (56.0)        | 262 (69.9)            | 237 (63.7)        | 211 (57.0)        | 920 (61.7)       |
| Religion               |                   |                       |                   |                   |                  |
| Catholic               | 64 (17.1)         | 48 (12.8)             | 46 (12.4)         | 51 (13.8)         | 209 (14.0)       |
| Seventh Day Adventist/Baptist | 26 (7.0) | 68 (18.1)             | 157 (42.2)        | 36 (9.7)          | 287 (19.2)       |
| Other Christian        | 275 (73.5)        | 242 (64.5)            | 168 (45.2)        | 280 (75.7)        | 965 (64.7)       |
| Muslim                 | 7 (1.9)           | 9 (2.4)               | 1 (0.3)           | 1 (0.3)           | 18 (1.2)         |
| None                   | 2 (0.5)           | 0 (0.0)               | 0 (0.0)           | 0 (0.0)           | 2 (0.1)          |
| Other                  | 0 (0.0)           | 8 (2.1)               | 0 (0.0)           | 2 (0.5)           | 10 (0.7)         |
| Ethnicity              |                   |                       |                   |                   |                  |
| Chewa                  | 16 (4.3)          | 5 (1.3)               | 5 (1.3)           | 7 (1.9)           | 33 (2.2)         |
| Lomwe                  | 327 (87.4)        | 285 (76.0)            | 275 (73.9)        | 350 (94.6)        | 1,237 (83.0)     |
| Mang’anja              | 3 (0.8)           | 51 (13.6)             | 59 (15.9)         | 3 (0.8)           | 116 (7.8)        |
| Ngoni                  | 2 (0.5)           | 9 (2.4)               | 7 (1.9)           | 1 (0.3)           | 19 (1.3)         |
| Nyanja                 | 22 (5.9)          | 1 (0.3)               | 1 (0.3)           | 3 (0.8)           | 28 (1.9)         |
| Sena                   | 1 (0.3)           | 6 (1.6)               | 1 (0.3)           | 3 (0.8)           | 9 (0.6)          |
| Yao                    | 3 (0.8)           | 3 (0.8)               | 0 (0.0)           | 3 (0.8)           | 9 (0.6)          |
| Khokhola               | 0 (0.0)           | 15 (4.0)              | 23 (6.2)          | 2 (0.5)           | 40 (2.7)         |
| Marital status         |                   |                       |                   |                   |                  |
| Never married          | 8 (2.1)           | 12 (3.2)              | 5 (1.3)           | 3 (0.8)           | 28 (1.9)         |
| Currently married      | 271 (72.3)        | 233 (62.1)            | 242 (65.1)        | 270 (73.0)        | 1,016 (68.1)     |
| Widowed                | 45 (12.0)         | 52 (13.9)             | 67 (18.0)         | 39 (10.5)         | 203 (13.6)       |
| Divorced/separated     | 51 (13.6)         | 78 (20.8)             | 58 (15.6)         | 58 (15.7)         | 245 (16.4)       |
| Relationship to reference girl |           |                       |                   |                   |                  |
| Parent/guardian        | 174 (46.4)        | 253 (67.5)            | 227 (61.0)        | 225 (60.8)        | 879 (58.9)       |
| Grandparent            | 60 (16.0)         | 61 (16.3)             | 87 (23.4)         | 72 (19.5)         | 280 (18.8)       |
| Sibling                | 61 (16.3)         | 24 (6.4)              | 24 (6.5)          | 38 (10.3)         | 147 (9.9)        |
| Maternal uncle/uncle   | 36 (9.6)          | 21 (5.6)              | 17 (4.6)          | 22 (5.9)          | 96 (6.4)         |
| Maternal aunt/uncle    | 11 (2.9)          | 6 (1.6)               | 6 (1.6)           | 8 (2.2)           | 31 (2.1)         |
| Cousin                 | 6 (1.6)           | 3 (0.8)               | 5 (1.3)           | 0 (0.0)           | 14 (0.9)         |
| Other                  | 27 (7.2)          | 7 (1.9)               | 6 (1.6)           | 5 (1.4)           | 45 (3.0)         |
child marriage in these communities, they are likely not the exclusive or primary reason for child marriage.

Fortunately, we could explore several complementary explanations for child marriage within the baseline data. Participants reported prudential reasons—especially financial reasons—for girls marrying before the age of 18 years in these communities. This means that child marriage is likely, in part, the result of financial constraints that eliminate alternatives to marriage for girls who are unable to attend school or find gainful employment. This is consistent with recent work by Mann et al. [22] in Zambia that found that “economic factors, including household poverty, are more likely to drive child marriage than cultural pressures” and that “sex and marriage were often pursued in the absence of any other available avenues”. However, our data on prudential reasons should be interpreted cautiously, as we were limited by the wording of the questions, which were individual items within Plan’s Child Marriage Acceptability score module and included words such as “may” or “sometimes,” possibly overestimating agreement among respondents to our survey.

