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Traditional, but changing, cultural norms:
rural community views on child marriage
in Algarderef State, Sudan

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEDAW	UN 1979 Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	civil society organization
FGM	female genital mutilation
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
NCCW	Sudan National Council for Child Welfare
SHHS	Sudan Household Health Surveys
SORD	Sudan Organization for Research and Development
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund

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1 INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is any formal marriage or informal union where one or both parties are under 18 years of age. Child marriage affects both boys and girls, but disproportionately affects girls. Each year, 15 million girls are married before the age of 18, and that number is growing. Worldwide, 700 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthday and more than one in three girls are married before age of 15 (UNICEF 2014a, 1). Although the largest numbers of child brides are in South Asia, most of the countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage are in Africa (African Union 2015a, 3). Sudan is among the African countries with a high prevalence of child marriage. In Sudan, 11.9% of women aged 15 to 49 were married before the age of 15, and 38% were married before the age of 18 (CBS and UNICEF 2014).¹

Child marriage is a human rights violation affecting children's and women's rights to health, education, equality, non-discrimination, and freedom from violence and exploitation. Child marriage has harmful effects on young girls. Neither physically nor emotionally ready to become wives and mothers, child marriage exposes young girls to a wide range of health risks. The minds and bodies of young girls are physically unprepared for sexual activity and childbirth, increasing the risks of maternal health complications. Early pregnancy increases the risk of both maternal and child mortality. Added to that, girl brides are more likely to suffer domestic violence and marital rape. Child brides are rarely allowed to continue their education. With limited access to education and subsequent economic opportunities, child brides and their families are more likely to live in poverty.

In recent years, child marriage has received great attention on international and national development agendas. The UN Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in September 2015, include eliminating child marriage as a key target for advancing gender equality by 2030. This goal may help sustain international attention and enhance political will at the national level in states with a high prevalence of child marriage. According to UNICEF's 2015 report *A Profile of Child Marriage in Africa*, the prevalence of child marriage has been slowly declining in Africa, but remains higher than the global average.² The fastest progress in reducing child marriage in Africa has been in the northern part of the continent.

Child marriage in Sudan has received heightened attention since late 2016 when it emerged as a recommendation from the UN after Sudan presented its Universal Periodic Report (United Nations 2016a; 2016b). In addition, the topic has recently come onto the public agenda in the context of reforming the Muslim Personal Law of 1991. That law sets the minimum age of marriage at *tamyeez* ("maturity"), which is 10 years old under the law. Furthermore, under the 1991 law, a woman needs a male guardian (a father, brother, or uncle) to contract her marriage. When the 1991 act was passed, the Islamic government of the time employed religious arguments to defend the legalization of child marriage. However, both government and civil society are now working for both legal and social change. In particular, the NGO, Sudan Organization for Research and Development (SORD) has advocated for legal reform of the 1991 law's provisions on child marriage. The SEEMA Center has also turned its attention to child marriage, particularly by working with victims. In December 2015, the Sudanese government launched the African Union campaign to end child marriage in Africa (African Union 2015b). In addition, the National Council for Child Welfare (NCCW), under supervision of the Sudan's minister of social welfare, has formulated a strategy for abandoning the practice, which is in process of being endorsed by the Cabinet of Ministers.

While there has been no legal reform of the Muslim Personal Law of 1991 at the time of this report, the 2010 National Child Act defines "child" as a person below the age of 18. The 2010 law also includes provisions protecting children against all forms of discrimination, and, accordingly, it has been used as a platform to advocate for legal reform of the minimum age of marriage. However, this initiative has met resistance from religious conservative

1 The prior 2006 SHHS showed that 14.6% of women ages 25 to 29 and 6.9% of girls ages 15 to 19 had married before the age of 15 (FMH and UNICEF 2006).

2 Specifically, UNICEF was looking at the percentage of women ages 20 to 24 who were married or in union, before age 18, by African sub-region.

groups, who continue to argue that the practice of child marriage is in accordance with Sharia. On the other hand, women continue to fight to end child marriage in Sudan, pointing to its multiple harmful effects, both nationally and sub-nationally.

This report investigates child marriage in Algardaref State, located in Sudan's eastern region. As of 2014, approximately 49% of the women in Algardaref ages 20 to 49 had married before age 18 (CBS and UNICEF, 2014). This figure is higher than the national incidence of child marriage in Sudan, which was 38% in 2014, (ibid). In fact, the practice of child marriage in Algardaref State increased negligibly between 2006 and 2014—from 48.6 % in 2006 to 48.8% in 2010 to 49.3% in 2014. (FMH and UNICEF, 2006; CBS and UNICEF, 2010 and 2014)

The report is part of a series of reports on child marriage in the Red Sea State, Algardaref State, and Kassala State of Sudan.³ This research is significant because Sudan has categorized child marriage as a form of violence against women and has issued a national plan (2012–2016) to eradicate the practice. Child marriage is a top priority on the agendas of the NCCW and international, national, and local organizations. Our research findings suggest that child marriage is a culturally articulated form of denying girls' rights, including the freedom to decide whom to marry and when to enter into marriage. Often, pubescent girls are stereotyped as being prone to promiscuous behavior that potentially damages the family and the ethnic group's honor.

Available statistical evidence shows that the practice of child marriage is higher in rural areas than in urban areas⁴, but as of yet no study has closely examined dynamics of the practice in rural settings. This report seeks to fill that gap by examining practice of and attitudes towards child marriage in rural communities of Algardaref State, Sudan.

The findings in this report can be used to design interventions aimed at ending child marriage, especially interventions aimed at changing norms that continue to support the practice, as well as to promote the rights of girls and women to decide whom and when to marry.

The main objectives of the research are as follows:

- to understand the attitudes of the communities in Rural Central Algardaref Locality towards the education and marriage of girls and boys;
- to gain insight into the arguments for and decision-making process behind child marriage;
- to cast light on the risks associated with child marriage, as perceived by communities in Central Algardaref Locality;
- to highlight the experiences of girls who continue education instead of getting married; and
- to gain knowledge on how local communities perceive awareness-raising campaigns to end child marriage.

Our findings suggest that control of girls' chastity, protection of girls from stigma of being unmarried/infertile and socialization of young girls into obedient wives are important drivers of child marriage in rural Algardaref. Compared to the other two eastern states, however, poverty is driving child marriage to a larger extent in Algardaref than in neighboring Kassala and Red Sea State. Added to that, poor educational infrastructure and lack of funding to attend school drives girls away from school and into early marriages to a much larger degree than in Red Sea State (El Nagar, Bamkar, and Tønnessen 2017)

³ As such, the information contained in this introduction and in part 3 below (dealing with causes and consequences of child marriage) is repeated in each report, with some adjustments to account for differences in the situation in each of the three states studied (see El Nagar, Tønnessen and Bamkar 2017 on Red Sea State; El Nagar, Tønnessen, Mahgoub, Idris, forthcoming, on Kassala State).

⁴ The figures on child marriage vary among the states and are generally higher in rural than urban areas. According to the MICS 2014, among women age 20-49 years, 42.3% in rural areas and 29.1% in urban areas, were married before age of 18 years. (CBS and UNICEF 2014).

The rural context of Algardaref State presents special challenges to ending child marriage. Local activism against child marriage has not yet taken root and international efforts in the state tend to focus more on maternal mortality, and especially FGM abandonment, rather than adopting an integrated approach to address the full range of traditional and harmful practices as severe and extreme gender discrimination.

Nonetheless, we do find some evidence that attitudes toward girls who continue education without getting married early is changing. An increasing number of girls and women in Algardaref State have completed their education and moved on to hold jobs in a extremely gender conservative setting, which has delayed marriage in some rural communities. Interestingly, the unmarried women attending schools and universities in Algardaref did not seem to face social sanctions or stigma concerning *bayra* (not desirable in marriage) and *agir* (infertile) to the same extent as in the Red Sea State (El Nagar, Bamkar, and Tønnessen 2017).

2 RESEARCH METHODS IN ALGADAREF STATE⁵

We used a qualitative methodology to learn about how communities in Algardaref State perceive child marriage, a topic of cultural sensitivity and evolving complexity. Data collection was undertaken from May through July 2016, with most data collection occurring during May. We used three primary data collection tools: structured interviews as part of a questionnaire (survey), semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussion.

This research focuses on Algardaref State in the eastern part of Sudan, a state with a high prevalence of child marriage compared to other parts of Sudan. Based on multi-stage purposive sampling of the 10 localities in Algardaref State, the Central Algardaref locality was chosen as the location of the study. The locality was purposely selected as a rural area, as most residents of this locality engage in farming and livestock trade.

We collected data from four villages in Central Algardaref—Umsinaibra, Gadambalia Tarfa, Ghibaisha, and Rufaa. These villages are situated in four directions from the locality's center. All four villages have primary schools for both boys and girls. They also all have secondary schools for boys, and all but Rufaa have secondary schools for girls. The villages are each between three and six miles from Algardaref town and they all have access to Algardaref town via paved roads and a public bus system. As the population of the Rural Central Algardaref Locality includes specific ethnic groups from the northern and western parts of Sudan, we chose to collect a fixed sample of 200 individuals in the locality, 50 from each of the four villages. Ultimately, we collected 191 surveys, including 83 from females and 108 from males.

In each village, we contacted households to obtain responses to our survey questionnaire. Respondents from each household were of varying genders and ages, very few were less than 18 years and majority were 18 or older. We also reached out to community leaders, civil servants in relevant government institutions, activists of civil society organizations (CSOs), youth under age 18 (whether in school or not), and school girls under age 18, to conduct additional interviews and focus group discussions.

The *survey questionnaire* consisted of close-ended survey questions on (i) the attitudes of community women and men towards child marriage and education; (ii) the extent to which consultation occurs prior to the marriage of girls and boys; (iii) the consequences of child marriage; and (iv) problems faced by unmarried girls who continue their education. In addition, respondents were asked questions about awareness-raising initiatives on child marriage. The questionnaire was administered to adult members of households, according to their availability and consent. The appendix to this report contains demographic data about the 191 individuals who completed the questionnaire.

In addition, we engaged in *semi-structured interviews* to elaborate on and complement the questionnaire, especially as to the problems and implications of child marriage. The qualitative data collection tools included open-ended questions to allow participants the opportunity to respond in their own words, rather than limiting their choices to the fixed responses provided for in the questionnaire. The data collectors conducted 36 individual interviews with men and women in households, with community leaders, and with young men and women (under age 18). We also conducted *additional interviews* with employees of government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Algardaref State Child Welfare Council and the Zainab Organization for Development.

Finally, we hosted *focus group discussion* with primary school girls—one in each of the four villages. The focus group discussions concentrated on the girls' intentions to continue their education and the factors influencing their decisions about education and marriage.

5 Five data collectors assisted with the study, two men and three women. Before they began the fieldwork, we trained them on the purpose of the research, the conceptual framework, how to complete the questionnaire, and how to conduct interviews and focus group discussions. We also instructed data collectors to avoid pressuring respondents who became restless or anxious during the interview. The reports of data collectors showed that only a few women and some men withdrew from an interview after understanding the issue to be discussed and the time needed for the interview.

