SUDAN REPORT

Community Views on Child Marriage in Kassala: Prospects for Change

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Table of contents

List of tables and figures

List of abbreviations

CBS   Sudan Central Bureau of Statistics

CEDAW   UN 1979 Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination against Women

CCD   College of Community Development at the University of Kassala

CSO   Civil society organization

FGM   Female genital mutilation

HIV   Human immunodeficiency virus

ICRW   International Center for Research on Women

INGO   International NGO

MICS   Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey

NGO   Non-governmental organization

NCCW   Sudan National Council for Child Welfare

SHHS   Sudan Household Health Survey

SORD   Sudan Organization for Research and Development

UNFPA   United Nations Population Fund

UNHCR   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF   United Nations Children's Emergency Fund

WHO   World Health Organization

1   Introduction[1]

Child 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 15 (UNICEF 2014, 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 2015, 3). Sudan is among the African countries with a high prevalence of child marriage. In 2010, 10.7% of girls and women ages 15 to 49 were married before the age of 15, and 38% were married before the age of 18 (CBS and UNICEF 2010).[2]

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 dangers 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.

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[1] We would like to acknowledge the efforts of our team of data collectors (Tamir Rajab, Aisha ahmed, Mahasin Zakaria, Mahdia Omer, Waleed Osman, and Sara Mahjoub) who patiently and enthusiastically undertook data collection, filling questionnaires, and assisting in interviews and focus group discussion. Their engagement in discussing the draft questionnaires and interview guide helped improve its relevance and cultural sensitivity. Their insights on preliminary results are also appreciated.

[2] The 2006 SHHS (Sudan Household Health Survey) 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). Available statistical evidence shows that the practice of child marriage is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. The figures on child marriage vary among the states and are generally higher in rural than in urban areas. According to a survey of women ages 20–49 in Sudan as part of the 2014 MICS (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey), 42.3% of women in rural areas and 29.1% of women in urban areas were married before age 18 (CBS and UNICEF 2016, 209).

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.[3] 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 (ANA 2015). 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 groups, who continue to argue that the practice of child marriage is in accordance with Sharia. On the other hand, women continue to

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[3] 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.

fight to end child marriage in Sudan, pointing to its multiple harmful effects, both nationally and sub-nationally.

This report investigates child marriage in Kassala State, located in Sudan's eastern region. As of 2014, approximately 45.1% of the women in Kassala 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 addition, in 2014, *Kassala had the highest percentage (18.6%) in the country of females who had married before 15 years of age* (ibid).

This report is part of a series of reports on child marriage in the Red Sea State, Algadaref State, and Kassala State of Sudan.[4] 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 combat violence against women. 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.

The findings in the three reports on child marriage in eastern Sudan 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.

This report seeks to examine the practice of and attitudes towards child marriage in Muslim communities of Kassala State, Sudan.[5]

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[4] 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, al-Jack and Tønnessen, 2017 (on Algadaref State).

[5] The research focuses on child marriage among Muslim groups in the state and does not include Christian Sudanese. Notably, however, Christians in Sudan also may practice child marriage, since the Marriage of Non-Muslims Act of 1926 sets the age of marriage at 13 for non-Muslim girls and at 15 for non-Muslim boys.

The main objectives of the research are as follows:

- to understand the attitudes of the rural and urban communities in Kassala State, 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 rural and urban communities in Kassala State;

- 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 drivers of child marriage in rural Kassala State are deeply rooted in tradition. Ethnic communities are legitimizing child marriage with Islamic frames and the practice serves to reinforce ethnic boundaries. These communities strongly believe child marriage helps protect girls from premarital sexual activity and unintended pregnancy. Tradition coupled with protecting girls' virginity, called *sutra* locally, are the two most important drivers of child marriage in Kassala. Additionally, girls are married early to avoid stigmatization, to ensure high fertility and to reduce the economic burden of the family. Poverty drives child marriage in Kassala State to some extent as it does in the Red Sea (El Nagar, Bamkar, and Tønnessen 2017). Related to that, the cost of education is also a diver of child marriage for some families in Kassala. In the last decade, the direct and indirect costs of education have become a problem for many families with limited income, as schools are often not accessible in the local village or neighborhood. In Kassala, some conservative communities are even against girls' education, because the school uniforms are considered indecent and the fact that girls need to travel with public transport is not culturally acceptable.

