Reviewer’s report

Title: Prevalence of child marriage and its impact on fertility outcomes in 34 Sub-Saharan African countries

Version: 0 Date: 11 Jun 2019

Reviewer: Beniamino Cislaghi

Reviewer's report:

Introduction

1. Some of the preliminary comments require greater critical engagement. Take, for instance, the sentence that child marriage undermines women's rights to autonomy. What do the authors mean by "rights to autonomy"? Where does such a right come from? Are you referring to the right autonomy in clinical treatment? And why would autonomy in itself be a positive goal? Several commentators have criticised the over-emphasis on autonomy as it's not only impossible (nobody can be 'independent'), but also harmful - the latter as it drives interventions that threaten the interdependent social fabric human relations.

2. Similarly, this reference to autonomy underplays the role that girls themselves play in child marriage. How would the authors reconcile their affirmation with the fact that in several cases girls themselves are initiating marriage? The reference 6 - used to support this statement - is not helpful and should be change. Their initial statements seem to hide biases in what child marriage is and how it affects girls, and requires greater engagement with the topic. A few articles that I would recommend looking at include:

Kenny L et al. (2019); Adolescent-led marriage in Somaliland and Puntland: A surprising interaction of agency and social norms. Journal of Adolescence, 72, p. 101-11. "Parents were concerned by these elopements: they thought they were rushed and not thought through enough. For example, a woman from Somaliland explained, "now the young people meet on social [media] and then say 'I like you' and 'I like you too' and then get married without planning for lasting marriage".

Boyden, J et al. (2013). Harmful traditional practices and child protection: contested understandings and practices of female child marriage and circumcision in Ethiopia. Young Lives. "There was considerable unease about an increase in elopements. It was emphasised that parents of the girl frequently oppose unions that arise through elopement, and many take the groom and his family to court, although apparently the courts are reluctant to investigate consensual marriages. Elopement also adversely affects bridewealth. The bridegroom's family is expected to give the bride's family a sum of around 1,200 birr (£44) in compensation for violating the norms of their clan, 1,000 of this being for the girl's parents and 200 for the clan".

3. I am not sure reference 13 supports adequately the authors' claim that "Further, social norms and the need to reinforce social ties are among the leading causes, as some parents believe
that they can improve their social status by marrying their daughters to a well-off family". For links between social norms and child marriage the authors could consult:


4. The claim that "some parents also think that by marrying their daughters at young age, she will be safe from sexual adversity" requires substantiation. If all parents were that wrong, they would probably not engage in child marriage to begin with. The authors' approach here seems to suggest a one-way interpretation of child marriage as harmful. Some commentators suggest that some parents - even though they are poor and uneducated - do love their daughters and are trying to do what they think it's best for them. This is why tackling child marriage is complicated: it actually does serve a purpose, it's not just a random glitch in the system that can be corrected without addressing the structural factors around it.

5. Despite series of efforts... etc - this sentence and the whole paragraph would benefit from a revision. Adverse consequences of child marriage should have been mentioned earlier on.

Results

1. Results only explore results for girls - do the authors think it would be worth including results for boys? A recent article from UNICEF just came out that look at child marriage for boys and it would be interesting to know whether the authors would consider carrying out a similar analysis for boys too.
2. This associations are interesting but limited in what they tell us about country differences. Is there anything that the authors can do to help understand how contextual differences are affecting the association between child marriage and negative health outcomes?
3. Table 2 needs greater discussion. Presently is only referred to in the text with little interpretation.

Discussion

1. As mentioned above, table 2 would need greater interpretation. This section also needs to benefit from a previously-built conceptual framework, so you might want to create one more explicitly in your introduction so that here you can resurrect it and use it to interpret your findings.

Conclusion

1. The suggestion that "the level (?) of child marriage indicates that it has become an acceptable act within several socio-cultural group" is not sufficiently supported by the data. To
substantiate such a statement you would need to ground your suggestion in the literature - this wouldn't be your finding though, it would only be part of the conceptual framework.

**Are the methods appropriate and well described?**
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

**Does the work include the necessary controls?**
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

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