3 CHILD MARRIAGE: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND DRIVERS OF CHANGE

UNFPA (2012, 11) defines child marriage as “a legal or customary union” before age 18. Although child marriage affects both boys and girls, the practice disproportionately affects girls. Numerous countries legally allow marriages of girls at a young age, usually with a lower minimum age than for boys. Each year, 15 million girls are married before the age of 18, many of whom are married to much older men (UNICEF 2014a, 1)

Child marriage is condemned by a range of international and regional conventions, protocols, resolutions, and platforms, including the UN Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (United Nations 2016c), which recognizes “child, early, and forced marriage” as harmful practices that violate, abuse, and impair human rights. Child marriage is synonymous with “early marriage,” as both terms refer to marriages where one or both of the parties to the marriage are under the age of 18 (although this also depends on the legal definition of “child” in a particular country). Forced marriages, on the other hand, also include marriages where the parties are over the age of 18 but have not consented to the marriage. In this report, we have chosen to use the term “child marriage” to discuss child and early marriage collectively; the report does not focus on forced marriage—although child marriage is by definition always forced (since a child cannot give consent to marry).

Child marriage is a harmful traditional practice and a form of violence against women. It could even be characterized as a form of slavery that negatively affects girls and women’s reproductive health, education, and economic opportunities by placing them in bondage to a spouse not of their choosing. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states that marriage should be “entered only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses” (article 16.2). However, an element of coercion is nearly always involved in child marriages (whether in Sudan or beyond): parents, guardians, or families pressure or force children into marriage, sometimes even colluding with others to do so. Child brides and grooms have little say in when or whom to marry.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (CRC) defines a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years” (article 1). Sudan ratified the CRC in 1990, and this convention has been instrumental in advocacy for child rights in Sudan. Although the CRC does not specifically address child marriage, it provides a number of norms and protective measures for children that collectively provide an enabling framework for tackling child marriage. The resolution is important in defining a child as younger than 18 years old. In many communities with a high prevalence of child marriage, puberty is the defining benchmark between childhood and adulthood, rather than the CRC’s international standard of 18 (UNICEF 2001). In Muslim countries that apply Sharia law, puberty is signified by the start of the menstrual cycle for girls. Although a marriage may be arranged during the pre-pubescent stage, such a marriage is not supposed to be consummated before puberty is reached. However, Sudan’s Muslim Personal Act of 1991 sets the age of “maturity” (*tamyeez*) at ten, even though many children have not even reached puberty by this age. On the other hand, the National Child Act of 2010 defines a child as a person younger than 18, but makes no mention of child marriage.

The condemnation of child marriage is most strongly expressed in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of 1979 (CEDAW), which is widely recognized as the women’s bill of rights. CEDAW explicitly addresses key areas of women’s rights, including the age of consent to marry. Article 16.2 calls upon states to legislate a minimum age of marriage that applies to both men and women: “The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage.” The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the expert body that monitors CEDAW, has issued a general recommendation stipulating 18 years as the minimum marriage age for both men and women (CEDAW Committee 1994, 36).

Similarly, article 6 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (also known as the Maputo Protocol) clearly provides that men and women should have equal rights when it comes to marriage (African Union

2003). Among other things, the protocol requires marriage only by consent of both parties, a minimum age of marriage of 18 years for women, and marriage registration. Sudan is among a select few countries that have neither signed nor ratified CEDAW. Sudan has signed the Maputo Protocol, but has not ratified it. This makes the CRC the most important international human rights treaty in Sudan in relation to advocacy for a minimum age of marriage of 18.

Child marriage prevails across countries, regions, cultures, and religions. Child brides are found in every region in the world, including in the Western world. However, 30 of the top 41 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage are African Union countries (African Union 2015a, 3). Sudan is among these countries with a high prevalence of child marriage.

The origins of child marriage are multidimensional and deeply rooted. Accordingly, the next subsections begin by providing background information on gender discrimination in Sudan, which is at the ultimate root of practices such as child marriage that are harmful to girls and women. It then goes on to address some of the specific drivers of child marriage as a unique social phenomenon, followed by a discussion of some of the harmful consequences of the practice. This section ends by discussing some current interventions against the practice of child marriage.

3.1 Gender discrimination in Sudan

This section presents the factors and processes perpetuating child marriage in Algardaf State, within the context of gender discrimination. Policies and laws at Sudan's national level shape and influence gender discrimination in the Algardaf, as decentralization processes have not been implemented to give Sudanese states autonomy. Thus, to understand the drivers and dynamics of child marriage in Algardaf State, we also need to consider and highlight gender discrimination at the national level.

3.1.1 National level gender discrimination in Sudan

Sudan's current government came to power through a coup d'état in 1989, which instigated a process of Islamization based on the assumption that Islamic and Arabic beliefs represented the foundation of the country's national identity and should define its legal, political, cultural, and economic systems. Leaders called this "the civilization project" (*al-Mashru al-Hadari*). As in many other political projects in the region, the "woman question" has been a driving vessel in this project (Hale 1997; Nageeb 2004; Tønnessen 2011). In particular, Sudan's codification of the Muslim Personal Law of 1991, described by activists as a backlash to women's rights, has played a particularly important role in attitudes towards women in the country and continues to be a contested piece of legislation.

The principal elements of the Muslim Personal Law build on the principle of *qawama*, which is roughly translated as "male guardianship." Islamist lawmakers understood the principle of *qawama* as very much linked to the ideal of a male breadwinner.⁶ A man's spending of his means to support the women in his family justifies his wife's duty to obey him, and articles 91 to 95 of the law expressly require a wife to be obedient to her husband, as well as to care for and be faithful to him. Because of the requirement of obedience, a man can deny his wife the right to work outside the home, and a woman is considered disobedient if she leaves the matrimonial home without her husband's permission (unless conditions for doing so are provided for in the marriage contract), or refuses to travel with her husband without an acceptable reason.⁷ On the other hand, the Muslim Personal Law

6 For example, the wife is entitled to financial maintenance (*nafaqa*) up to six months after a divorce. The husband is financially responsible for the children even when they are in the custody of the mother. A father is financially responsible for his daughters until marriage and for his sons until they can provide for themselves. In addition, a woman inherits half the amount of property that her brother inherits. The reasoning behind the inheritance law is that the husband is the breadwinner of the family. A woman's inheritance is thus considered her own property, while a man's inheritance will be used to fulfill his financial obligations to his family.

7 As a direct consequence of the stipulations on obedience, the concept of marital rape does not exist within the law. If the conditions stipulated are met, the wife is not allowed to deny her husband sexual intercourse (Tønnessen 2014). Recent statistics of Violence against Women Unit, showed prevalence of marital rape. (Abu Alyaman, 2012)

entitles a wife to a dowry (*mahr*), to maintenance (*nafaqa*), to receive permission to visit her parents and relatives, and to not be physically or psychologically harassed.⁸

Two issues related to male guardianship are particularly contested in Sudan. First, under the law, both parties must consent to a marriage, yet a female needs a male guardian (*wali*) to validate the marriage (article 25). Article 33 even gives the guardian the right to invalidate a marriage that has been contracted without his permission, *unless* the woman is pregnant.⁹ Second, the age of consent for marriage is “the age of *tamyeez*” (“maturity”) which is interpreted as 10 years of age (article 40(3)). *Tamyeez* is the stage where “a person is not an adult but is a child who is able to show a degree of independence and knowledge” (Abdel Halim 2011, 9). This part of the law is inherently interlinked, according to women’s rights activists, since (a) a child cannot give consent at the age of 10 (which makes any marriage at that age forced) and (b) the fact that a male guardian can contract a child into marriage facilitates the continuation of child marriage in Sudan.

At the time the Muslim Personal Law of 1991 was adopted, lawmakers argued for marriage at *tamyeez* in order to prevent illicit sexual relations. Sex outside of marriage is forbidden in Islam. Since women develop sexual urges at puberty, early marriage is considered as the Islamic solution to deal with the risk of fornication. From an Islamic point of view, the “sexual chaos” (*fitna*) of modern day societies, where there is little or no gender segregation in schools and workplaces, can be traced back to the abandonment of early marriage, as exemplified in the promiscuous West. Early marriage allegedly ensures that sexual relations happen only within marriage. Supporters of the Muslim Personal Law point to a *hadith* (reported in Sahih al- Bukhari and Sahih Muslim) that describes the Prophet Muhammad’s betrothal to Aishah when she was six years old. Evidence also suggests that they married (and the marriage was consummated) when she was nine years old, thereby establishing a practice that girls can enter puberty as early as the age of nine. In contemporary Sudan, this interpretation of Islam is highly contested by both women inside the government and independent women activists, who claim that this hadith has a weak chain of transmission and that it is a patriarchal and wrongful interpretation of Islamic sources.

Nonetheless, although gender discrimination has persisted through history in both public and private spheres, notable progress is being made in a few areas. For example, an increasing number of girls and women are receiving an education. The share of females six years old in primary level in 2011 and 2012 reached 81% (Sudan Federal Ministry of Education n.d., 26). Although Sudan has the highest rate (24%) of out-of-school girls before last grade of primary level in the Middle East and North Africa region in 2014 (UNICEF 2014b, 38), females constitute 48.8% of bachelor’s degree students and 44% of diploma students in public and private universities (Elnagar et al. 2011, 95).

In addition, women are becoming ever more visible in the formal and informal sectors of all kinds of economic activities, including those traditionally dominated by men, such as engineering, medicine, and street vending. Women even outnumber men in teaching and in civil service. Women, specifically in urban areas, are active in political parties and NGOs. Since the introduction of a requirement of 25% reserved seats for women in Sudan’s national and sub-national legislative assemblies in 2008, women are now more present than ever in political decision-making at both the national and state levels. This increased presence of women in the public sphere has led to calls for women’s rights and freedoms, as well as the condemnation of gender discrimination and gender-based violence, despite the fact that Sudan has not ratified CEDAW. The international community supports the mobilization, advocacy, and lobbying initiatives of women’s rights activists in Sudan and neighboring countries, including work on child marriage, FGM, and women’s political representation.

8 A man is allowed to marry up to four wives, although he has to treat all his wives justly and equally (article 51(d)). The law also stipulates that the husband should provide separate housing for his wives, unless they agree to live together in the same home (article 79).

9 The guardian has to petition the court within one year of after the marriage has been consummated.

However, progress towards gender equality is more apparent among those of the educated middle class in central Sudan and in and around the capital than in other regions, which have been struck by armed conflicts and chronic underdevelopment. Sudan still has high illiteracy (48%), particularly among women, and women's economic participation is still very low (21%) compared to men (54%). Women also have limited political participation and low educational attainment outside of urban areas and in disadvantaged states. The majority of women engage in unpaid work and in informal sector activities that lack legal protection (El Nagar et al. 2011). This limits women's participation in decision-making and reinforces unequal gender power relations within families.

Furthermore, progress in Sudan on the specific issue of child marriage has been limited. Despite international and domestic pressure for making 18 the minimum age of marriage, the Muslim Personal Law of 1991 remains unchanged. Neither the National Strategy for Women Empowerment nor the National Family Strategy of 2009 even mentions child marriage. Although the 2010 National Child Rights Act includes provisions against discrimination of the girl child, it does not mention child marriage specifically. However, the 2010 Child Act does define a child as a person below the age of 18, and since the 2010 Child Act is to take precedence over all other laws, women inside and outside of the government are of the belief that a reform of the Muslim Personal Law with regards to child marriage is inevitable. NCCW continues to tackle child marriage through awareness raising, but with a low profile. A strategy to eliminate child marriage, which was initiated by NCCW, is still waiting approval by the parliament. There are a few NGOs, especially SORD, that call for the end of child marriage. According to SORD, however, it is not enough to merely raise the minimum age of marriage to 18; Sudan must also get rid of male guardianship in marriage. There is need for more advocacy to reform discriminatory laws. (Badri and Al-Hussemi 2014,19).

