On the impact of early marriage on schooling outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa and South West Asia

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the effect of age of marriage on women's schooling outcomes for 36 countries from Sub-Saharan Africa and South West Asia. We employ an instrumental variable approach to account for the endogeneity of early marriage driven by socio-economic and cultural factors. Our results show that delaying early marriage by one year is associated with an increase of half a year of education in Sub-Saharan Africa and nearly one third of a year of education in South West Asia as well as a lower likelihood of dropping out from secondary school of 5.5% in South West Asia.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, girls and young women – especially those from the poorest households – have faced unequal opportunities for educational access compared to boys and young men. It is estimated that only 70% and 56% of countries will meet the Education for All (EFA) goal of gender parity at the primary and lower secondary level by 2015 deadline, respectively (UNESCO, 2014). Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and South West Asia (SWA) are the regions where gender disparities in access and primary and lower secondary completion are most acute. Of the group of countries with the worst gender inequality in secondary education, 60% are in SSA, whilst SWA has two countries within this group (UNESCO, 2014).

Several factors have been put forward to explain gender disparities in education among which poverty and socio-cultural norms are crucial. On the socio-cultural norms, early or child marriage in SSA and SWA plays a pivotal role in the lack of success to reach gender parity. The highest prevalence of child marriages in the world is concentrated in SSA, while from the total of 60 million child marriages, 50% of young married girls reside in South Asia (ICRW, 2013). In addition, when interacted with poverty, the influence of socio-cultural norms (in particular of child marriage) on educational exclusion becomes more intense. Poorest girls are more than three times likely to marry by the age of 18 than those from the richest homes and the child marriage rate of girls with no schooling is three times larger compared with those who hold some secondary education (UNFPA, 2012).

Because low levels of schooling among young married girls can also be linked to common factors related to ability, poverty and backward traditional settings, the early marriage-education relationship is likely to be endogenously determined. Unfortunately, there is a lack of large quantitative studies on the link of age of marriage and women's education. The few country-specific studies exclude the effects that country and the community characteristics have on the association between early marriage and schooling. For example, Lloyd and Mensch (2008) explain how much of school dropout can be related to child marriage and early pregnancy in some African countries, however their empirical approach does account for endogeneity. Field and Ambrus (2008) employ a rigorous instrumental variables (IV) approach to address endogeneity of marriage and schooling decisions but their focus is on rural Bangladesh.

In this paper, we attempt to answer the following questions: Do the negative association of early marriage and women's educational attainment reflect unmeasured characteristics or the true consequence of young females' choices? Which indirect channels reinforce the lack of schooling achieved among young married women? We estimate the global regional effect that delaying the age of marriage has on three educational outcomes for women:

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years of education, literacy rates and lower secondary school dropout in 36 countries from the SSA and SWA regions. We fill the gap in the literature of early marriage and schooling by providing new evidence on robust global regional effects for a large group of countries than has previously been done and by examining the crucial role played by the community—where most marriage arrangements take place.

We also offer new insights on country and community determinants as mechanisms of transmission of "education poverty" from early marriage. For instance, whether there is a differential effect of conflict, institutional quality on the linkage of early marriage and schooling between countries or whether indirect channels (such as deprived health, low women's empowerment within households) may be additionally operating on the likelihood that young brides obtain low levels of schooling achievement in certain countries.

To evaluate the effect of timing of early marriage (i.e., the effect of postponing early marriage by one year) as well as the decision to marry early (i.e., to marry before age 18) have on women's schooling at the regional level, we apply a standard OLS procedure and an IV approach to account for the endogeneity early marriage driven by socio-economic and cultural factors. Our analysis, however, has the typical caveats of cross-section IV analysis: results show conditional statistical correlations rather than causality and there is also difficult to fully claim that instruments are strictly exogenous.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a review on the factors behind early marriage and its consequences. In Section 3 we present the data and its descriptive statistics. Section 4 contains the OLS and IV estimates on the impact of early marriage on schooling outcomes and estimations of country and community indirect effects on the association of timing of early marriage and schooling. As a robustness check, in Section 5, we carry out estimations by SSA regions. Section 6 offers a summary of the main findings and their policy implications for effective policies aiming to increase educational achievement among young married girls.

