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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Social norms and barriers hindering the elimination of child, early, and forced marriage in Mozambique, Uganda, and Ethiopia and policy responses: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) remains a problem in many low- and middle-income countries. This study aimed to investigate contextual social norms on CEFM and explore barriers to implementation of policies designed to address these norms in Mozambique, Uganda, and Ethiopia.

Methods: Qualitative data was collected from a total of 90 respondents. Forty-two (n=42) interviews were conducted with adolescents, parents, traditional leaders, government officials and civil society organizations. Four (n=4) focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with parents, adolescents, community members and community leaders, comprising a total of 48 participants. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: The main social norms which contributed to CEFM in the three countries included the high social value attached to the motherhood status; the commodification of marriage; marriage as a rite of passage into adulthood, social construction of sexuality and the collective moral judgment about responsible parenthood. The norms were sustained by allowing those who abide by them to accumulate social and economic benefits such as stronger social ties within the community and improved social status. Although several policies and laws have been enacted to address these social norms, their impact has been limited. The main policy implementation barriers were the inadequate consideration of social norms that promote CEFM within the policy and legal framework, limited collaboration among key stakeholders, lack of comprehensive monitoring processes, and difficulties among community members to understand the policies due to low literacy levels and poor policy monitoring.

Conclusion: Enhancing the policy response to social norms that perpetuate CEFM will require

strengthening collaboration between non-governmental organizations, government departments and community leaders in implementation and monitoring of the policies.

Keywords: Social norms, child, early and forced marriage, Mozambique, Uganda, Ethiopia.

Abstract in Español at the end of the article

INTRODUCTION

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is considered a problem in the African region, ranging from countries that experience a very high prevalence, such as Niger (79%), to those with lower rates like South Africa (12%) [1]. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), one in three girls are married before the age of 18 and one in nine are married before the age of 15 [1]. In sub-Saharan Africa, 44.5% of women are married as children [1].

In Mozambique, about 48% of women aged 20–24 were first married or in a union before the age of 18, and 14% before the age of 15 [2, 3]. This is the highest rate of child marriage in the world, [2, 3]. In Uganda, statistics show that 34 % of girls were married before their 18th birthday and 7% before the age of 15 [1]. Ethiopia has, in the past decade, achieved a decline of one third in the prevalence of child marriage [4]. A recent report showed that among girls aged 15–19, only 5.7% were married before age 15, compared to 14.1% among young women aged 20–24 [5]. Of young women aged 20–24, 40.3% were married by the age 18, compared to 49.3% of women aged 25–29 [5].

Many studies have shown that CEFM is a result of a complex set of socio-cultural and environmental factors [6, 7]. An ethnographic study in Uganda identified poverty, socio-cultural beliefs and norms, and school dropouts as facilitators of child marriage [8]. Also other studies in Ethiopia and Mozambique identified socio-economic factors as key aspects that influence CEFM [8, 9]. Studies in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia found that young people's aspirations to enter marriage are influenced by traditional institutions such as initiation rites [10, 11]. Conflict and post-conflict effects such as fundamental shifts in economies, family relationships, and communication combined with structural changes may also negatively impact relationships and marriage patterns as experienced in Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Uganda [12]. Thus, a deeper contextual understanding of the role social norms play in CEFM might help policy makers in developing sustainable solutions to this problem [13].

Social norms such as patriarchal ideologies, local values regarding marriage and children also influence CEFM [14, 15]. Much of the normative structure underpinning systems of marriage is patriarchal and inherently serve to preserve a patriarchal organization of power in society [16, 17]. Patriarchal ideologies surrounding marriages such as the social construction of sexuality, and cosmological understanding of marriage being central to the girls' life are often championed from generation to generation by men who, in comparison to women, are often the majority who hold traditional power [16, 17]. These ideologies undermine young women's agency to make independent decisions on when to get married, as well as ability to pursue other social and economic goals [16, 17].

Although policies and strategies have been developed to address social norms that promote CEFM, in LMICs, gaps still exist with regards to effectively addressing these norms [14, 15]. Several contextual factors continue to perpetuate such norms [14, 15]. Meanwhile, mapping of these norms and how they influence CEFM remains understudied [15, 18]. In addition, several unfavorable contextual factors undermine implementation of legal and policy frameworks [16, 17]. However, these contextual factors, including how policy responses to CEFM can be strengthened, have not been fully explored. [14, 15]. This study aimed to investigate contextual social norms on CEFM and explore barriers to implementation of policies designed to address these norms in Mozambique, Uganda, and Ethiopia.