3.1.2 Gender discrimination in Algardaref State

Algardaref is one of three states in eastern Sudan and is a agricultural center for the country. The state population has a diverse ethnic composition, due to migration from parts of the country. This is well-reflected in the villages researched as part of this study: each village is inhabited by ethnic groups from different parts of Sudan, yet each is an integrated community, and during the interviews, respondents did not refer to ethnic origin. All four villages have primary and secondary schools for both boys and girls, except for Rufaa, which has no secondary school for girls. Each village also has a health center. Transportation to Algardaref town is available via public bus. Most of the rural population of the four villages researched live on subsistence farming and animal rearing.¹⁰

Gender power relations in Algardaref State are characterized by inequality, male dominance, and subordination—prevalent patterns among most rural population of Sudan. Women, girls and boys are deprived of some basic rights. Nonetheless, all respondents interviewed asserted that their communities are changing, as many families are supporting the education of girls and women as well as their participation in formal employment and public life. Some explained that women currently have more freedom, as some women work outside the village and marry men from other villages. Respondents explained that the change in their communities is influenced by increased access to educational and other public facilities and changing patterns of life at both the national and state level. Nonetheless, some community leaders noted that some families still support traditions that restrict females and sometimes even males. This is expected, since the current transformation—evidenced by the prominence of women in education, voluntary public work, the political arena, and diverse economic activities—is offset by restrictive laws and the prevalence of male-dominance perceptions related to patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

Compared to Red Sea State and Kassala State, Algardaref State is host to very limited representatives of UN agencies and other international organizations. Most such

¹⁰ This information is partially based on information collected by data collectors from the researched areas and partially on works such as Al Houweris (2009) and Abusin (2011).

organizations work from Kassala or Khartoum and channel support through national NGOs or Sudanese government institutions. Nonetheless, despite the international community's limited presence in Algardaf State, it provides tremendous support to health and education in the area. UN agencies, donors, and international NGOs have supported interventions in Algardaf State for child protection, women rights, and abandonment of harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and FGM.

Thus, the scene in rural Algardaf, as in other states in the country, is characterized by improved opportunities for girls and women for education and work. This is partially related to national and state government policies, as influenced by the loud voices of women's rights activists and CSOs. The international community's support for such initiatives contributes tremendously to improvement in the situation for women in Algardaf State. However, improvement remains limited because of socioeconomic dynamics that continue to reinforce gender inequality, the subordination of women, and discriminatory practices against girls and women.

3.2 Specific drivers of child marriage

The literature on child marriage identifies several root causes and exacerbating factors that contribute to child marriage, including gender-discriminatory norms rooted in patriarchal values and ideologies, the lack of educational and economic alternatives to child marriage, and exacerbating social factors such as poverty, economic instability, conflict, and humanitarian crisis. In addition, most countries where child marriage is prevalent lack laws that could protect children against the practice and ensure their human rights (Mathur, Greene, and Malhotra 2003; ICRW 2011; Myers 2013, 17–18; Backlund and Blomqvist 2014, 19; Save the Children 2014; Svanemyr et al. 2015).

Our study specifically looks at the following factors relevant to the persistence of child marriage:

- laws legalizing child marriage,
- the education of girls,
- poverty and the economics of marriage, and
- gender inequality and discrimination.

3.2.1 Laws that legalize child marriage

In 146 countries, state or customary laws allow girls younger than 18 to marry with the consent of parents or other authorities (UNFPA 2012, 12). Although an increasing number of countries have set a minimum age of marriage at 18, many of these countries provide exceptions to the minimum age if the parents consent, the court authorizes the exception, or the girl is pregnant. In Muslim countries, child marriage is often legitimized within the frame of religion. For example, in Iran, girls and boys can be married as young as nine years. In Saudi Arabia and Sudan the legal age of marriage is 10 years (Mortimer 2015). These young ages are based on a conservative interpretation of Sharia, which arguably allows child marriage upon puberty. Islamist lawmakers in Sudan argue that marriage at puberty (which has been interpreted as 10 years old) prevents out-of-wedlock births, “sexual chaos” (that is, *fitna* or “promiscuity”), and immorality.

Nonetheless, legislative changes alone are not enough to change the practice of child marriage. Although an increasing number of countries have introduced a minimum age of marriage at 18, implementation lags behind and oftentimes there is little government effort to promote public awareness of new laws (ICRW 2011, 4; Myers 2013, 18–19). In India, for example, marriage before the age of 18 has been illegal for about three decades, yet about half of all girls still marry before 18 (UNICEF India, n.d.). In Nigeria, a legal limitation on the age of marriage has not fundamentally altered the practice (Toyo 2006). In short, while reform of the legal and policy framework is necessary, it is an insufficient part of the answer (Malhotra et al. 2011).

The lack of impact of such laws is related in part to child marriage being a deeply entrenched cultural and religious tradition (Faizunnisa and ul Haque 2003; Prettitore 2015). Nevertheless, in the Muslim world advocacy to abolish child marriage is beginning to arise using Islamic arguments to condemn the practice (Bang 2016). For example, in a report to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2013, the Musawah Global Movement for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family (Musawah) challenges the ways in which Muslim governments invoke outdated and contested interpretations of Islamic laws to justify child marriage or to justify why change is not possible.

3.2.2 Education for girls

A lack of education for girls is both a cause and effect of child marriage. There is substantial evidence that child marriage is an important factor leading girls to curtail their education (see, e.g., Field and Ambrus 2008; Nguyen and Wodon 2012). Lloyd and Mensch (2008), using data from the late 1990s for Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Togo, find that for girls ages 15 to 24, child marriage and pregnancies directly account for between 5% and 33% of school drop-outs, depending on the country. Using similar data for Nigeria for 2006, Nguyen and Wodon (2012) find that child marriage accounts for 15% to 20% of school drop-outs, which is of the same order of magnitude. Additionally, according to Nguyen and Wodon (n.d., 3; citing Nguyen and Wodon 2012), "if child marriage and early pregnancies could be eliminated, this could potentially reduce the gender gap in education by about half."

The lack of school facilities contributes to the prevalence of child marriage (ICRW 2011, 50–51). If school locations are at a significant distance from home, this raises concerns about the safety of young girls, particularly when they reach puberty. As a consequence "many families opt to end a daughter's schooling rather than put at risk her safety by sending her to school" (ICRW 2011, vi). Parents may even feel it is in their daughter's best interest to marry at a young age, as it will protect her against physical or sexual assault.

For example, a study from Tigray in Northern Ethiopia shows that girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys when they reach puberty (Mjaaland 2013). To continue schooling after eight grade, many students must move from home to the nearest city. Since girls are considered sexually mature when they reach puberty around the age of 15, parents are often concerned that their daughters will get a boyfriend at school and be "broken" if they lose their virginity or become pregnant. Parents are committed to ensuring their daughters' reputations and their own respect in the community.

On the flip side, education is believed to reduce the risk of child marriage (Jain and Kurz 2007, 2). According to a report by Equality Now (2014, 35), "girls who are more educated marry later, have children later, and are more likely to earn an income and contribute to their nation's economy." There is reason to believe that the decline in child marriage among girls under the age of 15 in a number of African countries is (at least partly) linked to more girls going to school, since girls living in poor or rural areas who drop out of school have no real opportunities, other than to marry and have children. According to UNFPA (2012, 4), "child marriage is the outcome of fewer choices. Girls who miss out or drop out of school are especially vulnerable to it—while the more exposure a girl has to formal education and the better-off her family is, the more likely marriage is to be postponed."

3.2.3 Poverty and the economics of marriage

Poverty and economic transactions are key to understand the prevalence of child marriage (Nour 2009, 53). According to UNICEF (2016, 38), girls from poor households are twice as likely to be married during childhood than those from rich households. In the developing world, more than half of the girls from the poorest households are married before age 18 (UNFPA 2012, 36). This reality is underscored by global data showing that women and girls with greater means marry later (World Bank 2011, 153).

The economic benefits of marriage itself also contribute to child marriage (Parsons et al. 2015). Families may reap immediate financial rewards from marrying their daughters early. In some places, the costs of marriage are lower when the bride is a child. For example, in India and Bangladesh, the dowry amount increases with a girl's age and thus girls' families

are pressured to marry their daughters early (ICRW 2011, 37). In other place, such as in the Middle East, traditions such as bride wealth create incentives for child marriage, as younger brides are considered to have greater value (UNICEF 2001, 6). This drives poor families to marry off their daughters early to increase economic stability (Vogelstein 2013). In other words, “[f]or poor families, with little money even for food and basic necessities, marrying their daughter early is an economic survival strategy” (Smaak and Varia 2015, 4).

Once daughters are married, the financial responsibility to care for them shifts to the husband (unlike with sons). As such, marrying girls during childhood reduces the economic burden of their families of birth (Mathur, Greene, and Malhotra 2003, 6; Myers 2013, 24; Khalid 2013, 28). Sometimes child marriage can also create political or ethnic alliances: “By marrying their daughter to a ‘good’ family, parents also establish social ties between tribes or clans and improve their social status” (Nour 2009, 53; see also Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen 2015). However, even if parents have economic or social reasons to marry off their daughters, these short-term economic reasons do not serve the long-term interests of girls (Parsons et al. 2015).

3.2.4 Gender inequality and discrimination

The drivers of child marriage listed above must be understood within the context of gender inequality and discrimination against girl children that is often embedded within the religious and cultural norms related to dowry, bride wealth, and protection of girls’ sexuality (Karam 2015). Child marriage persists for many reasons, including poverty and the lack of educational opportunities, but ultimately it happens to girls because they are females. In essence, child marriage is driven by “traditions and gender-discriminatory norms rooted in patriarchal values and ideologies” (Svanemyr et al. 2015). According to Girls Not Brides (n.d.–b), “At its heart, child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and the belief that girls and women are somehow inferior to boys and men.” Child marriage is practiced in order to control their sexuality. “Parents also believe that marrying their daughters young protects them from rape, premarital sexual activity, unintended pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections” (Nour 2009, 53). Added to that, the marriage of girls at or near puberty is important for maximizing fertility (Mathur, Greene, and Malhotra 2003, 5; Backlund and Blonqvist 2014, 17). According to Girls Not Brides (n.d.–b),

Child marriage is also driven by patriarchal values and the desire to control female sexuality... Families closely guard their daughters’ sexuality and virginity in order to protect the family honour. Girls who have relationships or become pregnant outside of marriage are shamed for bringing dishonour on their family.

In other words, virginity is key to marriage and to securing the family’s good reputation.

3.3 Consequences of child marriage

The negative consequences of child marriage are wide ranging UNICEF (2001, 9). Child marriage violates the children’s basic human rights. A girl’s freedom is curtailed when she is denied the right to decide whom and when to marry. Further, being married young deprives a girl of her fundamental rights to education, sexual and reproductive health, and safety.