The rural context of Kassala State presents particular challenges in terms of interventions as some local communities are opposed to being "educated" by outsiders who may not respect their traditional practices, which they believe are religiously based. Additionally, local activism against child marriage is still in its early faces and often meet resistance at the community level. Moreover,

international efforts in the state tend to focus on maternal mortality female genital mutilation rather than on child marriage abandonment.

Nonetheless, we do find some evidence that attitudes toward girls who continue their education without getting married early are slowly beginning to change. Some girls and women in Kassala State have completed their education and moved on to hold jobs in an extremely gender conservative setting, which has delayed marriage in some rural communities, but the practice prevails in others where girls are married as young as nine years old. Because of poor educational infrastructure, low value of girls' education and lack of economic means, it is difficult for girls to attend school, especially given cultural norms about women's dress and mobility.

2   Research methods in Kassala State

We used qualitative methods to explore the perceptions of communities in the Kassala State on child marriage, a topic of cultural sensitivity and evolving complexity. Data collection was undertaken from November 2016 through March 2017, with most data collection occurring during November 2016. We used three primary data collection tools: structured interviews that utilized a questionnaire (survey), semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions.

This research focuses on Kassala State in the eastern part of Sudan, a state with a high prevalence of child marriage compared to other Sudanese states. As the state is predominately rural (with 52% of its inhabitants living outside of a city), the research sites included two rural and one urban community: the Biryaay neighborhood in Kasala Locality (urban area), Abu Talha village in Western Kassala Locality (rural area 1), and Fidyayeb village in Rural Kasala Locality (rural area 2).

The three areas have differing ethnic compositions. Abu Talha is inhabited only by the Rashayda, an ethnic group originally from Suadia Arabia that now has Sudanese nationality. Fidyayeb village, which is southeast of Kassala town, is populated mostly by the Beni Amer, along with some Hadnedwaa. The Biryaay urban neighborhood is inhabited mostly by the Hadendwa.

All three research sites have primary schools for both boys and girls. The two rural villages are few miles from Kassala town and both have access to Kassala town via paved roads and a public bus system. Since the population within each site is somewhat homogeneous, we chose to collect survey data from a fixed sample of 100 individuals in each research area. Ultimately, we collected 299 questionnaires, 155 from females and 144 from males.

In each village, we contacted households to obtain responses to our survey questionnaire. Respondents from each household that consented to interviews were of varying genders and ages; however, very few were younger than 18. (See appendix table 14) We also reached out to community leaders, civil servants in relevant government institutions, activists of civil society organizations (CSOs), 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)the 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 members of households, according to their availability and consent. The appendix to this report contains demographic data about the 299 individuals who completed the questionnaire.

In addition, we (authors and data collectors) 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 in the questionnaire. The data collectors conducted 31 individual interviews, with community leaders such as members of popular committee[6] and school parents' council, and with young men and women, including some under the age of 18). We also conducted additional individual interviews with employees of government agencies (such as the Kassala State Child Welfare Council and the social welfare office at localities and health centers) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (such as the Raira Voluntary Organization for Development, *Taalawait* Organization for Development, and Plan International Sudan).

Finally, we conducted group interviews and focus group discussions. First, the data collectors conducted six semi-structured group interviews with groups of women age 17-38 years, married and married. Then we hosted two *focus group discussions,* in each of the three research sites, with primary school girls. Each group included four to six girls, age 11-16 years. The focus group discussions concentrated on the girls' intentions to continue their education and the factors influencing their decisions about education and marriage.

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[6] In Sudan, each neighborhood has a 'popular committee', elected by residents to liaison with local government for service provision and to supervise quality of services provided and engagement of residents.

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 2014, 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 Status Law of 1991 sets the age of "maturity" (*tamyeez*) at 10, 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 on 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 2015, 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 Kassala State, within the context of gender discrimination. Policies and laws at Sudan's national level shape and influence gender discrimination in Kassala, as decentralization processes have not been implemented to give Sudanese states autonomy. Thus, to understand the drivers and dynamics of child marriage in Kassala 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 Status 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 Status 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.[7] 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

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[7] 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.

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.[8] On the other hand, the Muslim Personal Status Law 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.[9]

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.[10] 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). These parts of the law are 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.