METHODS

This was an exploratory qualitative study using data collected from all the three countries (Mozambique, Uganda, and Ethiopia) between August and December 2021. The countries were selected because there share similar socio-cultural, economic and policy environments. In addition, Plan International, the commissioner of this study, was implementing a project aimed at addressing CEFM in these countries. The data were collected through focus group discussions involving both married and unmarried adolescents aged 15-18 years, as well as their parents. Additional data were obtained through in-depth interviews with parents, decision-makers, and service providers, representatives of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), government officials, traditional and religious leaders, and guardians of adolescents. A total of 90 interviews were conducted across the three countries (Table 1).

We purposively sampled the parents and adolescents, by considering a combination of characteristics such as education, employment, parenthood and marital status.

Table 1. Number of participants across different data collection methods and countries

S	Categories of participants	Interview method	Mozambique	Ethiopia	Uganda	Total
1	Government staff (Social Welfare, Gender, Education, Health)	Key informant interview (KII)	5	7	4	16
2	Civil Society Organisations	Key informant interview	4	3	3	10
3	Plan International	Key informant interview	1	1	2	4
4	Local Traditional leaders	In-depth interview	4	4	4	12
5	Adolescents (girls and boys)	Focus group discussion	4	4	4	12
6	Adolescents (girls and boys) including those in marriage	Focus group discussion	4	4	4	12
7	Parents/ guardians – males	Focus group discussion	4	4	4	12
8	Parents/ guardians – females	Focus group discussion	4	4	4	12
	Overall total					**90**

Data analysis

The audio recorded qualitative data were transcribed and translated into English. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis [19]. In the initial phase, an inductive approach was employed to identify emerging codes, categories, and themes. The final themes focused on the types of social norms that drive child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in communities, the reference groups that sustain these norms, the sanctions for defying or upholding them, and the factors influencing country policy implementation efforts. A workshop was held to validate the findings with Plan International, other CSOs, and government departments working to address CEFM in Uganda, Mozambique, and Ethiopia.

Research ethics

Before beginning fieldwork, ethical approval was obtained from ethics committees in each of the three participating countries (Mozambique, from the Bioethics Unit at the Faculty of Medicine at Eduardo Mondlane University; Ethiopia, from the Ethics Committee at the University of Gondar; and Uganda, from the Makerere Research Ethics Committee). Informed consent was sought from the respondents before they participated in the study. The consent stage involved disclosing the various aspects of the research, emphasizing that participation was voluntary and that the participants were safe. Throughout the study, participants' confidentiality and privacy was observed. Data security was ensured by anonymizing the data gathered and storing the data safely.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study, organised in two main parts. The first part describes social norms which influence child marriages, including reference groups that sustain the norms and benefits of adhering to them. The second part outlines barriers to implementing policies aimed at addressing CEFM. The section starts by outlining the demographic details of the study participants.

Demographic details

An equal number of male and female parents, aged above 24 years, was included in the study. For Uganda and Ethiopia, the sex ratio of adolescents was quite balanced with 49% of the Ugandan respondents being female versus 50% in Ethiopia. In Mozambique, however, only 31% of the respondents were males. Close to three quarters (73%) of Mozambican respondents were schooling, whereas only half of the Ugandan respondents (50%) were in school. The percentage of school going respondents in Ethiopia dropped even further to only 36%. With regards to marital status, about 43% of adolescents interviewed in Uganda were married, this was the highest proportion of the three countries with Ethiopia having 11% and Mozambique having the lowest at 3%. Similarly, Uganda had 36% of interviewed adolescents indicating having a child whereas this proportion was lower for Ethiopia and Mozambique (6% and 15% respectively).

Social norms which influenced child marriages

Several social norms contributed to child marriages in Mozambique, Ethiopia and Uganda. The main social norms were the high value of motherhood, local notions of responsible parenthood, marriage as a rite of passage into adulthood and commodification of marriage. These norms are explained in detail below.

High value for motherhood

In all three countries, having children was highly valued from both cultural and social perspectives. This expectation was communicated through social and religious meetings, as well as in peer and family discussions. Such messages put excessive pressure on young women and men to engage in sexual relationships, compelling them to prove their ability to have children and demonstrate their womanhood and manhood before marriage.

This often resulted in unwanted or unplanned pregnancies, pressuring both girls and boys into early marriages to avoid attracting shame to themselves and their families due to premarital pregnancy.