3.3.1 Educational attainment and labor force involvement

Education is widely considered to be one of the most important factors in delaying the age of marriage for girls. Girls with no education are three times as likely to marry by 18 as those with a secondary or higher education. Marriage and pregnancy have been identified as some of the key factors forcing girls to leave school (Field and Ambrus 2008; UNFPA 2012; Nguyen and Wodon 2012; Lloyd and Mensch 2008). Early childbearing and a lack of access to continued educational opportunities limits a child bride’s chances of employment and, in turn, her productive value to society (Mathur, Greene, and Malhotra 2003, 10; Mann, Quigley, and Fischer 2015, 35). In turn, this limits her choices and life opportunities, as she is more likely to be financially and socially dependent upon a male breadwinner and to be

deprived of her agency to make choices about her body, her sexuality, and her reproductive health and rights (McClearly-Sills et al. 2015, 70).

When girls marry young, their opportunities to learn reading, mathematics, and other life skills are replaced by a process of socialization into submissive wives (Mathur, Greene, and Malhotra 2003, 7–8; Mann, Quigley, and Fischer 2015, 35). De Silva-de-Alwis (2008, 36) explains, “After marriage, young married girls’ access to formal and even non-formal education is severely limited because of restrictions placed on mobility, domestic burdens, childbearing, and social norms that view marriage and schooling as incompatible.”

The educational effects of child marriage affect not only the girl herself, but also the overall economy. Because child marriage reduces education attainment for girls, it may also reduce labor force participation directly (because of a lack of agency for child brides) or indirectly (because of the impact of early marriage on education attainment and on fertility) (McClearly-Sills et al. 2015).

3.3.2 Health of mothers and children

Child marriage also has negative health complications. Child marriage “encourages the initiation of sexual activity at an age when girls’ bodies are still developing and when they know little about their rights or their sexual and reproductive health” (Girls Not Brides, n.d.–c). Consequently, girls suffer psychosocial and emotional problems from forced sexual relations (UNICEF 2001, 9).

Child marriage is associated with other health complications and dangers as well. Neither physically or emotionally ready to give birth, child brides face health risks with early pregnancy and childbirth. Once married, girls face intense social pressure to prove their fertility, which results in too soon and too many pregnancies. According to Nour (2009, 54), girls between ages 10 and 14 are five to seven times more likely and girls between ages 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die during childbirth. They are at an even greater risk for other problems arising from early sexual activity and pregnancy, such as eclampsia, postpartum hemorrhage, sepsis, HIV infection, sexually transmitted disease, malaria, and obstructed labor (ibid.). For example, girls younger than 16 usually have small pelvises that are not mature enough for childbearing; consequently, they have an 88% chance of having an obstetric fistula—a hole in the birth canal caused by labor that can leave the girl with urinary or fecal incontinency (ibid.). Furthermore, mothers younger than 18 have a 35–55% higher risk of delivering preterm or having a low-birth weight infant (ibid.). These problems are further exacerbated by entrenched gender inequity and discrimination that are manifested in poor quality of health services specifically discriminatory practices by male staff against young girls (Myers 2013, 28).

3.3.3 Safety

Child marriage is associated with increased exposure to sexual and gender-based violence because the marital relationship is based on the power of one spouse over the other. Young wives are vulnerable to domestic violence, abuse, divorce, and abandonment (ICRW 2006). According to Myers (2013, 30; citing Jenson and Thornton 2003), “Women who marry young are more likely to be beaten or threatened, and to believe that their husbands might be justified in beating or raping them.” A study from Egypt reports that nearly 30% of married women who entered marriage as child brides become victims of violence at their husbands’ hands, and 41% of women married as child brides are report beatings during pregnancy (Koons Family Institute 2013, 13).

3.4 Interventions against child marriage

The practice of child marriage is slowly declining, according to UNICEF. “Progress is most dramatic when it comes to the marriage of girls under 15 years of age” (UNICEF 2014a, 4). Globally, the percentage of young women ages 20 to 24 who were married or in union before age 15 declined from 12% in 1985 to 8% in 2010 (UNICEF 2014a, 4). The change has come as a result of interventions aiming to encourage abandonment of the practice by addressing the perpetuating factors, and these efforts have differed among countries and specific contexts.

Girls Not Brides (n.d.–d), a transnational organization working to end child marriage worldwide, has developed a theory of change that includes four categories: (i) empowering girls, (ii) mobilizing families and communities, (iii) providing services, and (iv) establishing and implementing laws and policies. Ending child marriage requires mutually reinforcing efforts across these areas. At the same time, however, attitudes towards child marriage are heterogeneous, as illustrated by a case study of rural Muslim communities in Burkina Faso (Gemignani and Wodon 2015) that finds important differences in drivers of child marriage between communities. This suggests that policy and program responses to child marriage should take into account local conditions—including those pertaining to religion and gendered norms—if they are to be successful (Karam 2015).

Most interventions towards ending child marriage can be placed within one of the above four categories. These interventions may target girls at risk of child marriage, communities, religious and tribal leaders, and/or political decision-makers. Not only must successful interventions target all these groups of people, but they also must rely on a combination of international, national, and local actors who are committed to pressing for the end of child marriage.

The international dimension of change is key in many aspects. First, international law can influence national and local policymaking to end child marriage. For example, a significant body of research suggests that states that ratify CEDAW adopt more women's rights policies compared to states that have not ratified the convention (see, e.g., Stetson 2008). Second, states may be more likely to adopt policies on child marriage when their international donors support the change; that is, the international context may provide material incentives for states to enact policy change (Adams 2007; O'Brien 2013; Kang 2016). Third, international actors may be able to directly affect the practice of child marriage, for instance, by funding women's advocacy activities, by engaging in awareness-raising and other outreach activities, and by providing financial and technical assistance for drafting bills and other legal measures. For example, Mann, Quigley, and Fischer (2015, 38) explain that through support from the UK and Canadian governments, the Zambia government and Zambian NGOs were able to develop programs for combating child marriage.

Changes in law and policy are key (Jones et al. 2014, v–vi). However, the effect of legal change can be ambiguous, and different fields of scholarship view the driving forces of such change quite differently. Law and economics scholars assume that social control is achieved primarily by the state through the legal system, and that governments are the chief source of rules and enforcement mechanisms (Posner 2003). This is based on an assumption that individuals are rational actors and alter their behavior in the face of legal incentives—an assumption that requires laws to be evenly and predictably enforced (which is often not the case in countries where child marriage is practiced). Nonetheless, legal and policy change can sometimes create an enabling environment for advocates. Particularly in the context of authoritarian states, a national strategy on child marriage or a legal change on the minimum age of marriage gives both international and national organizations the political and social space to design appropriate interventions.

Law and society scholars recognize examples of successful deterrence-based strategies, but also recognize that in some instances the threat of a criminal penalty has a limited impact. For example, when laws are antithetical to the norms of a social group, the pecuniary costs may have limited power to deter behaviors (Tyler 1990). The influence of social groups may be powerful when there are strong social sanctions such as withholding or conferring signs of status and respect, or withholding access to material resources (Posner 2000). Social, moral, and religious norms may be intimately intertwined in complex cultural systems and (if at odds with legal norms) may generate resistance to complying with legal regulations (Mackie and Lejeune 2009). Similar studies on other harmful traditional practices suggest that legal and policy changes are symbolic and communicate a new state-backed norm that can act as a catalyst for social change and provide an “enabling environment” for ending child marriage (UNICEF 2010). The power of this catalyst depends

on the readiness to change of individuals in the community (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2006).¹¹

Gender-based and theories of change scholarship recognizes that a deep-rooted, discriminatory, and harmful traditional practice such as child marriage will only change if gender norms change. Most awareness raising projects aim to change social/religious/moral norms from “below” and from “within” the culture. The theory of change underpinning these awareness-raising initiatives builds on the idea of critical mass. Once a critical mass of individuals manifests public support for abandonment of the practice, social pressures can lead additional individuals and families to adopt the new norm; change can then proceed spontaneously and will be sustained over time. Role models are critical in catalyzing such norm change processes (Myers 2013, 36; UNICEF 2001; Badri and Al-Husseni 2014, 27). Role models “do not hesitate to deviate from the customary practice of child marriage. They do face potential stigma and exclusion but articulate a resolve to educate their daughters and even allow them to pursue careers beyond completion of schooling” (ICRW 2011, vi1).

The thinking around child marriage abandonment has a strong resemblance to theories of change regarding other harmful practices, particularly FGM. Here Gerry Mackie’s (2000) social convention theory is important. Mackie argues that FGM and other harmful practices must be understood as “a matter of proper marriage” (at 254). One individual cannot give up the practice unless other members from intermarrying groups do the same. Mackie predicts that if a critical mass of people in one community were to agree to stop FGM—and publicly declared this—the normative change would potentially spread to other communities and lead to a shift in social conventions that would “help bring female genital mutilation to an end” (Mackie 1996, 999). On other harmful practices, Mackie and LeJeune (2009, 1v) state,

[P]arents want what is best for their children. It is this most basic value that motivates a parent’s decision to continue the harmful practices, since failure to comply with the social convention brings shame and social exclusion to girls and their families. Once an alternative to the social convention becomes possible within a community and people realize that the community might be better off jointly abandoning the practice, it is this most basic value—to do what is best for their children—that also motivates communities to abandon the harmful practice.

Ending child marriage requires interventions both “above” (such as changes in laws and policies) and “below” (at the level of communities that engage in the practice).

11 In a study on the abandonment of FGM, Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2006) identify five stages of change: willing adherent, contemplator, reluctant adherent, willing abandoner, and reluctant abandoner. “Willing adherents” are those who favor continuation of FGM and continue the practice in their families. “Reluctant adherents” personally favor abandonment, but continue the practice because others have not yet become persuaded to abandon the practice. “Contemplators” continue the practice, but are experiencing ambivalence and question aspects of the practice. “Reluctant abandoners” personally support the practice, but have abandoned it because other people or social pressures have forced them to stop. “Willing abandoners” personally favor abandonment of FGM, and have been able to act on this preference.

4 FINDINGS

4.3. Child marriage: A practice in Algardaref State rooted in tradition and culture

4.3.1. When does childhood end?

Respondents reported that the age of childhood ends between 10 and 18 years for boys and between 12 and 16 years for girls, although most respondents referred to puberty as the age of maturity for girls without specifying an age. Hence, the age a girl becomes “mature” is determined by her biological growth. Some respondents mentioned 18 years as the age of maturity for boys. These groups must have had access to information about Sudan’s child rights law, because culturally we do not relate maturity to specific age but to when a person can take full responsibilities. In rural areas, most boys are expected to participate in agriculture and animal rearing at 10 years old. Overall, our results are in line with the conclusion of Mann, Quigley, and Fischer (2015) that the age of childhood age is flexible and context-specific.

4.3.2. When do individuals marry?

Most of the respondents interviewed reported that age of marriage is above 18 years old for males and 15–16 years old for females. Very few mentioned that girls marry between 10 and 14 years old, although a few suggested that girls can be married at the age of puberty. All respondents confirmed that the age of marriage has increased over the years. According to respondents, most marriages, for both boys and girls, occur at 20 years old and older.

