Review article

Interventions to Prevent Child Marriage Among Young People in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review of the Published and Gray Literature

Amanda M. Kalamar, Ph.D. [a], Susan Lee-Rife, M.P.H., Ph.D. [b], and Michelle J. Hindin, M.H.S., Ph.D. [a,c,*]

[a] Department of Population Family and Reproductive Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, Maryland
[b] Lee-Rife Research, Minneapolis, Minnesota
[c] Department of Reproductive Health and Research, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland

A B S T R A C T

Child marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18 years, is a human rights violation that can have lasting adverse educational and economic impacts. The objective of this review was to identify high-quality interventions and evaluations to decease child marriage in low- and middle-income countries. PubMed, Embase, PsycInfo, CINAHL Plus, Popline, and the Cochrane Databases were searched without language limitations for articles published through November 2015. Gray literature was searched by hand. Reference tracing was used, as well as the unpacking of systematic reviews. Retained articles were those that were evaluated as having high-quality interventions and evaluations using standardized scoring. Eleven high-quality interventions and evaluations were abstracted. Six found positive results in decreasing the proportion married or increasing age at marriage, one had both positive and negative findings, and four had no statistical impact on the proportion married or age at marriage. There is wide range of high-quality, impactful interventions included in this review which can inform researchers, donors, and policy makers about where to make strategic investments to eradicate marriage, a current target of the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite the cultural factors that promote child marriage, the diversity of interventions can allow decision makers to tailor interventions to the cultural context of the target population.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This review of the literature finds six high-quality interventions and evaluations that reduced child marriage, using a range of implementation strategies and in a variety of settings. These intervention strategies can be used to reduce child marriage and help countries meet Sustainable Development Goal targets.

Preventing early, coerced, and forced marriage has been on the global agenda for several decades, with the Millennium Development Goals first highlighting the reduction of child marriage as a global priority in 2000 and it continues to remain part of the global agenda with establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Goal 5, which focuses on gender equality to empower women and girls, will monitor country-level progress on the elimination of child marriage, defined as the proportion of women aged 20–24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 years and before age 18 years [1]. Globally, among 20- to 24-year-olds, 8% were married by age 15 years, and 27% were married by age 18 years in 2014 [2]. By age 15 years, 17% were married in South Asia, and 14% were married in West and Central Africa [2]. In sub-Saharan Africa, data suggest that the rate of child marriage is declining, although

there is substantial heterogeneity across and within countries [3]. However, the numbers of girls getting married less than the age of 18 years are on the rise, about 39,000 per day globally, because the number of adolescents and young people is the largest in history [4]. In South Asia, the prevalence of child marriage has generally declined, but primarily among those who are below the age of 16 years [5].

Child marriage is associated with lower educational attainment [6] and reduced levels of literacy [7], which, in turn, lead to reduced economic participation [8]. Girls who marry early often begin childbearing early as well [9,10] and are more likely to be subject to forced or coerced sex and intimate partner violence [11,12]. Given the importance of the prevention of child marriage, both from a human rights standpoint and for meeting the Sustainable Development Goal targets, there is a clear need for evidence-based interventions that prevent child marriage [13]. This review focuses on high-quality interventions and evaluations that can guide program managers, country officials, and donors to well-designed, successfully implemented interventions that have been rigorously evaluated. The objective of this review was to identify high-quality interventions and evaluations targeting child marriage in low- and middle-income countries.

Methods

Search strategy

We undertook a systematic search of published literature to identify interventions that address child marriage in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). We used six databases—PubMed, Embase, PsycInfo, CINAHL Plus, Popline, and the Cochrane Databases—in conducting these searches. Search strategies for each database used the particular database's controlled vocabulary for searches (e.g., medical subject headings [Mesh] terms) and free-text terms. In building the searches, we combined a list of terms that describe young people with a list of terms that describe marriage or marriage-like arrangements. We then combined this search with a list of low- or middle-income country (LMIC) and regional search terms. We searched the literature from 2000 to November 2015.

We then searched gray literature for child marriage by first targeting organizations involved in child marriage eradication and through the use of the Google search engine for publications about child marriage interventions. We also hand-searched the literature based on identified citations in the published and gray literature for additional titles (additional details are provided in the methodology commentary in this volume: Hindin and Kalamar, forthcoming).

The results of the initial search of both published and gray literature were stored using EndNote reference manager software. All titles and abstracts resulting from the searches were screened for interventions related to child marriage in LMICs, and these remaining articles were abstracted.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria

Articles were included for abstract screening if they met all the following criteria: (1) reported on interventions targeting child marriage; (2) the intervention targeted young people, ages 10–24 years; (3) the intervention was in a low- or middle-income country; (4) the article or publication was written in English, French, Spanish, or Portuguese; and (5) published from 2000 onward.

Abstraction-ranking strategy

For each of the abstracted articles, the quality of both the intervention and the evaluation of the intervention's effects was assessed and rated on a scale from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong). To assess the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention, reviewers were asked to consider whether the intervention was grounded in theory, if the intervention was first pilot tested to assess feasibility and acceptability, whether and what kind of training personnel involved in the intervention received, what steps were taken to prevent cross-over or contamination between intervention and control groups, the duration of the intervention, and whether and how randomization, of the intervention and/or evaluation took place. A ranking of 1 or 2 was given when the weaknesses of the intervention and study design heavily outweighed any identified strengths. Articles were ranked as a 3 when, on balance, the study design had about as many strengths as weaknesses. Those that were ranked as the strongest, 4 or 5, had more identified strengths than weaknesses and those assigned a 5 had few, if any, weaknesses.

To assess the strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation, reviewers were asked to consider several aspects of the evaluation design and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses before assigning a ranking score. These included the analytic techniques used to evaluate change attributable to the intervention, the use of an appropriate comparison group, sample size, operationalization and measurement of exposure to the intervention, length of follow-up, and the number of evaluation time points (particularly whether there was baseline and end line data collection or just end line). To assign a ranking score (1–5) for the evaluation, the same methodology was used for ranking the intervention. The quality of the intervention and evaluation of each included article was assessed by two, and a third reviewer arbitrated discrepancies.

Analysis

Most interventions aimed to reduce the proportion of girls married or to delay marriage beyond a certain age. While many studies included knowledge, norms, and behavioral outcomes, this review reports on behavioral outcomes (Box 1), as changes in knowledge and norms are not necessarily sufficient to produce behavior change. Studies that did not include behavioral outcomes were excluded from this review. In addition, due to the heterogeneity of the interventions, populations, and outcomes, a meta-analysis was not performed. However, results are summarized to show the features of the interventions, populations, and impact of the interventions on child marriage. Table 1 provides the description of the intervention and the key impact on the targeted behavior by outcome. The description includes the age range of participants at the time of the intervention, the duration of the intervention, the age range at the time of the evaluation, the venue of the intervention, and participant characteristics. Table 2 summarizes the findings of each article by study across all targeted behavioral outcomes, highlighting the main finding for each outcome.

Box 1. Behavioral outcomes

- Proportion of girls married
- Age at marriage