When the Muslim Personal Status Law of 1991 was adopted, lawmakers argued for marriage at *tamyeez* in order to prevent illicit sexual relations, since sex outside of marriage is forbidden in Islam. Since women may develop sexual urges at puberty, early marriage is considered the Islamic solution for dealing 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 Status Law point to a *hadith* (reported in Sahih al-

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[8] 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 from Sudan's Unit for Combating Violence against Women and Children show a prevalence of marital rape in the country. 56% of researched women (including housewives, cleaners, tea sellers, and employees, from all levels of education) were forced to sex from their husbands without their consent. (Abu Alyaman, 2012, 14).

[9] 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).

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

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 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 Sudanese girls and women are receiving an education. The share of females six years old in primary level in 2011 and 2012 reached 81% (MHE, n.d., 26). In 2014, Sudan had the highest rate (24%) of female school drop-outs before the last grade of the primary level in the Middle East and North Africa region (UNICEF 2015,38) However, the number of women graduating from some universities in the 2015–2016 academic year exceeded that of men. For example, 15,160 women graduated from the University of Khartoum that year—more than double the number of male graduates (6,684) (MHE, n.d., 4).[11]

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.

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[11] This is also case in the national University of Ribat Al Watani, as well as in state universities, such the universities in Nyala, El Fasher, Al Gezira, and Kordofan (MHE, n.d., 4–5).

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 (Elnagar 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 Status Law of 1991 remains unchanged. Neither the National Strategy for Women's Empowerment nor the National Family Strategy of 2009 even mentions child marriage. Although the 2010 National Child Act includes provisions against discrimination of the girl child, it does not mention child marriage specifically. However, the 2010 act does define a child as a person below the age of 18, and since that 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 Status 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 awaiting parliamentary approval. In addition, a few NGOs, especially SORD, have called 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-Husseni 2014,19).

3.1.2   Gender discrimination in Kassala State

Kassala is one of three states in eastern Sudan characterized by a diverse ethnic composition. The three research sites are predominately inhabited by different ethnic groups. Beni-Amer is the predominant group in Fidyayeb (rural 2), Abu Talha (rural 1) is inhabited mainly by Rashayda; and Hadendwa in Biryaay (urban setting). Primary schools are accessible in the three research sites but there are no secondary schools in the rural research sites and although they are available in the urban research site, they are not nearby and require pupils to travel. Each of the research sites also has a health center, and transportation to Kassala town is available via public bus. The

population of the three sites are engaged in trade, farming and herding.[12] Some families in these communities, specifically in rural area 1, are very wealthy.

Gender power relations in Kassala State are characterized by inequality, male dominance, and women subordination—prevalent patterns among urban and most rural populations throughout Sudan. Although there are increasing number of children in the state's educational institutions, many respondents asserted a lack of interest in education, specifically for girls. Female participation in public economic, social, and political activities is against social norms and traditions in these communities. For example, "Unlike the women of southern and western Sudan, Hadendowa and Beni-Amer women do not work in tea selling in spite of extreme poverty. The tribes of the East perceive such a livelihood system as degrading to the integrity of the household" (Abu Sin and Abbakar 2009, 198). Community leaders are critical of the increasing involvement of women in public state affairs. In short, the research communities still support traditions that restrict females in continuing education, and also their movement in public spaces. Even males can be restricted in for example choice of economic activities and marriage partners. 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.

Kassala State's capital, Kassala City, has offices for UN agencies such as UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO, and UNHCR in addition to INGOs such as Plan International Sudan. It also has several active local NGOs, such as the Raira Voluntary Organization for Development. These organizations are all active in providing support to health and education within the state. UN agencies and NGOs have engaged in interventions supporting child protection, women rights, and the abandonment of harmful traditional practices (such as child marriage and FGM).