A 60-year-old man with a primary education explained, “Villagers’ attitudes are changing in favor of girls’ education. This is related to the influence of changes in Algardaref state and at national level.”¹² However, another man, 53 years old, noted, “Things are changing, but it is still better marry girls at puberty to protect them from young men.”¹³ This latter statement demonstrates the cultural beliefs that males should not be trusted and that females are weak and need protection are still prevalent in the region.

4.3.3. Whom do individuals marry?

All respondents emphasized that in the rural areas of Algardaref State there is preference for marriage of close kin. Priority is given to paternal and maternal cousins and if a non-relative were to propose to family, the cousins would be consulted; if a family member had interest in the would-be bride, he would be given priority. Thus, the consolidation of family ties is an important factor related to child marriage. In the case of rural farming communities, the strengthening of family ties is related to keeping the land within the family in case of inheritance (see IPPF and FMRWG 2006).

In the interviews, respondents were asked if girls are married to old married men. Most interviewees confirmed that this happens very rarely. Nonetheless, a 60-year-old married man stated, “I can marry a girl from the sixth class if I want.”¹⁴ A different response came from a girl’s father, however, who emphasized, “If an old man asked to marry my daughter, I would have a big problem with him.”¹⁵ These differing responses show very clearly that, while the attitude to marriage of girls to old married men is changing, some still approve the practice.

4.3.4. Who makes decisions about child marriage?

The decision-making process starts with someone initiating the idea of a marriage. Among those living in Algardaref State, Sudan, as well as in other parts of the world, older family members (such as maternal and paternal uncles) often initiate the process. In addition, about 70% of male and 60% of female respondents reported that a bridegroom, whatever

12 Interview with 60-year-old man with primary level education, Umsinaibra village, 21 May 2016.

13 Interview 53-year-old man, Umsinaibra village, 20 May 2016.

14 Interview with 60-year-old married man, Rufaa village, 20 May 2016.

15 Interview with a girl’s father, Gadambliya Tarfa village, 21 May 2016.

his age, may take the initiative for his own marriage. Thus, young males and boys in the researched communities have choice.

A man in one interview explained that some girls are betrothed at birth to their maternal or paternal cousins. When these girls reach puberty, a mother or father may remind the uncles about the betrothal. In such cases, the selected bridegroom may resist the arrangement when he is older, but the girl has no choice but to accept. One man said, “My cousin refused to marry his cousin and married from Algadaref town.”¹⁶ In such a case, the rejection is usually attributed to a problem with the girl, and she may be stigmatized by the rejection.

The initiation of the idea of marriage is followed by a process of consultation by the families involved. Our research indicates that the consultative process surrounding a marriage for both girls and boys among researched villagers is primarily a concern of males in the extended family. Males are given this guardianship role by family law and tradition. As table 1 demonstrates, for both boys and girls, the consultation mostly involves mothers, uncles and grandparents. The consultation of uncles and cousins is essential if the bridegroom is a non-relative because if any male cousin were to show interest, he would be given preference. About one-third of respondents indicated that brothers and sisters are consulted about marriages. However, one male indicated, “It is the brothers who are the main decision-makers in case father is dead or away.”¹⁷

Table 1. Family members consulted by a child's father prior to arranging a marriage, by percent of respondents in Algadaref State, Sudan

Whom does the father consult when deciding on the marriage of his child?	Regarding a boy's marriage		Regarding a girl's marriage	
	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
Mother	39.8	20.4	39.8	39.8
Uncles	37.3	72.2	37.3	67.6
Aunts	10.8	21.3	10.8	23.1
Grandparents	37.3	20.4	39.8	39.8
Brothers and sisters	7.2	28.7	7.2	32.4

Are girls consulted about their marriages?

Islam requires a female to be consulted before she is married¹⁸. However, in practice, no real “consultation” occurs in rural Algadaref communities; rather, the female is merely informed of the marriage decision. This is due not only to cultural norms in the research communities, but also to the fact that families in these communities do not understand or accept the idea that a female has a right to choose her marriage partner.

According to figure 1, approximately 90% of both female and male respondents indicated that girls are consulted prior to their marriages, although, as noted, this consultation may not be more than informing the girl that she is to be married¹⁹. As table 2 demonstrates, one-third of male and female respondents who said girls are consulted were 38–47 years old and about one-quarter of males and one fifth of females were 18–27 years old. Thus, the

16 Interview with 43-year-old man, Gaibesha, 20/May 2016..

17 Interview with 54-year-old man, Rufaa village, 20 May 2016.

18 Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, “A matron should not be given in marriage except after consulting her; and a virgin should not be given in marriage except after her permission.” The people asked, “O Allah’s Apostle! How can we know her permission?” He said, “Her silence (indicates her permission). (Sahih al-Bukhari 5136; Book 67, Hadith 72; Vol. 7, Book 62, Hadith 67)

19 Cross-tabulation with education does not show a specific pattern. The results below show that 47% of males and 46% of females who confirmed consultation have primary level education and 46% of males and 33% of those who said that girls are not consulted are in primary level. Consultation does not appear to be influenced by education, most likely because it is related to religion and traditions.

group that believes consultation occurs includes both current and future parents. However, a challenge is whether any of these individuals would reconsider the marriage decision after consulting with the girl—that is, giving the girl a real choice about the marriage.

Figure 1. Consultation of girls about their marriage, by percent of respondents in Algardaref State, Sudan

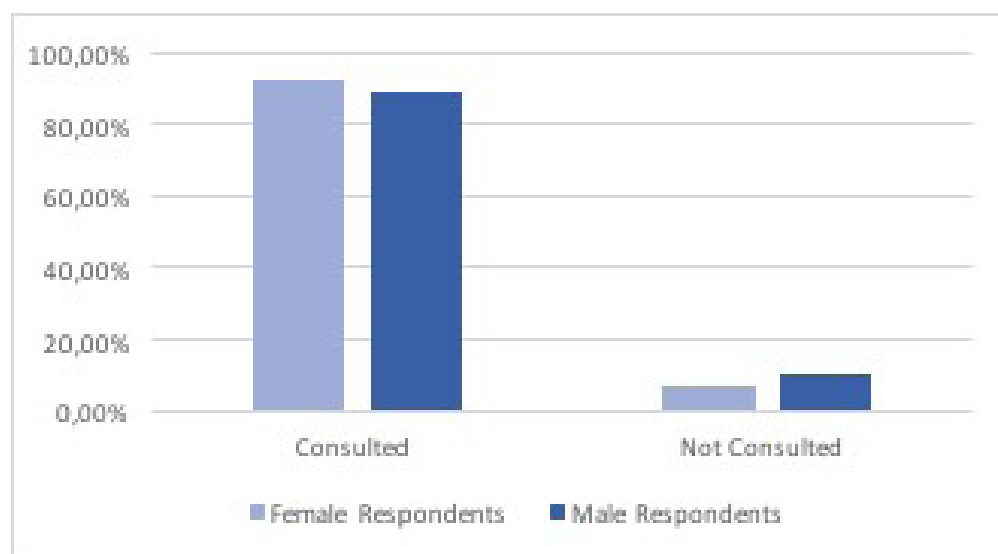


Table 2. Consultation with girls prior to their marriage, as reported by respondents in Algardaref State, Sudan (distributed by age)

Although consultation of girls is stipulated by Islamic rules, some female (10.3%) and male (7.2%) respondents asserted that girls are *not* consulted prior to being married. One-third of female respondents who asserted this were in their 20s, and over one-third were in their late 40s (see table 2).

Are girls consulted prior to their marriage?	Age of respondent				
	< 18 (%)	18–27 (%)	28–37 (%)	38–47 (%)	> 47 (%)
Male respondents					
Yes	2.1	26.0	21.9	30.2	19.8
No	0.0	27.3	36.4	18.2	18.2
Female respondents					
Yes	13.0	20.8	31.2	36.4	10.4
No	16.7	33.7	16.7	0.0	33.3

This suggests that some daughters of these female respondents may be at risk of child marriage without their consultation. The failure to consult with girls prior to marriage is influenced by cultural norms that discriminate against girls' ability to make decisions about other aspects of their lives as well, such as education and livelihood (ICRW 2011).

Why do girls accept their parents' decisions about marriage?

Girls have no opportunity to refuse marriage proposals, as emphasized by 90% of male and female respondents, as well as by most of those interviewed. This is due to multiple, interrelated reasons. As displayed in table 3, some reasons relate to the social expectation that girls be submissive and obedient. They are raised to believe that their parents will make all decisions in their interests and that if they disobey their parents, they will be sanctioned by their close family, more distant relatives, and communities. Girls also accept

these decisions because they are brought up to place a high value on marriage and a low value on education in their lives.

There are also more practical reasons why girls do not resist their parent's choices. Since they know their parents would disregard their decisions, there is no reason to do so. In addition, they may be aware that their family would be unable to support their education for cultural or economic reasons.

Table 3. Reasons girls accept marriage decision of parents, based on interviews in Algadaref State, Sudan

Why does a girl accept the marriage decisions of her parents?	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
She will not go against their family's decision	1.2	49.1
She knows her family would not consider her opinion	24.1	8.3
She knows marriage is more important than education	7.2	8.3
She is not encouraged by her family to continue her education	6.0	4.6
She knows an education will be of no use to her	6.0	0.9
She knows her family's financial conditions will not allow her to continue school	4.8	23.1

However, a different response was noted in the interviews, as a middle-aged man reported, "These days, girls can say 'no'. They cannot be forced to marriage. The situation is changing."²⁰ This reflects a realization that girls are becoming empowered and can resist.

4.3.5. Who benefits from bride wealth?

Bride wealth or *mahr*²¹, required by Muslim laws, is a gift from the bridegroom to the bride to legalize the bond of marriage. Traditionally, this *mahr* has had different compositions and purposes. About 40% of female respondents reported that bride wealth is composed of gifts of gold and money, while 81.5% of male participants said that bride wealth is given in form of money only (and 32.5% of women agreed with them). The bride wealth is used partially to help the bride prepare for married life, for instance, by acquiring new clothes and kitchen utensils. The rest is used for the wedding celebration.

Despite the importance of the bride wealth to the marriage process, it is not discussed among families. In fact, 75.9% of female and 66% of male respondents stressed that families do not discuss bride wealth, as it is not culturally acceptable to discuss this topic directly among immediate family members. Instead, intermediaries (usually distant relatives and friends) share expectations among families. Mothers sometimes send a strong message about the importance of gifts of gold, which is usually given directly to the bride for her security. Families of brides also obtain economic gains through the *mahr* payment, especially from well-off bridegrooms (especially old men). In the rural context, these gains make marriage one of the means of reducing the economic burden of supporting girls. (ICRW 2011)

4.3.6. What (if any) conditions are placed on child marriages?

We asked about the conditions parties put in marriage contracts in rural communities in Algadaref. The majority of respondents (over 80% of both females and males) reported that brides' families do not put prior conditions into marriage contracts, suggesting that the relationship of married couples is governed by traditions that rural communities consider to be adequate. The few respondents that listed conditions included the following:

- Less than 3% of respondents asserted that some brides' families have a condition of a gift of gold to the bride.

²⁰ Interview with middle-aged man, Ghaibaisha village, 20 May 2016.

²¹ According the Islamic rules, the *mahr* is a gift paid earlier to the bride at the time of marriage, or deferred to a later date and sometimes it is a compromise of both.