Additionally, social norms related to adolescent sexuality and pregnancy might indirectly drive girls toward marriage. In our sample, we found strong, negative attitudes toward adolescent sexuality and use of and access to family planning methods and services. Given that adult decision-makers are key gatekeepers to adolescents’ access to sexual and reproductive health services, these findings suggest that adults in these communities hold strong moral opinions that may prevent adolescent girls from accessing the services they need to avoid pregnancy. Other studies have shown that these attitudes, if present in a community with strong social sanctions against having children outside of marriage, may first expose adolescent girls to a high

### Table 3

Percent agreement with statements related to prudential reasons, personal normative beliefs, and social expectations regarding child marriage at baseline by site, Malawi, 2017

| Empirical expectations | Chiwalo (n = 375) | Mchiramwera (n = 375) | Changata (n = 372) | Nazombe (n = 370) | Total (n = 1,492) |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Most girls in this community marry before the age of 18 y | 85.1 | 79.3 | 94.1 | 89.6 | 96.7 | 95.1 | 89.7 | 97.8 | 92.7 | 82.7 | 76.9 | 87.3 | 89.3 | 869.913 |
| Most people in this community expect girls to marry before the age of 18 | 53.6 | 45.0 | 61.9 | 48.5 | 43.5 | 53.6 | 62.6 | 55.9 | 68.9 | 48.1 | 42.7 | 53.5 | 53.2 | 49.9 | 56.4 |
| Sanctions | If I do not ensure my daughters and/or nieces are married early, my family will not be respected in the community | 54.0 | 45.8 | 61.9 | 31.1 | 26.4 | 36.2 | 36.8 | 31.8 | 42.0 | 23.9 | 18.4 | 30.4 | 36.4 | 33.4 | 39.6 |
| Personal normative beliefs | It is wrong to marry a girl before the age of 18 | 91.6 | 87.3 | 94.4 | 93.9 | 90.9 | 95.9 | 88.9 | 83.9 | 92.6 | 94.6 | 91.9 | 96.4 | 92.3 | 90.5 | 93.7 |
| Prudential reasons | Marrying girls at a young age can help provide them security | 9.6 | 6.5 | 13.9 | 7.2 | 5.1 | 10.1 | 7.8 | 5.4 | 11.1 | 7.3 | 5.3 | 9.9 | 8.0 | 6.7 | 9.5 |
| Marrying girls young can help prevent sexual violence, assault, and harassment | 14.4 | 10.0 | 20.3 | 6.1 | 4.0 | 9.3 | 10.5 | 8.0 | 13.6 | 9.2 | 6.7 | 12.5 | 10.1 | 1.0 | 84.1 | 11.9 |
| Marriage of girls under 18 y sometimes happens for financial reasons | 62.4 | 57.6 | 67.0 | 64.5 | 59.7 | 69.1 | 58.9 | 51.8 | 65.6 | 57.0 | 51.0 | 62.9 | 60.7 | 57.9 | 63.5 |
| Marriage of girls under 18 y mostly happens because there is a lack of education and job opportunities | 81.1 | 78.0 | 83.8 | 74.4 | 69.5 | 78.8 | 80.4 | 76.0 | 84.1 | 76.8 | 69.2 | 82.9 | 78.2 | 75.6 | 80.5 |
| Marriage of girls under 18 y may happen because of pregnancy in this community | 79.2 | 71.4 | 85.3 | 90.1 | 86.4 | 92.9 | 83.9 | 76.9 | 89.0 | 86.5 | 81.0 | 90.5 | 84.9 | 82.0 | 87.4 |

| Table 4

Baseline attitudes toward adolescent sexuality and girls’ access to sexual and reproductive health services by site, Malawi, 2017