In short, Kassala has some differences from other states researched as part of this series because of the predominance of conservative ethnic groups and their resistance to changing the situation of females and promoting opportunities for education and work. This is partially related to national and state government policies that do not challenge communities in Kassala State. Accordingly, the communities researched in this study are unable to fully benefit from the

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[12] This information is partially based on information collected by data collectors from the researched areas and partially on works such as Ahmed (2005), Bushra (2005), and Abu Sin and Abbakar (2009).

international community's support for improvement in the situation of Kassala's women and children. Instead, local practices 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 old. 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.[13]

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

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[13] For more information, please access the Musawah website http://www.musawah.org/musawah-to-OHCHR-child-marriage

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 eighth 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 as those from rich households to be married during childhood. 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 female. 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 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 fertility) (McCleary-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 bribes 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 2014, 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 (ibid.). 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.–c), 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 (Wahba 2010). The power of this catalyst

depends on the readiness to change of individuals in the community (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2006).[14]

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, vi).

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, iv) state,

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[14] 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.

Parents 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).

4 Findings

4.1 The end of childhood is context-specific

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 reported that they know 18 years is the end of childhood according to the 2010 National Child Act. However, culturally most communities in Sudan do not relate maturity to a specific age, but to when a person is emotionally capable of taking full responsibility for structuring his or her life. In rural areas, most boys are expected to participate in agriculture and animal rearing at 10 years old and are from that age considered adults.

## 4.2 Girls have little voice in the decision to marry

4.2.1 Age of marriage

Girls marry at very young ages in the communities researched in Kassala State. As figure 1, demonstrates, boys in rural area 2 marry as young as 10-12 years. While 60% of respondents in this area reported that boys marry between 13-15 years of age, only 23% in rural area 1 and 19% in urban area mentioned this age range for marriage of boys. Higher percentages of respondents noted age marriage for boys 16-17 years in rural area 1 as compared to other research sites. Boys marry at 18 years and older in urban areas more that in rural areas. Many boys marry at such young ages because the family take full economic responsibility for the marriage and the new family formed. In interviews, some explained that boys from well –off families (such as those in rural area 1) may enter the trade of their families and are thus able to generate income that helps them afford establishing a family at an early age. Other boys marry above 18 years because they have to work and save for economic responsibilities of having a family.

Figure 1. Usual age of marriage, of boys, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan
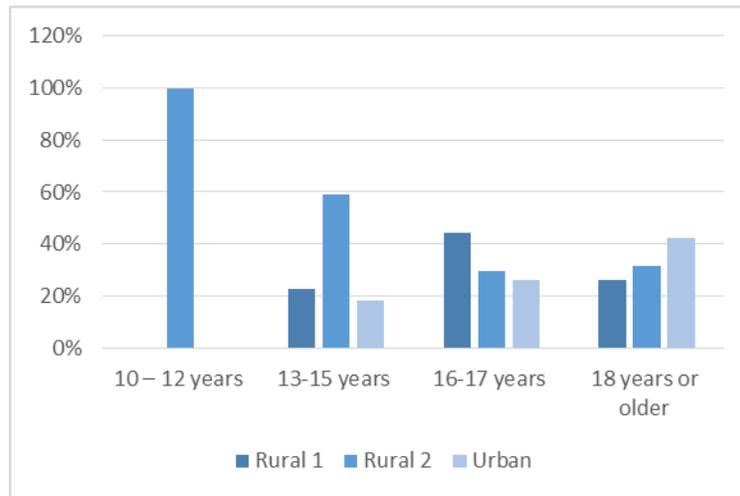
As figure 2, shows, only in rural 2 that respondents asserted marriage of girls as young as 7-10 years old. Higher percentage (42%) in this area as compared to rural area 1 (25%) and urban area (34%) marry girls between 11-12 years. While (40%) of respondents in rural area 1, about one third in each of the other sites. noted marrying girls between 13-15 years. Higher percentage of respondents in urban area as compared to rural areas marry girls at age above 16 years. Thus, individuals from all three researched areas considered child marriage for girls to be a normal practice, although there was some rural-urban variation. Child marriage is likely to continue, so long as the law does not effectively support abandoning the practice (Mathur, Greene and Malhorta 2003; Save the children 2014).