- Less than 4% noted that some families require their daughters to continue living with them after the marriage at least the first year to help her to adapt to marriage life. .
- 4% of female and 3% of male respondents indicated that a bride's family may place a condition that she has a separate living space and facilities in her in-laws' home.
- A 38-year-old, illiterate woman reported in an interview that families may condition that husband should not beat their daughter and should not drink liquor.
- A 54-year-old man with a secondary education stated in another interview, "A father may place a condition that his daughter continue her education after marriage."²² (However, this was not a widely held response, as noted in subsection 4.3.7 below.)

Although these responses show that some parents are concerned with protecting and educating their daughters, it is noticeable that no respondents added conditions of respect, good treatment, or continuing education²³ in the category "other" on the survey questionnaire.

About 90% of males and female respondents confirmed that bridegroom's family do not include conditions in marriage contracts. About 3% of females and 7% of male respondents noted that a bridegroom's family may have a condition that the bride lives with them, usually when the bride's family has shown an interest in keeping their daughter with them. Generally, however, the bridegroom and his family have no need to put conditions into the marriage contract because once the contract is signed, the bride and her family have no say in the bride's life, by law or tradition. Rather, the bride is under her husband's full control. She may not visit her family without her husband's permission, and if he does not allow her to do so, she may not see them for long period. (Traditionally, this happens very rarely, though.) It is evident that very few put conditions on marriage because families are careful not to create obstacles to marriage and because any restrictions on wife by husband are culturally approved gender discriminatory norms²⁴.

4.3.7. Why does child marriage occur?

Based on our interviews, reasons for child marriage in Algardafef include poverty, control of girls, fertility, and protection of girls from immortality and from the stigma of being unmarried. A male community leader stated, "Many males, believe that marrying young girls helps them to socialize girls as they want. In addition, it ensures high fertility."²⁵ Along the same line of reasoning, a male university graduate and teacher explained that "marrying a girl at an early age ensures her obedience to her husband."²⁶ *The main factor highlighted by most respondents is the issue of protection from immortality.*

Although poverty was not identified as a driver of child marriage in Red Sea State (Al-Nagar, Bamkar and Tønnessen 2017), it was highlighted by the respondents from Algardafef State. A 38-year-old woman with a university education explained, "Girls who are married at childhood are from poor families who cannot afford cost of their education."²⁷ A 60-year old man from Umsinaibra village noted: "Girls are married early to reduce economic burden of family"²⁸ This is reiterated by the head of popular committee and a member of the parents' council of girls' school in this village. A male community leader explained "Poor families

22 Interview with 54-year-old, secondary educated man, Rufaa village, 21 May 2016.

23 A man noted in *semi-structured interviews* that continuing education may be put as condition by some parents.

24 The MICS 2014, Sudan's results noted the acceptance of women to domestic violence: 'Overall, 34.0 percent of women in the survey feel that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife in at least one of the five situations (If she goes out without telling him, If she neglects the children, If she argues with him, If she refuses sex with him, and If she burns the food). CBS and UNCEF, 2014, 219).

25 Interview with male community leader, Gandambliya village, 21 May 2016.

26 Interview with male, university-educated teacher, Umsinaibra, 20 May 2016.

27 Interview with 38-year-old, university-educated woman, Gibaisha village, 20 May 2016.

28 Interview with 60-year old man from Umsinaibra village, 20 May, 2016.

who cannot afford cost of education force their daughters out of school and then marriage would be the only alternative for parents and girls”²⁹ Algardaref State is a poverty struck state with poverty incidence at 50.1% (CBS, 2009). Added to that rural areas are generally poorer than urban ones and this study took place exclusively in rural Algardaref. Poverty is identified as a factor perpetuating child marriage in the general literature.

Particularly the costs of girls’ education in rural areas burden rural households (World Bank, 2012). Also the lack of educational facilities inside the village poses problems. Some interviewees in Rufaa village noted that the lack of a secondary schools in the village makes marriage the only alternative for girls and their parents. For the families, the secondary schools in nearby villages are not good alternatives as they are concerned about security of their girls specifically after the primary level when girls reach puberty. It is considered safer for families to marry them that let them continue their education which put them at risk of immoral behavior. Added to that there is a fear of stigma, although protection of girls from immoral behaviors is the primary reason identified by respondent. A 45-year-old man with a primary education mentioned two reasons for child marriage: (i) “fear of families of the stigma of a daughter being unmarried” (*baira*) and (ii) a “family concern that girls do not become immoral”.³⁰ These are gender inequality norms indicating concern of families for their honor and mistrust to females. The protection of women sexuality is a norm maintaining male dominance. (Nour, 2009)

The idea that girls need to be socialized to be obedient, need to be protected from immorality, will suffer stigma if they are unmarried, and are of primary value because of their fertility are all basic norms that perpetuate the subordination of women and gender inequality (Girls Not Brides n.d.-b). The factors driving child marriage in rural Algardaref are similar to many factors discussed in the general literature (see, e.g., Mathur, Greene, and Malhotra 2003; Backlund and Blomqvist 2014; ICRW 2011; IPPF and FMRWG 2006). Furthermore, respondents refer to a greater extent to culture and tradition as the main driver of child marriage, rather than law. This is an important point because current efforts to end the practice are mostly aimed at law reform at the national level; however, unless the cultural bases of the practice are addressed, legal changes may gain little traction in practicing traditional rural communities. At the same time, a law reform is extremely important because it creates space for anti-child marriage activists to do awareness raising among practicing communities. However, legal reform cannot be the only strategy of eradicating child marriage.

While marrying early often results in a child dropping out of school (see subsections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2 below), some interviewees asserted that parents are not willing to let their girls miss an opportunity for marriage because they believe their daughters will have the opportunity to continue their education after marriage. This justification needs consideration. If parents are for girls continuing their education after marriage, they should put it as condition to marriage during the contracting process, since after marriage parents have no authority over their daughter. However, we found no evidence that parents in Algardaref State are requiring such conditions when they marry their daughters. Rather, after marriage, the husband makes all decisions about the girl’s future and she is traditionally expected to obey him. However, some informants, specifically in Umsinaibra village³¹, in interviews asserted that there are girls who continued their secondary education after marriage, which is a positive step.

29 Interview with university graduate from Rufaa village, 20 May, 2016

30 Interview with 45-year-old, primary educated man, Rufaa village, 20 May 2016.

31 Interview with a 35 years female, an employees, Umsinaibra village, 20 May, 2016. In interview the woman confirmed that there are currently 10 married girls in one of the secondary schools near their village.

4.4. Negative impacts of child marriage in Algardaref State and the importance of education for girls

4.4.1. What are the impacts of child marriage?

Research participants confirmed that child marriage has negative consequences, especially for girls. The main problem with the marriage of boys is early divorce, as reported by 59% of female and 47% of male respondents. Another problem is that boys may take a second wife. Less than 8% of respondents reported problem with boys living with their in-laws (see table 4). Although the category “other” was an option for respondents, they did not indicate any other problems related to boys’ marriages (such as maturity or the rights of education, self-development, career, or a choice about his bride).

Although it is good that social problems related to boys’ marriage are recognized, girls are the real victims of child marriage. For example, males who divorce are not culturally stigmatized and males have a choice about who they take as a second wife. On the other hand, females who are in an unhappy marriage must either live with the social stigma of divorce or tolerate the tensions of having a co-wife (or wives). Even if a female marries a second time, she will be very limited in her choices and may not be able to choose for herself.

A greater percentage of respondents, both male and female, indicated that problems result for girls subjected to child marriage. A substantial percentage of female (66.3%) and male (42.3%) respondents noted divorce as a major problem, and several also noted the difficulty for girls of living with in-laws. A 35-year mother with a secondary education elaborated, “The younger the girls are married, the more complicated are the problems in their married lives.”³² A 38-year-old man also noted, “My friend married a 13-year-old girl. He suffered in his first year of marriage, as she continued playing with children.”³³ It is evident that not all girls are able to adapt to the marriage context and this may lead to other problems, including vulnerability to violence.

Interestingly, as table 4 shows, a greater percentage of male than female respondents thought child marriage does not pose problems, either for boys or girls. This suggests that males may not be as ready as females to consider change and may even resist intervention efforts.

Table 4. Social problems resulting from child marriage, based on survey of rural communities in Algardaref State, Sudan

What problems result from child marriage?	For boys		For girls	
	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
No problems	14.5	37.0	18.3	44.4
Some husbands take a second wife	45.8	28.7	0.0	0.0
Some husbands refuse to live with in-laws / wives have difficulties living with in-laws	7.2	5.6	21.7	16.7
Some divorce early	59.0	47.2	66.3	42.6

Importantly, the fact that child marriage continues in spite of a recognition of these social problems (especially of divorce) reflects that parents and communities are not concerned with the social well-being of their girls. Communities and families seem to prioritize the family honor and ties over the future and comfort of their girls. These concerns are rooted in a culture of gender inequality. Sadly, no one mentioned a husband taking a second wife

³² Interview with 35-year-old, secondary educated mother, Umsinaibra village, 20 May 2016.

³³ Interview with 38-year-old man, Gadambliya Tarfa village, 21 May 2016.

as a problem for girls, since the prevalent culture approves it for men with no concern about how derogatory it is to girls and women.

In addition, there is no realization of the problem cited in literature (IPPF and FMRWG 2006) that illiterate mothers are likely to have children with a low level of education and low income opportunities (whether those children are male or female)—that is, that child marriage perpetuates a cycle of poverty. Furthermore, no respondents noted the economic dependency of girl brides (ICRW 2011), since this is culturally the norm. Finally, the marriage of girls is not associated with the deprivation of rights because girls' rights are not traditionally recognized in Algardaref State.

Table 5. Health problems resulting from child marriage, based on survey of rural communities in Algardaref State, Sudan

What health problems do child brides have?	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
Obstructed labor	67.5	58.3
Complications of frequent pregnancy	48.2	45.4
Death of mother during child birth	22.9	20.4
Infertility	16.9	9.3
Other frequent health complaints	14.5	15.7

As to impact of child marriage on health, there are some who deny health risks. A 65-year-old man with a primary education asserted, “No health risks are associated with child marriage.”³⁴ But table 5 shows that substantial percentages of both male and female participants are aware that girls face drastic health risks, including obstructed labor, death during childbirth, infertility, and complications with pregnancy. Nonetheless, despite recognition of these risks, child marriage is still a prevalent practice in the communities researched, which raises questions about the value of girls in these communities.

4.4.2. What are the educational opportunities for married girls?

Table 6 shows that most female (71%) and male (75%) respondents reported that the married girls have opportunities to go back to school. A man with a secondary school education observed, “There are at least 10 married girls from our village who are married and had children and are students in secondary school.”³⁵ This is encouraging, but who and what motivates these girls by reducing barriers to education is an issue that needs to be better understood to expand the education of females.