> *"Boys sometimes want to experiment whether they can have children, and so they get into a relationship with a girl. Sometimes they just want to show their friends that they can also have a girlfriend. But the problem is that once pregnancy comes, then parents will force them into marriage. It is often a problem because both are not ready."* (KII, Mozambique)

It was reported, particularly in Mozambique and Uganda that some girls felt envious of those who have children and were pressured by their peers into early marriages.

Collective moral judgment about responsible parenthood

Collective moral judgment about responsible parenthood, which involved community members expecting parents to ensure that their children appreciate community norms such as the importance of a wedding ceremony was discussed in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, the expectation for girls to marry and have a wedding ceremony was higher than for boys. To be deemed as responsible, parents were expected to facilitate this marriage process. Many respondents mentioned that the wedding ceremony was a sign of high status and respect for a young woman and her relatives. Wedding ceremonies for young women who do not have children tend to have a much higher value than those with children, hence parents encourage their daughters to marry early before getting pregnant. In Ethiopia, some families tended to organize a single wedding ceremony for two or more girls or couples to share and minimize the costs. Wedding ceremonies were also viewed as a means of cementing family relationships, not only between the families of the couple, but also among other families who had their sons and daughters married at the same ceremony.

> *"The reasons are, first those families having a number of children have a tendency to prepare a single wedding ceremony for more than one in order to share and minimize the cost of repeated wedding ceremony. This activity is mostly practiced for adolescents older than 18 years. Other reasons are the interest of the family for keeping their friendships on the basis of their children's marriage."* (KII Ethiopia)

Marriage as a rite of passage into adulthood

Norms regarding rite of passage into adulthood or transitions to adulthood were mentioned across the three countries. It was indicated that being married was a sign of adulthood. This was especially true for those who had undergone a traditional wedding ceremony, during which rituals were performed to transform them from children to adults. In addition, during this ceremony, young girls (and boys) were taught about all aspects of life. The adult status was attractive as it had many social benefits in the community. For example, it attracted respect and honor, and only married women would be assigned leadership roles as they were regarded as mature. Young men, too, gained more status and were given leadership roles once they were married

> *"Sometimes it is about keeping love within families, and getting support, and recognition as an adult, yes someone who can now be independent. We want to be happy and be liked by our parents. That is why some young people agree to get married early."* (FGD, adolescent, Mozambique)

Social construction of sexuality

Social construction of sexuality, which is about the local meanings and rules attached to sexuality was discussed in all the three countries. It was emphasized that sexual activity should only take place within marriage. The emphasis for one to get married before having sex was also connected to concerns about having children before marriage. To protect girls from premarital sex and potential pregnancies, it was reported in all the three countries that community members encouraged girls to marry at an early age. Communities and families commonly viewed marriage as an acceptable context for bearing children and thus encouraged early marriage to protect their daughters' dignity. Those who engaged in sexual activity and got pregnant before marriage were socially stigmatized. However, this stigmatization was short-lived, as both the young mother and her baby were soon accepted by the relatives and the community. Additionally, the young mother's status increased due to her motherhood. Nevertheless, in Ethiopia, the girl's virginity at marriage was a sign of high levels of discipline and womanhood, therefore highly valued.

> *"It is everywhere, in the family, community and even within religion, it is perceived as more *"acceptable"* to have sex if the girl or young woman is married."* (FGD, Ethiopia)

Commodification of marriage

Girls were generally expected to perform household chores such as cooking, sweeping and looking after the family. This justified the payment of the bride price before marriage, usually in the form of cattle or money to the girl's family as a way of appreciating the girl. However, the girls' relatives received the bride price primarily to compensate for the loss of the girl to the family. Bride price encouraged early marriages as it was higher for girls who had not yet had children at the time of marriage. In all the three countries, delayed marriage was viewed as a risk for pregnancy among young girls.

> *"Dowry is a big cause of early marriage, even forced marriage. You see, many households are poor. Thus they look forward to receiving appreciation from the man when the girl is married. Girls without children, and who are well behaved*

receive a higher amount of money or cattle. Now, you find that those who are educated attract even more appreciation." (KII, Uganda)

In all the three countries, some people reported that parents perceived pregnancy and early marriage as relief from the burden of supporting girls. Some girls, too, viewed marriage as a relief from poverty, as they expected a better life with their husband.

> *"Some parents think girls have a lot of needs, and require a lot of attention and protection compared to boys. Thus, like here, many parents prefer girls to be married off quickly."* (FGD, Mozambique)

> *"Some parents see a situation of relief when their daughter gets pregnant and immediately send her to her husband-to-be, even when she is a minor."* (KII Uganda)

Overall, some people viewed marriage as way to improve their economic status. Marriage provided an opportunity for girls to receive financial support from their husbands and for parents to be rewarded with the bride price. Young boys received or had access to property such as land after marrying.