Figure 2. Usual age of marriage, of girls, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan (percentages)
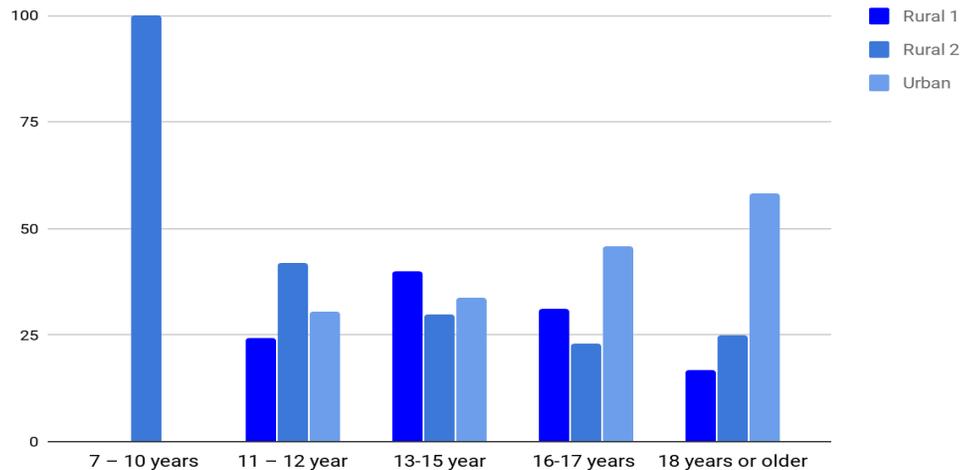
In a group interview, young women in their 20s from rural area 1 noted that some girls in their village are married as young as age nine and others are betrothed at birth.[15] Another group of urban women in their 20s, who had primary to university level education, reported that most girls marry around age 12 or 13 and very rarely do they wait until age 18 to marry[16]. One of the group elaborated, "My cousin was married at nine years old but her uncle (the girl's father) kept her to be 'fattened' until she was 12 years."[17] But this group asserted that that changes are beginning to occur; nowadays contracts for marriage for some girls may be done at a young age but marriage consummation is delayed and they remain with their families for some years(sometimes until age 14 to 15 years) to be cared for and to learn cooking and house care.[18] This reinforces the prevalent gender inequality culture that categorizes females as sexual objects and domestic workers. A man in rural area 2 noted a different reason for delay in the consummation of marriage: "Females stay at their families' homes for some time after contract arrangement to ensure that marriage is not

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[15] Group interview with young women age 20-30 years, primary and secondary education, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016.

[16] Group interview with a young educated women age 20-25, secondary and university graduate, urban area, 15 Dec. 2016.

[17] Group interview with a young educated women age 20-25, secondary and university graduate, urban area, 15 Dec. 2016. In most Sudanese cultures there is preference for 'fat' /'fleshy' women as compared to 'thin' ones.

[18] Group interview with young educated women age 20-25, secondary and university graduate, urban area, 15 Dec. 2016.

done to cover a problem" (that is, the girl's immorality).[19] This suggests that male mistrust of young females is an issue in the culture of the community.

Some respondents indicated that girls generally marry between seven and 10 years of age. If this is the case, their communities are sanctioning those marriages illegally, since Sudan's law stipulates that a court must approve any marriage of a girl aged 10 or younger. This could reflect a reluctance of communities to obey and enforce the law—a problem that has been observed among communities in India (ICRW 2011). However, this is unlikely in Sudan, since many individuals in the researched communities are not aware of the law and instead support the practice of child marriage based on strong traditions and a misperception of religion. In addition, Kassala State has no cultural or social policies in place to help end misperceptions about the practice.

4.2.2 The choice of a spouse

All respondents from the three research areas asserted that they prefer to marry their children to maternal and paternal cousins and other ethnic group relatives. Only a few respondents—from the urban area and rural area 2—noted the possibility of marrying outside one's ethnic group. This is because ethnic groups' gatekeepers are concerned with maintaining tradition and keeping their ethnic groups within strict boundaries. This concern also leads to support of child marriage. For example, one community leader explained, "if girls are allowed to grow up and get an education, they may refuse to marry someone from the ethnic group."[20] Bushra (2005, 281), writing about the Rashayda people in Kassala, stated,

"Marriage practices among the Rashayda are part of an overall strategy whereby social and political relations are maintained, recreated and reproduced. They often occur between parallel cousins of the same minimal lineage within the branch of the tribe, where they contribute towards reinforcing unity and integration and solidifying the minimal lineage as a corporate group in factional struggle. This marriage strategy may also be used in order to retain control over the wealth that accompanies the brides within the same lineage".