| Agree that | Chiwalo (n = 375) | Mchiramwera (n = 375) | Changata (n = 372) | Nazombe (n = 370) | Total (n = 1,492) |
|-----------|------------------|----------------------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| It is acceptable for girls to have sex before marriage | 4.0 | 2.3 | 6.9 | 1.1 | 4.2 | 2.6 | 7.0 | 4.8 | 10.2 | 3.0 | 1.8 | 4.9 | 3.8 | 2.9 | 4.9 |
| It is acceptable for boys to have sex before marriage | 4.8 | 2.9 | 7.8 | 1.6 | 8.3 | 3.1 | 7.3 | 5.0 | 10.5 | 2.7 | 1.7 | 4.3 | 4.1 | 3.2 | 5.2 |
| Unmarried girls who get pregnant are naughty | 95.4 | 92.9 | 97.1 | 90.7 | 88.6 | 92.4 | 91.7 | 88.9 | 91.8 | 93.2 | 90.3 | 95.3 | 92.7 | 91.5 | 93.8 |
| Agree that | All girls have a right to access contraceptives/family planning services | 43.4 | 36.3 | 50.8 | 38.9 | 33.2 | 44.9 | 47.2 | 41.8 | 52.6 | 48.8 | 41.7 | 55.8 | 44.5 | 41.3 | 47.8 |
| Unmarried adolescent girls should have access to contraception/family planning services | 39.3 | 32.8 | 46.2 | 32.5 | 27.9 | 37.5 | 44.6 | 38.3 | 51.2 | 35.1 | 29.2 | 41.6 | 37.9 | 34.9 | 41.0 |
| Married adolescent girls should have access to contraception/family planning services | 96.0 | 92.7 | 97.8 | 94.7 | 91.8 | 96.6 | 91.4 | 84.3 | 95.4 | 96.4 | 92.3 | 98.4 | 94.6 | 92.6 | 96.1 |
| Giving unmarried girls access to contraceptives makes them promiscuous | 84.6 | 80.1 | 88.3 | 76.7 | 72.4 | 80.6 | 74.7 | 70.0 | 78.8 | 82.8 | 78.9 | 86.0 | 79.7 | 77.6 | 81.6 |
| I would like contraceptives/family planning services to be available to girls in my community | 39.2 | 33.7 | 44.9 | 37.5 | 33.3 | 41.9 | 41.2 | 35.1 | 47.6 | 40.5 | 34.6 | 46.7 | 39.6 | 36.8 | 42.4 |

CI = confidence interval.
risk of becoming pregnant and then lead to the social expectation that they marry [11,13].

Finally, limitations in our measures may have prevented us from revealing the underlying norms around child marriage in these communities. Few studies to date have validated these questions; it could be that decision-makers did not understand the question or had a different interpretation of what the questions were asking than was intended. To mitigate this risk, these questions and their translations were reviewed with the enumerators during training and included in the survey pilot before data collection. It also could be that the measure of sanctions, although determined with the implementing partners, did not match with the sanctions most often experienced in the community. Social desirability bias, and the recent push to enforce laws against child marriage, may have prevented respondents from responding honestly. Finally, it should be noted that our article was motivated by a desire to understand norms not the myriad of other important factors such as education and sexuality, that shape child marriage itself.

Our results offer many lessons learned that may improve the quality of social norms research related to child marriage. First, it is essential to conduct formative research to challenge any preconceptions about norms related to child marriage or key reference groups. In addition, quantitative data collection should always be paired with qualitative data collection to increase explanatory power. Furthermore, even studies with advanced norms measures should include questions about prudential reasons for marriage and alternative norms that may indirectly perpetuate child marriage to be able to support or exclude them as additional contributing factors. Finally, given our measure of normative expectations and our measure of sanctions did not have similar levels of agreement, we recommend avoiding using them interchangeably.

Despite the information we were able to glean from this survey about measurement of norms related to child marriage and the potential drivers of child marriage in these communities in Southern Malawi, our study had several limitations. First, we a priori chose to measure social norms in support of child marriage and did not include measures that could have checked for normative expectations against child marriage. This approach was selected based on the information gathered by the implementing team during the intervention design phase, which concluded that norms in these communities were supportive of child marriage, hence the need for the intervention. Second, although we plan to rigorously investigate norms through qualitative vignettes and in-depth interviews in our mid and end-line work, we were unable to do so at baseline, limiting our ability to explore causality, sensitivity, and exceptions to sanctions. Third, we conducted interviews with adults rather than girls, which means that we did not capture girls’ own perceptions of social expectations related to marriage. Fourth, very few respondents chose a married reference girl for the section of questions related to their decision-making for a particular girl. This likely occurred because we instructed respondents to choose the girl over whom they had the most decision-making power, perhaps inadvertently leading them to pick younger, unmarried reference girls. This selection bias may also have been exacerbated by respondents’ awareness of our interest in child marriage and subsequent reluctance to disclose involvement in the decision for a girl to marry early. Finally, it is important to note that the ENGAGE interventions are not explicitly designed to change norms; ICRW’s inclusion of social norms measures is exploratory.

Notwithstanding these limitations, our data suggest that child marriage is less a social norm in these communities, but more the result of poverty and negative attitudes toward and norms around adolescent sexuality and contraceptive access that result in adolescent pregnancy. We suggest that future research on child marriage in Southern Malawi investigate adolescent pregnancy, norms around adolescent sexuality, and attitudes toward adolescent access to and use of contraception. Our experience implementing these norms measures also suggests that researchers interested in investigating norms on child marriage must not only take into consideration social expectations about child marriage but must continue to acknowledge how other factors such as prudential reasons, knowledge of laws, attitudes, and related norms such as those related to adolescent sexuality are at play.

Similarly, data about all drivers of child marriage, including norms, economic insecurity, access to schools, and attitudes toward adolescent sexuality, need to be considered when developing evidence-informed programming. For implementers, program activities that target key decision-makers for adolescent girls, such as parents, to reduce negative opinions of contraceptive use among youth may better link to changes in behavior. It is also important that future work explore and potentially build upon existing prosocial or protective norms.

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