> *"Escaping from poverty in the parents' house is a benefit, for instance when girls fail to get money for buying menstrual pads or other basic needs."* (FGD, adolescent, Uganda)

Reference groups that sustain the norms

In all the three countries, it was reported that they were reference groups who reinforced or transmitted the norms that have been outlined in the preceding sections. Most respondents claimed that it was mainly the parents, traditional counsellors as well as religious and traditional leaders, who sustained the norms about child and early marriages. While this study did not link reference groups directly to each norm, it was noted that community actors tended to promote such norms through for example shaming unmarried pregnant girls publicly, thereby forcing them into early marriages. Similarly, married women also shamed pregnant girls, or pressurized them to get married. The reference groups also informed adolescents about the norms through initiation ceremonies, narratives from community members, and family discussions. Furthermore, these actors also played central roles in negotiating the bride price between the families or parties involved.

> *"We keep reminding them that marriage is good, and also say please if you think you can't manage to stay without a relationship, it's better to get married instead of being pregnant before marriage. Sometimes, we even tell them to emulate our marriages with their father."* (FGD with parents, Ethiopia)

Most parents, community members and youngsters saw many benefits in getting married, particularly for girls, even at a young age. Nevertheless, several respondents indicated that minors should not get married before they had reached the official age of adulthood. Some saw the negative side of getting married at a tender age, such as 'not being prepared yet or mature enough for marriage', not having an income or being able to financially look after oneself, the newly married couple or a child. Very few informants mentioned the physical dangers of giving birth at a tender age.

Policies addressing CEFM

Given the persistent social norms and in line with the Social Development Goals, the three countries have enacted various polices to address CEFM. This section outlines the primary policies put in place, identifies gaps in their implementation, and suggests strategies for addressing these gaps.

Policy landscape regarding CEFM in Mozambique

In December 2019, the Mozambican Parliament approved its first law criminalizing unions with minors (under 18-year-olds). This landmark legislation was culmination of efforts by the Government, civil society, and rights-based organizations, to combat the high levels of child marriages, with almost half of Mozambican girls being married off before 18.

> *"This was an important step toward ending the country's escalating rate of child marriage, as this new law prohibits marriage of children younger than 18 years old, without exception."* (KII Mozambique)

As part of its earlier commitment to ending child marriage, Mozambique launched a National Strategy on Prevention and Fight against Child Marriage in 2016. To ensure the full enforcement of the law, government authorities reviewed efforts to increase school retention for girls as part of the strategy. For instance, in December 2018, Mozambique revoked a discriminatory 2003 decree that required pregnant girls to attend night school. Education officials monitored schools to ensure that pregnant girls could attend daytime classes. By enacting this law, the national assembly recognized Mozambique's international obligation to uphold and protect the rights of girls.

Additional laws and policies regarding CEFM include broadly the Constitution of the Republic, Law 28/2008, and the 19/2019 Law which criminalizes CEFM including all those involved in CEFM (parents, local leaders, adult husbands). Additional legal enforcements under the 29/2009 Laws included legislation against Gender-Based Violence, Child Labor, Human Trafficking and the Child Protection Act, and the International Convention Law. The laws have been disseminated through printed materials, community meetings and over radio talk shows. Nonetheless, these channels of dissemination were noted as not very effective by the interviewees.

> "'*In the week of October 10, there was a meeting in Inhambane with all the districts to talk about the law and many Government institutions did not know the law.*" (KII Mozambique)

The interviews revealed that the policies and laws were useful in shaping the community's attitude towards CEFM. They also provided a legal basis for educating communities against CEFM practices and for taking action against offenders. Notably, some individuals involved in CEFM were imprisoned as a deterrent measure.

> "*They are useful to combat offenders. When someone is punished it serves as an example in society because society wakes up that this should not happen... Law 19/2019 criminalizes all participants.*" (KII Mozambique)

Challenges with the implementation of the policies in Mozambique

The focus group participants highlighted concerns about gaps in the law, such as policies failing to address the socio-cultural norms surrounding marriage, including CEFM. They also pointed out that the lack of penalties for boys responsible for pregnancies allowed boys to continue having sexual relationships with girls, leading to unintended pregnancies.

> "*In this case, the law has no penalty for boys who get girls pregnant. Since there is nothing to do, boys end up impregnating so many girls in the community.*" (FGD Mozambique)

It was further reported that the laws did not adequately provide guidance on how to support young girls and boys who were divorced, particularly in addressing their mental, emotional, and material needs. Additional gaps were those that relate to access to justice systems including reporting mechanisms, and age/gender responsive systems.