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[19] Interview with a man, primary education, community leader, rural area 2, 14 Dec. 2016.
[20] Interview with man, leader of community popular committee, urban area, 10 Dec. 2016.

It is apparent that selection of a spouse has nothing to do with the basic rights and interests of individuals; rather, the main concern of tribal leaders is to strengthen ethnic group social ties and to preserve traditions (Nour 2009; Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen 2015).

During the interviews, respondents were asked if girls are married to old married men (that is, as a multiple wife). Some interviewees confirmed that this happens very frequently. A 35 year old woman, primary education explained: "It is very common practice in our community to marry a very young girl to a married man, as a third or fourth wife; my niece was forced out of school to marry an old man whose daughters are older than her"[21] One woman from rural area 1, added: "My cousin accepted polygamous marriage but was able to convince her family to put a condition for bridegroom for her continuity in school"[22] This is a rare happening but being mentioned means there is a realization among some women that some of them succeed to find a space for their interests in their conservative communities.

4.2.3 The decision-making process

The decision to marry starts with someone initiating the idea that is, selecting a girl or woman as a potential bride. In most Sudanese communities, an older family member (such as a father, mother, uncle, or aunt) usually initiates this process. About 50% of female and 30% of male respondents stated that a bridegroom may take the initiative for his marriage (that is, has some choice).

Once the initial idea of marriage is accepted, a consultation process takes place. Our research indicates that male relatives (uncles and cousins) dominate the decision-making process. Although the mother and aunts are also consulted, as shown in table 1, their opinions are rarely taken into consideration (for fear that they may refuse to allow the marriage). In all three researched communities, men have the upper hand in all aspects of life.

[21] Interview with 35-year-old, educated woman, housewife, urban area, 14 Dec. 2016.
[22] Interview with a 35-year woman, married, primary education, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016.

Table 1. Family members consulted by a child's father prior to arranging a marriage, as reported by respondents in Kassala State

Family Members Consulted Prior to Marriage	Regarding a Boy's Marriage		Regarding a Girl's Marriage	
	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %
Mother	59.4	37.5	58.7	54.9
Uncles and cousins	54.2	91.7	47.7	88.2
Grandparents	12.9	8.3	18.1	18.1
Aunts	8.4	4.9	9.7	13.2
Brothers	9.7	20.1	5.2	28.5

4.2.4   Consultation with girls about marriage

Although Islamic rules stipulate that a girl must be consulted prior to being married, over 90% of both female and male respondents in the urban area and in rural area 2 asserted that girls are *not* consulted prior marriage. This is because of prevalent beliefs that parents know their daughters' interests better than they do and that girls do not have the right or capability of making life decisions about marriage, livelihood, and education. This shows a clear disregard to an important religious duty and can be considered as forcing girls into marriage, even by the standard of the current Sudan Personal Status Law for Muslims, 1991.

Figure 3. Consultation of girls for marriage, as reported by respondents in Kassala State
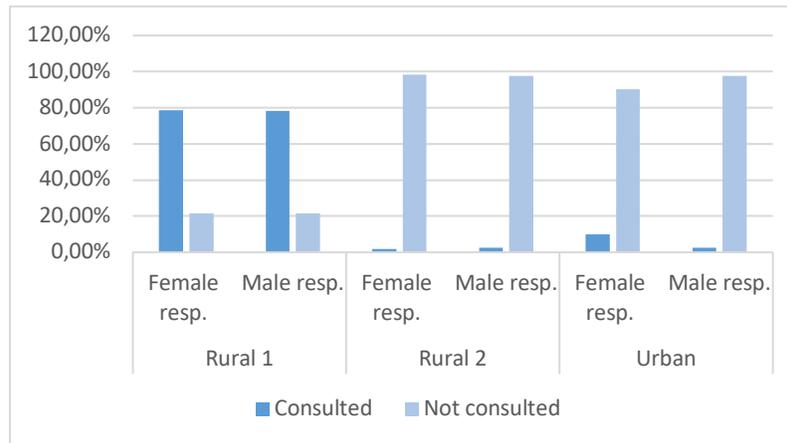
On the other hand, about 80% of male and female respondents in rural area 1 asserted that girls are consulted prior to marriage. Nonetheless, this is not "consultation" in the generally understood sense; rather, girls are merely *informed* that the marriage is going to occur. For example, a female teacher in rural area 1, emphasized, "Girls are informed about their marriage."[23] A 30-year-old woman, urban area, explained, "In consultation, a mother usually tells her daughter, 'You are given to your cousin, and your father and I know your interests better [than you].'"[24] Not only is this not a true "consultation," but it also appears that these discussions only take place to vaguely comply with religious duty and not out of respect for their daughters' rights to choose.