Table 6. Educational opportunities for married girls, based on survey of rural communities in Algardaref State, Sudan

Do married girls have educational opportunities?	Female respondents		Male respondents	
	Number	%	Number	%
Yes	59	71.1	81	75.0
No	24	28.9	27	25.0

Still, over one-quarter of females and a quarter of males see no opportunity for married girls to go back to school. They gave several reasons for that. As the table 7 shows, the highest percentage of male and female respondents reported the husband's refusal as a reason for discontinuing education. By law, the husband has a right to restrict the wife from any public activity and she must obey. Child care is also a barrier for girl brides who become

34 Interview with 65-year-old man, Ghibaisha village, 21 May 2016.

35 Interview with 35-year-old man, Umsinaibra village, 21 May 2016.

mothers. But in such rural communities with patterns of residence and easy accessibility of extended families, child care shouldn't be the problem.

Table 7. Reasons married girls do not continue their education, based on survey of rural communities in Algadaref State, Sudan

Why are married girls unable to continue their education?	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
They have children	15.7	12.0
They are not accepted in school	0.0	0.9
Their husbands do not let them attend school	19.3	20.4
They have no use for an education after marriage	8.4	4.6
Their communities would not accept them attending school	3.6	6.5

Few participants reported that girls cannot resume their education after marriage because the community would not approve. But even if social and cultural barriers are addressed, some schools do not allow married girls to attend, even though there is no law that forbids married girls from doing so. Some school directors forbid married girls from attending school because they have the misperception that married girls will talk about their sexual experiences with unmarried girls and that this will have a negative influence on other girls. This perception of school directors and teachers is shaped by a culture of gender discrimination. These factors constraining continuity of married girls to their education are highlighted by De Silva-de-Alwis, 2008.

4.4.3. How are views towards girls' education changing?

To identify potential changes in the practice of child marriage, we started by asking about attitudes towards education, since education is related to both causes and consequences of child marriage. As table 8 shows, more than half of the women favored primary education for girls and even higher percentages of males were for secondary and university education. This is expected, as rural females are less educated than rural males and are gatekeepers of culture; thus, they are more concerned about keeping girls at home. The results for males are encouraging, since males are the key decision-makers about whether girls should continue in school. In several interviews, some men asserted that they have no problem with girls' continuity in education as conditions in the rural and urban Algadaref State are changing in favor of girls' education. A male, educated and community leader noted: 'Females who continued education to university were able to find jobs and got married. That is why I am not for child marriage³⁶'. A young male added: 'Females who completed university got married so there is no problem with continuing in education'³⁷. For a rural community, what is said is an important indicator not only for changing attitude towards education and child marriage but it includes a positive vision to women non-agricultural work. It is evident that females' educational achievements in these rural communities are generating new norms, linking delaying of marriages with educational attainment and labor force participation. In other words it is a realization of negative impacts of females' reduced educational attainment and participation in labor force, that are highlighted by McCleary-Sills et al, (2015).

³⁶ Interview with a 45-years old, Uncinaibra village, 20 May, 2016.

³⁷ Interview with 27-years old, and unemployed male, Ghibaisha village, 20, May, 2017.

Through what grade level should girls continue school?	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
Fourth primary grade	1.2	0.9
Fifth primary grade	1.2	0.9
Sixth primary grade	12.0	1.9
Seventh primary grade	27.7	1.9
Eighth primary grade	57.8	26.9
Secondary level	1.2	34.3
University level	1.2	32.4
Girls do not go to school	0.0	0.9
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 8. Respondents' views on the continuity of girls in education, based on survey of rural communities in Algardaref State, Sudan

Among female respondents who believed girls should continue their education through the secondary level, a slightly higher percentage of respondents came from older age groups. While only about one-fifth of females ages 18–27 favored continuing education through secondary school, about one-third of females ages 28–37 and 38–47 favored reaching this level of education. The older age groups of females are favoring education as by age they are observing increase in number of educated women and how they promoted their families' social and economic situation. On the other hand, males favoring secondary education for girls are concentrated in their 20s and 40s. This is important because it means daughters of young generation parents in these rural communities are less likely to be at risk of child marriage. It is evident that rural males and females of different ages are currently negotiating the gender discriminatory norms and moving towards norms supporting the education of girls.

Why do girls drop out of school?	Female respondents		Male respondents	
	Number	%	Number	%
Education is not important for girls	1	1.2	12	11.1
It is better for them to learn how to read the khalwa to know how to read Koran	2	2.4	3	2.8
The school in our area is mixed	1	1.2	1	0.9
The school is a long distance from home	0	0.0	2	1.9
Girls are needed to help at home	70	84.3	22	20.4
To give chance for her brother to get to school	1	1.2	3	2.8
To be married	32	38.6	52	48.1
Costs of education are high	23	27.7	51	47.2

Table 9. Reasons girls drop out of school, based on survey of rural communities in Algardaref State, Sudan

We then examined the forces that push girls out of school, as these factors also perpetuate the practice of child marriage. The responses in table 9 demonstrate that the need for domestic help from girls is the primary reason girls in Algardaref State discontinue their education. Some respondents also asserted that girls do not need to be educated or that a *khalwa* education is good enough for them. Both these reasons suggest that traditional norms remain as barrier to girls' education.

The other reasons cited, such as the cost of education, the mixed gender of schools, and the distance of schools indicate that educational policies are not responsive to the rural

cultural and social settings' needs in Algardaref. They also suggest that if such institutional barriers to education were lifted, more girls would have the opportunity to continue their education and escape early marriage.

We then tried to touch on how attitudes towards girls' education have changed in reality, so we asked about girls and young women who have been able to continue their education without getting married. The results seemed encouraging, as 81.9% of female and 88% of male respondents reported that in their villages there are unmarried girls who have finished primary school and are unmarried. In addition, 81.5% of female and 84.3% of male respondents claimed that young, unmarried females are secondary school graduates in their villages. A male community leader and a member of a school parents' council confirmed, "There is a change in the attitude to education and child marriage, as more girls continue their education without marriage; the village is near the town of Algardaref and influenced by a growing interest among families in town in girls' education and accessibility of schools."³⁸ A university-educated woman also declared, "There is a change in the attitude of men. Many now prefer educated women, as they expect that education helps them to raise children better than uneducated girls."³⁹ This realization is important, although it emphasizes the domestic and care roles for females, but it also indicates the emergence of new values supporting girls' education. Such a change is noticeable throughout Sudan, at both the national and state levels. The question is how these changing values reduce social sanctions on girls and their families for delaying marriages for continuing education. Another challenge is how changing values see education as human right for girls' self-development.

4.4.4. What are the risks of delaying marriage for an education?

Since unmarried young women often continue their education, we asked about risks for girls and their families from delaying marriage. The responses were very encouraging, as the majority confirmed that there are no risks. One explanation several male and female respondents gave in interviews was that the situation in villages is changing, and there are girls who complete secondary school, proceed to universities, and then get married and have children. For example, a man in his 20s asserted, "There are no marriage risks for educated girls and women. There are girls who completed primary school and others who completed secondary school and got married. And I know four women who got married after graduating from university."⁴⁰

However, some research participants claimed that delaying marriage involves risks. As table 10 shows, for girls, completing the primary or secondary school involves risk of missing opportunity to marry or risk of being stigmatized as '*bayra*', (meaning old and not considered by men for marriage) or '*agir*' (meaning infertile). Such risks for delaying marriages are expected to continue as beliefs for child marriages are deeply rooted in prevalent culture of gender discrimination and improvement in females opportunities remained limited and faced by obstacle (see section 3.1.2).

Table 10. Beliefs about the risks of delaying marriage, based on responses from communities in Algardaref State, Sudan

What risks does a girl take by delaying marriage until after completing her education?	After completing primary education		After completing secondary education	
	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
She misses the opportunity to marry	12.0	9.3	14.5	12.0
She is stigmatized as <i>agir</i> or <i>bayra</i>	2.4	4.6	3.6	9.3

38 Interview with community leader and member of parents' council, Ghibaiasha village, 20 May 2016.

39 Interview with 38-year-old, university educated woman, Ghibaiasha village, 20 May 2016.

40 Interview with a 23-year-old male, Umsinaibra village, 20 May 2016.

Some respondents did share a concern about fertility, however. In this connection, a male community leader reported, “Completing secondary school is a problem because the girl gets old and infertile.”⁴¹ An 18-year-old man also related delaying marriage to attend secondary school to reduced fertility.⁴² Several interviewees also had negative views about females attending university. One man explained, “Men avoid marrying university girls because men do not trust girls who have had interaction with men who are strangers.”⁴³

The interviews showed that some families and young females have paved the way for delaying marriages and succeeded in reducing stigma. One male noted, “In Gadamblia, there are girls who finished university. They are not stigmatized by their families and communities, but most of them married outside the village.”⁴⁴ A female university student explained, “Many young men prefer educated women because they have better awareness with marriage life and responsibilities as compared with illiterate girls.”⁴⁵ A 27-year-old unemployed male university graduate explained, “Nowadays youth prefer educated girls who have a job, preferably as teachers.”⁴⁶ It is apparent that education is perceived as investment that benefits women in getting jobs. Though women work in rural settings in agriculture of herding of animals has been socially approved for decades in Sudan, a new social value is developing that supports women working in employment that requires an education.

Families are expected to experience some social sanctions for delaying their daughters’ marriages. Nonetheless, as table 11 below shows, only a few respondents mentioned negative consequences of delaying girls’ marriages for education; the majority of respondents saw the positive effects of changing attitudes. This suggests that expectations about the roles of girls and women are changing. Those who delay the marriage are positively regarded as trying to change traditions, as confirmed by more than one-third of female and a little less than one-fifth of male respondents.

This also could be a recognition that change is in process and is being initiated by community members. Delaying child marriages for education is becoming a prevalent and accepted practice. In fact, over half of male and female respondents reported positive consequences that link delaying marriage to a female’s success in education and work. This was true even among older respondents. For example, a 55-year-old man noted, “In our villages, there are women who are university graduates and some with PhDs. They have different jobs in nearby towns. Some are married, and those who are not married are not stereotyped, as they succeeded in promoting the social and economic status of their families.”⁴⁷

Table 11. Percentage distribution of respondents by their perceptions of the consequences to families of delaying the marriages of their daughters

What are the consequences to families of delaying the marriage of their daughters?	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
They live with the insecurity that their daughters will not marry	4.8	16.7
Their girls become unmarriageable	13.3	15.7
There is no stigma, as the families are seen to be trying to change traditions	36.1	17.6
There is no stigma, as their daughters are educated and can work to support the family	56.6	50.0

4.4.5. How do girls feel about child marriage and education?

Focus group discussions were conducted with girls to represent their voices on education and child marriage. The discussion included girls from four primary schools (one in each of the four villages), ages 11 to 14. Many girls reported that they know that there are barriers

41 Interview with a male, community leader, Gadamblia Tarfa village, 21 May 2016.

42 Interview with 18-year-old male, Rufaa village, 20 May 2016.

43 Interview with a male, university graduate, community leaders, Uncinaibra village 20.5.2016.

44 Interview with 65-years old male, Gadamblia Tarfa village, 20 May, 2016 .

45 Interview with 18-year-old female university student, Gadambilia Tarfa village, 20 May 2016.

46 Interview with 27-year-old male university graduate, Ghibaisha village, 20 May 2016.

47 Interview with 55-year-old man, Umsinaibra village, 21 May 2016.

to completing their education and that child marriage is one such risk. Nonetheless, they explained that girls in their communities generally continue their education through secondary school. Some school girls noted that their parents expect them to at least complete secondary school. In fact, according to these girls, the number of girls admitted to secondary school from Unsinaibra village increased noticeably from 24 in 2014 to 43 in 2015.