> "*Law 19/2019 is not clear, the treatment of the rescued girls, the social support, the support for the one who wants to continue to dream... the social support that the Government will provide is not clear.*" (KII Mozambique)

Another major gap was limited dissemination of the laws in the communities. The laws and policies were not well shared with the community members. There was a call to make the laws and information against CEFM practices more accessible, particularly in hard-to-reach rural areas.

Strengthening CEFM policies in Mozambique

Stakeholders provided several suggestions for strengthening CEFM policies in Mozambique. It was for example recommended that there should be greater responsibility and commitment from all stakeholders—including governments, NGOs, civil society, and communities—to ensure that pregnant minors were not married off. It was also noted that policies focusing on access to justice systems and gender- and age-responsive SRHR should be strengthened, translated in the local languages and disseminated widely at community level. Further, the government needed to collaborate with community leaders in undertaking comprehensive capacity building among community leaders in the policies, for instance through seminars and trainings. There was also need for developing comprehensive assistance programs to help minors reintegrate after being withdrawn from marriages, as well as increase access to SRHR and CSE to ensure that adolescents engage in consensual sexual relationships and have access to contraceptives.

> "*Once girls are rescued from premature unions, how will they be integrated into society and what will they do to support themselves and the child...on the other hand, sometimes they have been sent away from their parent's home and how do you take this girl where she is not welcome in her own parent's home?*" (FGD Mozambique)

> "*The article that states that minors are not accountable for their actions should be repealed, at least for those who impregnate different girls even after being warned.*" (FGD Mozambique)

Policy landscape addressing CEFM in Ethiopia

The main legal and policy guideline in Ethiopia was the National Children's Policy. Other legal provisions that made early marriage illegal included international legal provisions and bylaws against CEFM such as the National Policy on Ethiopian Women 1993, the National Strategy and Action Plan on HTPs against Women and Children in Ethiopia 2013, the Ethiopian Women's Development and Change Package 2017, and the MoWCY's GTP II Sectoral Plan 2015/16–2019/20. There is also a National Social Norm Change Manual that has been developed by the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (formerly Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs).

Protection from HTPs were also mainstreamed into several sectoral policies and strategies. The National Social Protection Strategy of 2016 targeted adolescent girls *"to maximize impacts on educational outcomes and reduction in child marriage"* and planned communication and awareness-raising for prevention of abuse, violence, neglect, and exploitation, including child marriage. Education was also identified as instrumental for ending child marriages.

> "*Educated women are less likely to enter into early marriage or early motherhood or contract HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases. Mothers who are literate are better able to understand health education and child developmental*

materials that directly impact the lives of their children." (KII Ethiopia)

These policies were communicated through community meetings, radios and NGOs such as Plan Ethiopia. Further, the interviews revealed that the policies had contributed towards the reduction of CEFM, increased respect and protection towards children. There has been increased mobilization of education in the community and collective action towards addressing CEFM. For example, there was an increased integration of anti-CEFM messages in schools and stakeholders stopping marriages among young people.

"*Yes, it is effective, for example in the last year we have stopped one CEFM in our locality.*" (IDI Ethiopia)

"*In the past children had no rights. For example, for me I had cried during my wedding which was illegal because of the pressure by family…But now there is tangible change because the interest of the children is respected and protected, not the family.*" (KII Ethiopia)

Challenges with the implementation of the policies in Ethiopia

Several challenges were reported in Ethiopia regarding policy implementation. It was noted that most governmental policies remain on paper and are not fully implemented. Additional challenges included inadequate monitoring of policies, limited awareness and understanding of the policies, "age cheating" due to lack of birth records, the COVID-19 outbreak which limited program implementation, limited integration and collaboration among stakeholders, and weak accountability mechanisms for policy implementation.

"*These [20] are related to the previous one, for example, less community awareness, less government attention and low monitoring and evaluation systems and also country poverty.*" (KII Ethiopia)

"*The main challenge is lack of an integrated approach or work between concerned bodies like woman, child and youth office in relation to health and education and also lack of accountability and transparency agreement to each other which resulted in a negative outcome.*" (KII Ethiopia)

Strengthening CEFM policies in Ethiopia

Suggestions for strengthening communication of CEFM policies included expanding opportunities for inclusive discussions at lower levels and enhancing communication strategies. Increased involvement of community leaders and mass media is essential to raise awareness about CEFM. Additional measures included providing comprehensive reproductive health services, promoting economic empowerment, improving feedback mechanisms, bolstering the birth registration system, advocating for universal birth registration, ensuring accountability among stakeholders, and fostering collaboration between government departments and civil society organizations. Integration of CEFM information into the education sector is also crucial.