2. Literature review

Early marriage, also known as child marriage, is used to describe the legal or customary union between two people, of whom one or both spouses is below the age of 18 (Article 1, Convention of the Rights of the Child, CRC). The practice disproportionally affects young girls. Child marriage is a serious human rights violation since it deprives girls from their future by denying them the right to decide when and with whom to marry (Davis et al., 2013). Because girls have not attained full maturity and the capacity to act autonomously (Dixon-Mueller, 2008), it leaves physical, emotional and psychologically deep scars that impede their overall development and well being.

Early marriage has a wide-ranging negative effect on girls beyond education. Girls who married young are more likely to suffer from psychological disadvantage (Ahmed et al., 2013) (e.g., lack of self-esteem and depression) and sexual abuse with increasing risks of sexual transmitted diseases and HIV (Clark, 2004; Clark et al., 2006). Young married girls also start child-bearing soon after marriage with increased health risks from complications in pregnancy and death during delivery, low-birth weight, and high risk of infant mortality (UNICEF, 2005; Godha et al., 2013; Raj et al., 2010). Young married girls are victims of long-term violence (Santhya et al., 2010) and, crucially, are deprived from basic education (Lee-Rife et al., 2012).

These effects spread to societies and regions at large. For instance, in low- and middle-income countries, complications from pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death among girls aged 15–19 years (WHO, 2011). In SSA and SWA, with nearly 2.9 million of girls married by age 15, only 4% and 8% of literate girls are married by age 15 but around 20% and 25% of those who are not literate are married by this age (UNESCO, 2014).

Studies have found the following common structural drivers of child marriage across the world: gender discrimination, socio-cultural and religious values; economic survival strategies; value of virginity and protection of girls' sexuality; instability due to conflicts and weak law enforcement (Khanna et al., 2013; WLUML, 2013).

Gender inequality is one of the leading causes of child marriage. Families and communities see girls as having little importance outside of their roles as wives, while boys are given preference in the belief that they will look after their parents. On the other hand, girls are viewed as a financial burden which increases by delaying marriage as larger dowry needs to be paid. They occupy a lower status in societies and early marriage and explains why married girls are rarely found in school (often due to laws that prohibit their attendance or school practices that push them out of school). In contrast, men marry later, which significantly diminishes women's empowerment within households (Carmichael, 2011).

Gender inequality is often endorsed by socio-cultural traditions and religion. The view that women have the right to choose when to marry is inconsistent with patriarchal norms which see them as the property of fathers and husbands. Child marriage is also a route to strengthen family ties, clan and tribal connections or political alliances, and, sometimes, acts as a mechanism to settle obligations (Amin, 2011; UNIFPA, 2006). Moreover, social pressure operates in communities with high prevalence of early marriage where failure to conform can result in disapproval or shame for the family (Bayisenge, 2010).

Poverty is another major factor underlying child marriage. In families on low incomes, early marriage becomes a strategy of economic survival as the financial burden of raising the child is passed onto the husband. This strategy manifests in regions where mortality is high and poor rural areas, where girls need to become pregnant straight after marriage to maximise the number of pregnancies ensuring enough surviving offspring to satisfy household requirements for labour (Mathur et al., 2003).

The value attached to virginity before marriage is another channel which influences the incidence of child marriage. After girls reach puberty, parents worry about sexual assault or girls starting sexual activity early (Khanna et al., 2013). Protection from unwanted pre-marital sexual activity or a non-marital pregnancy is therefore accomplished by marrying girls at a young age (Lee-Rife et al., 2012).

At the macro level, conflict and weak law enforcement exacerbates the likelihood of early marriage for girls. In regions affected by wars or civil conflicts, where sexual abuse and rape are rampant, child marriage becomes a protection mechanism. SSA, where ethnicity can play a key role in the spread of civil wars (Bosker and de Ree, 2014), suffers from an endemic number of wars and civil conflicts. It is estimated that nearly 75% of SSA countries have been affected by armed conflicts (Poirier, 2012). Moreover, many countries have established laws prohibiting early marriage but more often these laws not enforced. In India, for example, all marriages need to be registered under the Compulsory Registration Act, 2006. But some state governments (e.g., Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh) have not taken the initiative to make it compulsory (Centre for Social Research, 2008). Overall, it is estimated that in 74 countries in the world which have reported to the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) have not yet set the minimum age for marriage (Right to Education Project, 2013).

3. Data and descriptive statistics

This study is based on 36 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) from the SSA and SWA regions (MEASURE DHS, 2013a). The