4.2.5   Accepting the marriage decision

Given the fact that girls have little voice in the marriage decision, why do girls accept their parents' decisions about marriage? The majority of respondents emphasized that girls have no opportunity to refuse a marriage proposal, due to multiple, interrelated reasons. As presented in table 2, some reasons relate to the prevalent culture of gender inequality that emphasizes the subordination and submissiveness of females. Girls are raised to respect their parents' decisions, and they are

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[23] Interview with 25-year-old, teacher, daughter of ethnic group leader, rural area 1, 10 Dec. 2016.
[24] Interview with 30-year-old female nurse, urban area, 14 Dec. 2016.

socialized to believe parents know their children's interests better than the children do. As well, girls are expected to obey, and any disobedient girl is sanctioned by close family, relatives, and the community. Girls are also socialized to value the goal of becoming a wife and mother far above the goal of obtaining an education.

Table 2. Reasons girls accept their parents' marriage decisions, as reported by respondents in Kassala State

Why does a girl accept the marriage decisions of her parents?	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %
She believes marriage is more important than education	43.9	16.7
She believes an education will be of no use to her	2.6	4.2
She will not go against her family's decision	38.1	51.4
She believes her family would not consider her opinion	40.6	25.0
She is not encouraged by her family to continue her education	16.8	18.8
She believes her family's financial conditions will not allow her to continue school	9.0	15.3

A girl complies with her parents' decisions because she believes her parents will not support her education for social and economic reasons or because she believes her parents will not consider her decision. A girl who resists her parents' decision about her marriage could also be beaten and forced to marry.[25] Several individuals interviewed also emphasized that girls who have never been to school are forced to accept their parents' decisions, since they have no alternative but marriage (and there are no programs to provide them with any alternative).

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[25] Group interview with female primary school students, urban area, 14 Dec. 2016.

4.2.6   Bride wealth and other contractual considerations

In Islam, *mahr* ("bride wealth") is a gift that the groom is to give the bride. It is stipulated in the marriage contract and is supposed to be the wife's property.[26] However, bride often has access to only part of the *mahr*.

Sudanese Muslims provide for a nominal gift of *mahr* during the religious marriage process, but may also provide *mahr* in the form of gifts. About 6.5% of male respondents described *mahr* as a nominal payment registered in marriage contract, while the rest of the respondents (both men and women) described it as any combination of money and gifts. Some individuals interviewed noted that *mahr* may include items such as electric equipment, furniture, cattle, camels, and vehicles.

Table 3. Families' negotiations of bride wealth, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan

Do families negotiate bride Wealth?	Females (155) %	Males (144) %
Yes	81.3	64.6
No	18.7	35.4

Mahr is a significant part of the marriage negotiation process for families in the research communities in Kassala. About 80% of female and 50% of male respondents indicated that a bride's father will discuss bride wealth as part of the decision to give away a daughter in marriage (table 3). In addition, about 60% of female and 19% of male respondents reported that a bride's mother discusses bride wealth. Fewer respondents mentioned other relatives taking part in bride wealth negotiations. These responses suggest that negotiating the bride wealth is a prevalent norm in the three research areas. Respondents who highlighted these negotiations came from both rural and urban settings and represented different ages and educational levels. The differences in responses of males and females to discussion of bride wealth by father and mother is related to

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[26] Islamic law traditionally provides for two sums for m*ahr* when a marriage is contracted: (i) *mahr*, (*mugaddam*), bride wealth; given with marriage contract and (ii) *mu'akkar*, an amount to be paid in case of divorce. In some Muslim communities (e.g., Egypt) *mu'akkar* is a large amount stipulated in the contract, which constrains men from divorcing their wives.

differences in experiences and perspectives of men and women. Men responded from ethnic group perspectives, bride wealth is set by group traditions therefore mostly discussed by fathers; while women are referring to everyday life processes in which informal discussions that happen among families on bride wealth.