"*This can be improved by creating awareness and empowering economic status as our project did by giving startup capital to the family and their children for their own source of income.*" (KII, Ethiopia)

"*Then CEFM policies should be given at formal curriculum education like other subjects such as Mathematics, and English in the school.*" (KII, Ethiopia)

Policy landscape on policies addressing CEFM in Uganda

As in Ethiopia and Mozambique, the Ugandan Government has also committed to addressing child marriages.

"*Addressing child marriage is in line with government's commitment to ending all forms of discrimination and ensuring the protection of children's rights as articulated in the various global and regional conventions and declarations and reflected in Uganda's policy documents including National Development Plans [NDP], 2010; 2014); the National Vision 2014 – 2020; the National Gender Policy (2007); and other sector policies and strategic plans.*" (CSO Representative Uganda)

Key policies in Uganda included the Good Parenting Policy, Health Act, Child Protection Act, Child Participation Policy, Adolescent Health Policy Guidelines and Service Standards, Children's Act, and Children Statutes. There were also by-laws developed by sub-national government structures such as sub-counties or districts to deal with defilement and other abuses on children and women.

Policies were communicated through various channels, including media (radio/TV), community meetings (involving drama acts and group discussions), and through influential figures such as traditional/religious leaders, police, and NGO representatives. Additionally, policies were integrated into health education and promotion programs at both health facilities and community levels, featured in newspaper articles, and highlighted during awareness campaigns on International Days like the Day of the African Child and Women's Day.

There are varied opinions on the effectiveness of policies targeting social norms contributing to child marriage in communities. Some believed these policies have

reduced maternal deaths among adolescents and increased reporting of early pregnancy and marriage by local leaders. Positive changes have led to increased reporting of CEFM cases to relevant stakeholders. Moreover, heightened awareness has encouraged more regular meetings, including among girls, to discuss issues related to CEFM.

> *"This is working well because people are brought together and also the language used people understand very well and also people are able to ask all the questions that they feel they have to ask."* (KII Uganda)

Others however, noted that pregnancies and early marriages were still high. Delayed response when cases of abuse were reported to the police, courts of law and other relevant agencies, as well as poor handling of cases against affected children were noted as hindering the implementation and maintaining of policies. Consequently, this had a negative impact and was a setback to changing social norms.

> *"The current policies are not so effective because the implementation is somehow weak as it is always known that police do compromise and are corrupt. The file for the case sometimes disappear and they release the perpetrators after they were arrested and this annoys people so much that it makes them not to trust the police system. Hence someone just says -I'd better negotiate and get something (money) instead of taking the case to the police while the perpetrator he is released, then I don't benefit anything."* (KII Uganda)

Challenges with the implementation of the policies in Uganda

The implementation of CEFM policies faced multiple challenges across government and community levels. At the government level, issues included frequent transfers of trained health workers, a lack of adolescent-friendly and gender-responsive services, and the absence of disability-friendly services. Community-level challenges involved low literacy rates that hindered policy comprehension, poor dissemination of policies, bribery among police officers leading to unreported offenders, the entrenched nature of CEFM as a long-standing practice, and fear of community backlash for reporting cases. Additional implementation difficulties included insufficient resources for monitoring and implementing activities, a lack of follow-ups to evaluate policy effectiveness, irregular review meetings, language barriers between government officials and local communities, and limited understanding of the policies among some policymakers.

> *"Language can also be a barrier because sometimes some may not understand the language used to communicate."* (KII Uganda)

Strengthening CEFM policies in Uganda

Strategies for improving the implementation of the policies included regular training of parents on children's rights and the dangers of CEFM, promoting community dialogues including intergenerational dialogue on the CEFM policies, and strengthening enforcement of legal provisions against those perpetuating CEFM. Additionally, effective communication using local languages and increased community-level resources for policy dissemination were emphasized.

Table 2 below shows policy/ legal progression regarding the adoption of the laws and policies on minimum age of marriage in the three countries.

Table 2. Summary of National Adoption of Minimum Age of Marriage.