Some of the school girls indicated that they plan to continue to the university and are confident they will do so, as their elder sisters are currently in university. These girls were not for early marriage, as they had heard from a television program that it has harmful health consequences. They added that education is important because it allows a girl or woman to broaden her knowledge, and they expressed their view that they should also get jobs.

The school girls acknowledged that some girls from their schools had been forced to drop out of school and marry. However, they also recognized that child marriages often end in divorce and cited examples of girls from their schools whose marriages in fifth or sixth grade all ended in failure. The school girls also explained that interrelated factors contribute to girls discontinuing school, including poor academic records of girls, family poverty, and child marriage. Importantly, though, the school girls who participated in the focus group appeared aware of and ready to cross the borders of tradition, if they were empowered to deal with the obstacles to obtaining an education.

4.5. Perspectives on interventions for change

Badri and Al-Husseni (2014) note that in Sudan, 23 organizations or institutions support interventions for ending child marriage using religious, health, and social perspectives to raise awareness among parents, school girls, grandparents, religious leaders, community leaders, and political parties. In Algardaref State, active actors include the Algardaref State Child Welfare Council, the Zainab Organization for Development, the Red Crescent, and the Sudanese National Committee for Combating Traditional Practices. Donors and UN agencies support all these organizations. In addition, representatives of the Sudanese Women's General Union are present in all of the villages researched in this study, and community-based organizations are also active in some parts of the state.

We asked respondents if they had heard about the idea of child rights or had been exposed to advocacy or awareness-raising information about the abandonment of child marriage. About half of male and female respondents indicated that they had heard about child rights. About 35% of female and 14% of male respondents had been exposed to information about the harms of child marriage (see table 12 below). This suggests that child marriage is not yet a priority in the agenda of concerned CSOs and government institutions in Algardaref State. In addition, it suggests that more women than men are being targeted in awareness-raising efforts, which means interventions are not reaching the main decision-makers for child marriage (the men). Women cannot change the situation alone.

Table 12. Percentage of respondents in Algardaref State, Sudan, exposed to advocacy materials relating to the abandonment of child marriage

Have you been exposed to information discussing the abandonment of child marriage?	Female respondents	Male respondents
	%	%
Yes	34.9	13.9
No	65.1	86.1

Of those who had been exposed to information about child rights or child marriage abandonment, less than 6% expressed their views on the information they had received. Some stated that information shared through awareness-raising efforts challenges their norms, traditions, and religion, or that the reasons for ending child marriage would not be acceptable to their elders, who are the primary influencers for continuing the practice. From these discussions, it seemed evident that intervention messages and methods are culturally insensitive and sources are not considered credible by those in a position to argue for change.

Nonetheless, a woman with a post-university education stated, “Some organizations have conducted raising awareness sessions on FGM and child marriage. I think that some people have considered seriously abandoning the practice.”⁴⁸ Although her perception is heartening, the limited number of individuals exposed to these messages and the unacceptability of the messages to older community members indicates that actors’ inventions are weak. One young man explained in interview: ‘many girls in our village, who continued education, have succeeded to get married and had a choice for that. I think that young men can participate in advocacy and raising awareness for continuity of girls in education and for child marriage abandonment’⁴⁹ Another young man asserted: ‘many young males in these villages are ready to participate in raising awareness of old people to change their understanding for child marriage abandonment’⁵⁰. These responses indicate readiness of youth to change and to get engaged in promoting change. Thus, in any intervention youth in local communities can be the ‘critical mass’ who that can be engaged to manifest public support for new gender equality norms. (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund, 2006).

48 Interview with 38-year-old, university educated woman, Gibaisha village, 20 May 2016.

49 Interview with a 27-years old male from Ghibaisha village, 20 May, 2016

50 Interview with 30-years old male, working as trader, Umsinaibra village, 20, May, 2016

5. CONCLUSION: A PATH TO OVERCOMING GENDER DISCRIMINATORY NORMS

Our findings suggest that control of girls' chastity, protection of girls from stigma of being unmarried/infertile and socialization of young girls into obedient wives are important drivers of child marriage in rural Algardaref. Compared to the other two eastern states, however, poverty is driving child marriage to a larger extent in Algardaref than in neighboring Kassala and Red Sea State. Added to that, poor educational infrastructure and lack of funding to attend school drives girls away from school and into early marriages to a much larger degree than in Red Sea State (El Nagar, Bamkar, and Tønnessen 2017).

Traditional norms about protecting girls' virginity and sexuality are intrinsically related to protecting the family's honor; and protecting the family's honor is deemed more important than protecting the rights and health of the girl child. Health problems—especially reproductive health complications—related to child marriage are well-documented in the literature on child marriage. (Girls Not Brides, n.d.-c; Nour, 2009; UNICEF 2001; Myres, 2013). This study demonstrates how rural Algardaref communities are aware of both the health and social harms of child marriage. Sadly, despite this knowledge of health and social consequences of child marriage, the practice continues. Even though it is well documented that child marriage harms the reproductive rights and health of the girl child, the communities are firm in their belief that child marriage ensures fertility. Why are communities ready to risk the well-being of their daughters to preserve family honor?

These contradictions also demonstrate the shortcomings of policies, education, and development programs at all levels and suggests a need to revisit the agendas of government institutions and CSOs in rural development. However, the rural context of Algardaref State presents special challenges to ending child marriage. Local activism against child marriage has not yet taken root and international efforts in the state tend to focus more on maternal mortality, and especially FGM abandonment, rather than adopting an integrated approach to address the full range of traditional and harmful practices, including traditional practice of *mahr* that commodifies girls as objects that can be bought and sold, as severe and extreme gender discrimination.

Nonetheless, we do find some evidence that attitudes toward girls who continue education (without getting married early) are changing. Girls and women in Algardaref State are completing their education and moved on to hold jobs in an extremely gender conservative setting, something which has delayed marriage in some rural communities. Interestingly, the unmarried women attending schools and universities in Algardaref do not seem to face social sanctions or stigma concerning *bayra* (not desirable in marriage) and *agir* (infertile) to the same extent as in the Red Sea State (El Nagar, Bamkar, and Tønnessen 2017). Government educational policies, as well as role model families have contributed to this positive development. A focus on girls' education by both government and civil society has been important, but has not been coupled with national and subnational laws and policies on child marriage.

Based on our findings, we recommend the following actions to fight child marriage in Algardaref State, as well as elsewhere in Sudan:

- National government institutions concerned with children and women need to intensify the current efforts to legislate a minimum age of marriage at 18 years. However, such a legal reform would only be effective at state and local level if it is accompanied with intensive and context sensitive advocacy and awareness raising on the new legal norm.
- The Ministry of Welfare and Ministry of Education at national and state levels need to exert efforts to improve the educational infrastructure and facilities for Algardaref rural communities, while at the same time raise awareness of local leaders and hold them accountable for girls' right to education.
- Anti-child marriage advocates, such as state and non-state actors including Algardaref Council for Child Welfare, NGOs, women's groups and universities, should coordinate and collaborate. We recommend that all actors concerned with child marriage should develop a theory of change that consider a) the factors driving child marriage are embedded in prevalent gender discriminatory culture/tradition; b) the dynamics of social change seen by the decreased stigma of girls who attend schools instead of marrying early c) empowerment of school girls.
- Interventions on child marriage are limited, but there are some efforts to end the practice through awareness raising on the negative health effects. However, rural communities are well aware of the negative consequences, but continue to marry their girls early. Respondents stated that the interventions efforts challenged their norms, traditions, and religion, or that the reasons for ending child marriage would not be acceptable to their elders, who are the primary influencers for the continuity of child marriage. Intervention messages and methods are culturally insensitive and off target and should therefore be reconsidered.
- The international community, including donor countries, UN Agencies and INGOs, the main partner and funder for the abandonment interventions have great responsibilities to: a) encourage government to harmonize laws and policies with international human rights conventions and give priority to implementation of relevant Sustainable Development Goals specifically Goal 5.
- Further research is needed (i) to elaborate on the link between education and child marriage. (ii) to investigate the factors perpetuating child marriage in urban areas of Algardaref state.

To end child marriage, we suggest to tackle it upstream by raising a minimum age of marriage at 18 years and by making child marriage a priority in government strategies concerning violence against women and women's empowerment. Legal and policy changes are extremely important to give legitimacy for vital downstream work at the grassroots. As child marriage is a deeply rooted traditional practice, it is obvious that it requires awareness raising with practicing communities. However, it is difficult to carry awareness raising at the grassroots as long as child marriage is legalized by the Sudanese state.

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APPENDIX: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA ON RESPONDENTS TO QUESTIONNAIRE FROM ALGADAREF STATE

Table 13. Age, education, occupation, and marital status of all respondents, who reported on child marriage, Algardaref State, Sudan

	Females (83)		Males (108)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Age				
Younger than 18	2	2.4	2	1.9
18–27 years old	18	21.7	28	25.9
28–37 years old	25	30.1	25	23.1
38–47 years old	28	33.7	32	29.6
48–57 years old	10	12.0	21	19.4
Older than 57	0	0.0	0	0.0
Education				
No education	12	14.5	11	10.2
Khalwa*	3	3.6	13	12.0
Primary school	37	44.6	50	46.3
Secondary school	21	25.3	14	13.0
First university degree	8	9.6	16	14.8
Post-graduate work (e.g., masters or doctorate)	2	2.4	4	3.7
Occupation				
Salaried employee	6	7.2	8	7.4
Wage worker	1	1.2	4	3.7
Farmer/herder	1	1.2	24	22.2
Unemployed	0	0	4	3.7
Housewife	66	79.5	0	0.0
Self-employed worker	1	1.2	55	50.9
Other	8	9.6	13	12.0
Marital Status				
Single (never married)	7	8.4	26	24.1
Married	73	88.0	81	75.0
Divorced	2	2.4	1	.9
Widowed	1	1.2	0	0.0

* The Khalwa represents the first cycle of the Islamic system of education. Children join the Khalwa at the age of four or five and begin by learning reading, writing and then the Koran, memorizing all its verses. The Khalwa students may continue education in regular primary school if accessible.

This report investigates child marriage in Algarderef State, located in Sudan's eastern region.

Child marriage is a human rights violation affecting children's and women's rights to health, education, equality, non-discrimination, and freedom from violence and exploitation. Child marriage has harmful effects on young girls. Neither physically nor emotionally ready to become wives and mothers, child marriage exposes young girls to a wide range of health risks. The minds and bodies of young girls are physically unprepared for sexual activity and childbirth, increasing the risks of maternal health complications. Early pregnancy increases the risk of both maternal and child mortality. Added to that, girl brides are more likely to suffer domestic violence and marital rape. Child brides are rarely allowed to continue their education. With limited access to education and subsequent economic opportunities, child brides and their families are more likely to live in poverty.

In recent years, child marriage has received great attention on international and national development agendas. The UN Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in September 2015, include eliminating child marriage as a key target for advancing gender equality by 2030. This goal may help sustain international attention and enhance political will at the national level in states with a high prevalence of child marriage. According to UNICEF's 2015 report *A Profile of Child Marriage in Africa*, the prevalence of child marriage has been slowly declining in Africa, but remains higher than the global average.

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