Policies	Ethiopia	Mozambique	Uganda
Age at marriage	Achieved	Not started	In progress
Criminalising child marriage	Achieved	Achieved	Not started

DISCUSSION

Several norms that promote child, early and forced marriage still existed in Mozambique, Uganda and Ethiopia. These norms included the view that marrying off girls whilst young is a sign of relief for the household, while also girls themselves perceived this as a way of escaping from poverty in the household. Young girls looked forward to acquiring the wife status which gained them more respect. Studies in other countries identified some of these norms, especially bride wealth, as an influencer of marriage as poor parents arranged early marriages for their daughters in order to receive the bride wealth paid by the relatives of the husband-to-be [21]. Similarly, studies in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia for example, found that conducting an initiation ceremony since long and still is the main form of endorsing the transition from childhood to adulthood, after which young girls were socially approved to start engaging in sexual activities [22-25]. However, these initiation rites were slowly diminishing and disappearing [22-24].

Studies have shown that in Uganda, Mozambique and Ethiopia, social norms triggered child marriages and pregnancies by shaping decisions through influencing

expectations about when a girl was supposed to get married or have children [26-28]. These norms constrained girls' agency to make independent correct reproductive health decisions or choices by making child marriage an 'acceptable practice'[26]. As shown in our study- and other studies, in Ethiopia and to some extent in Uganda and Mozambique, social norms, particularly related to girls' sexuality contributed to CEFM by making girls believe that one way of fostering family honour was by avoiding getting pregnant out of wedlock. Further, these norms made CEFM to be perceived as a tradition or recommended practice by faith. Socio-economic factors such as poverty also influenced the occurrence of child marriage where marriage was seen as a viable economic opportunity in the form of bride wealth or economic relief [26, 27, 29].

On the other hand, those who do not follow the traditional norms risked being negatively labelled, denied support and full recognition by the family. We note that these norms create a social structure that constrains or limits girls' individual agency in making independent decisions about CEFM. This finding aligns with other studies in LMICs, which suggest that early pregnancies are linked to structural contexts that restrict adolescents' decision-making space or agency regarding marriage and pregnancy [30-35]. Significant others such as parents, community leaders and traditional counsellors play a major role in influencing independent decisions regarding CEFM among adolescents through providing feedback, including endorsement of social status to girls through rewards and sanctions. It is important to note that feedback about one's position can provide a sense of security or sense of threat to the self [36, 37]. Negative feedback through for example threats to withdraw support from the girls may, over time, make girls become less confident, assertive and less positive to make correct decisions, including those over CEFM. Such actions can threaten or weaken the sense of belonging and the girl's agency as they result in the classification of individuals as "we" and "others" [21]. Thus, these findings build further on the existing body of literature on adolescent gender – power dynamics in relation to early pregnancy in LMICs by adding contextual data on how social norms can complicate reproductive health choices among adolescents [37, 38].

To address such norms, countries have developed different policies aimed at addressing child, early and forced marriages. While these policies are being implemented, several contextual issues hindered their relevance in addressing the social norms concerning marriage, producing children, and the subsequent increased status of the couple. Key contextual barriers included policy content gaps, policy communication challenges, socio-cultural dynamics and economic aspects such as poverty [34, 39]. This study showed that the content of the policies did not adequately consider the social norms concerning marriage nor provides strategies for addressing them. There is also limited response to the economic and childcare needs of young mothers or social protection programs to enable a pregnant girl to go back to school.

Addressing these social norms and policy response challenges requires strengthening community-based interventions such as dialogues on the risks of CEFM, correcting myths on delayed marriage and targeting community influencers or reference groups that sustain CEFM norms. Adopting this approach is vital, as it can facilitate a careful examination of the dynamics of early motherhood prevail[40]. These dynamics are often beyond formal policies but are instead deeply embedded in relationships of power and economic disadvantage, and social relations that influence everyday politics of reproduction, including structural drivers of CEFM [20, 34, 41, 42].

To address the reported weak collaboration among actors in implementing policies aimed at addressing CEFM, it is important that clear roles and responsibilities are assigned to implementing partners. Clear definition of tasks is vital as implementation of CEFM policies is a negotiated process between the experiences, attitudes and interests of implementers, health workers, teachers and the contextual socio-cultural and community dynamics [34, 38, 42-46]. Thus, clearly defining tasks can enhance implementation of CEFM policies and programs by promoting collaborative governance, capacity for joint action, shared motivation and coordinated efforts among various actors [47].

Finally, this study makes a unique contribution to ongoing efforts aimed at addressing CEFM by emphasizing the importance of developing modules on social norms which contribute to CEFM as well as strategies for addressing the norms, and integrating these modules into the school and community outreach programs. These modules should be tailored to age groups, community, and other groups who might have different norms. Further, it is important that adolescent health policies adequately consider strategies for addressing CEFM. We also suggest the need to strengthen communication of policies on CEFM by opening up more spaces at community level for inclusive discussions and communicating of policies [48, 49].

Strengths and limitation of the Study

The use of interviews and review of documents in this study helped in developing a comprehensive account of contextual social norms on CEFM and barriers to implementing policies aimed at addressing these norms. Credibility of the findings was enhanced through thoroughly documenting the research processes including the analysis process. In addition, sharing the results with Plan International and other stakeholders during a dissemination workshop helped in clarifying and validating the findings. One limitation of this study is that, while the discussion of reference groups sustaining norms was done, we did not comprehensively link reference groups to each norm. We thus recommend

that future studies should explore directly in detail each norm and illustrate how these references groups actively enforce and propagate specific norms.

Conclusion

Social norms that promote CEFM such as considering marrying off girls as getting rid of financial burdens at household level or as escaping poverty for girls, viewing marrying off girls early as a sign of responsible parenting, marriage as a rite of passage to womanhood and manhood, and the high social status of motherhood are still prevalent in Mozambique, Ethiopia and Uganda. These norms are transmitted from one generation to another through key reference groups such as parents and family members, community leaders and initiation rites advisors. Benefits of promoting and adhering to these norms include improved social status, a sense of belonging to the community, maintaining social bonds and socio-economic rewards.

Although policies aimed at addressing child, early and forced marriage have been implemented, several gaps still exist which affect the relevance of these policies in addressing the social norms. These gaps include policies not adequately considering social norms and not taking into account the social context that promote CEFM, policy communication challenges as well as lack of understanding of these policies by some implementers.

To effectively address CEFM, policies should integrate traditional norms into their content and emphasize these norms in communication and implementation processes. Additionally, promoting community-based policy development and communication is crucial. We recommend conducting a more detailed content analysis of the policies to complement stakeholder perspectives and provide a more comprehensive understanding of their effectiveness.

DECLARATIONS

Publication Consent

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Author contributions

The study was conceived and designed by JMZ, TR, PM, GS. JMZ, TR, PM, MC, MPC, AS and GS analyzed the data and drafted the manuscript. MT provided the overall scientific guidance to the development of the manuscript. All authors critically reviewed, revised and approved the final manuscript for submission.

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Data availability

Not applicable.

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Normas y barreras sociales que dificultan la eliminación del matrimonio infantil, precoz y forzado en Mozambique, Uganda y Etiopía, y respuestas políticas: un estudio cualitativo

RESUMEN

Introducción: El matrimonio infantil, precoz y forzado (MIPF) continúa siendo un problema persistente en muchos países de ingresos bajos y medianos. El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar las normas sociales contextuales que sostienen el MIPF y explorar los obstáculos que dificultan la implementación de políticas diseñadas para abordarlas en Mozambique, Uganda y Etiopía.
Métodos: Se recopilaron datos cualitativos de un total de 90 participantes. Se llevaron a cabo 42 entrevistas individuales con adolescentes, padres, líderes tradicionales, funcionarios gubernamentales y representantes de organizaciones de la sociedad civil. Además, se organizaron cuatro grupos de discusión con padres, adolescentes, miembros de la comunidad y líderes locales, sumando un total de 48 participantes. El análisis de los datos se realizó mediante un enfoque de análisis temático.
Resultados: Las principales normas sociales que contribuyen al MIPF en los tres países incluyen: el alto valor social atribuido al estatus de maternidad; la mercantilización del matrimonio; su consideración como un rito de paso hacia la adultez; la construcción social de la sexualidad; y el juicio moral colectivo sobre la paternidad responsable. Estas normas se perpetúan porque ofrecen beneficios sociales y económicos a quienes las siguen, como el fortalecimiento de los vínculos comunitarios y una mejora del estatus social. Aunque se han promulgado políticas y leyes para afrontar estas normas, su impacto ha sido limitado. Los principales obstáculos a su implementación incluyen la escasa integración de las normas sociales en los marcos legales y políticos, la débil colaboración entre los actores clave, la falta de procesos sistemáticos de seguimiento, y la dificultad de comprensión de dichas políticas por parte de las comunidades, debido a bajos niveles de alfabetización y una limitada difusión de las mismas.
Conclusiones: Para fortalecer la respuesta política frente a las normas sociales que perpetúan el MIPF, es necesario promover una colaboración más estrecha entre las organizaciones no gubernamentales, los organismos gubernamentales y los líderes comunitarios, tanto en la implementación como en el monitoreo de las políticas.

Palabras clave: Normas sociales, infantil, matrimonio precoz y forzado, Mozambique, Uganda, Etiopía.

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