About one-third of all respondents (male and female) noted that the amount and type of bride wealth is based on custom and tradition. In one interview, a 35-year-old woman noted, "The father and brothers may specify *mah*r and ask for vehicles, cattle, or gold."[27] A 25-year-old woman from rural area 1, noted that, "Some families use the *mah*r of a girl for marriage of her brother."[28]

Both among rich and poor families, the negotiation and transaction of *mahr* seems to involve an economic exchange, with the bride receiving only a limited share. Some brides are given gifts of cloth, few goats, or gold, but the rest of the *mahr* is used by families, some of it for the marriage celebration.[29] Thus, traditions deprive the brides from benefiting from '*mahr*', specifically that most Sudanese families do not require '*mu'akkar*', to be stipulated in contract and that makes it easy for men to divorce.

Since a marriage contract gives a husband full authority over his wife, we asked if a bride's family tries to put conditions in the contract to protect the bride's rights. Only 6.5% of the female and 1.4% of the male respondents indicated that some families include conditions in marriage contracts that allow their daughters to continue their education. These small percentages reflect the negative attitude to education prevalent in the researched communities. For example, one young woman, 26 years old, explained, "Fathers put a condition that the daughters and their husbands stay with them at home until they have their first baby."[30] A man with primary education explained that some brides' families' require "that the groom work with them in trade, mostly as a business partner."[31] Trade-offs of this type suggest that brides are viewed as commodities in the marriage process.

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[27] Interview with 35-year-old woman, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016.

[28] Interview with 25-year-old woman, secondary education, rural area 1, 10 Dec. 2016.

[29] According to religious wisdom, *mahr* is a symbol of respect and appreciation *for the bride*. It should not be exorbitant, but what the groom can afford. Most Sudanese practice appears to have diverged from this traditional understanding.

[30] Interview with 26-year-old woman, *khalwa* education, rural area 2 , 9 Dec. 2016.

[31] Interview with middle-aged man, primary education, rural area 1, 10 Dec. 2016.

Nonetheless, the majority of respondents indicated that families do not put conditions on their daughters' marriages because they do not want to create obstacles to marriage. They also pointed out that families that do so risk having themselves and their daughters stigmatized as being difficult, or intending to control son-in law.

4.3   Child marriage is a deeply entrenched tradition in Kassala State

4.3.1   Reasons for child marriage

In Kassala State, families practice child marriage for several reasons, including to respect tradition, to protect girls from immorality and the stigma of being unmarried, to control girls, to safeguard fertility, and to obtain economic benefits.

Table 4. Reasons for child marriage, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan

Reasons for Child Marriage	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %
Because of tradition	80.0	54.9
To avoid stigmatization as *bayra*[32]	22.6	17.4
To have many children	12.9	6.3
To protect girls	76.8	61.1
To reduce family economic burdens	14.8	10.4

As demonstrated in table 4, high percentages of male and female respondents mentioned tradition as a primary reason for engaging in child marriage. In one group interview, a female university graduate explained, "Child marriage is part of the culture, a norm that is observed by all members of community, and any digression is sanctioned."[33] Another woman explained, "We are part of a community. We have to respect traditions, to comply with community expectations for marriage to avoid social sanctions."[34]

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[32] 'B*ayra* means "unmarriageable," that is, not desirable as a marriage partner.
[33] Group interview with educated females, age 20-25 years, urban area, 15 Dec. 2016.
[34] Interview with a 35-year woman, housewife, rural area 2, 10 Dec. 2016.

Interviewees asserted that this tradition stems from a religious basis. For example, a member of the Kassala State Legislative Assembly from rural area 1 said, "Girls are to be married at puberty according to the Koran and Sunna."[35] In a group interview, girls (under age 18 years) and women, explained that religious leaders assert that child marriage is a religious practice.[36] All community leaders interviewed in the three research settings emphasized the religious linkage of the practice, suggesting that leaders base their reasons for this practice on religion, as means to control women although the practice linkage to religion is not agreed upon among in most Muslim communities.

Another important reason mentioned by 76.8% of female and 61.1% of male respondents is the protection of girls. In interviews, some referred to this as *sutra*, that is, "protecting girls' virginity" (from premarital sexual activity or unintended pregnancy). All these acts are considered to dishonor the family and the ethnic group.[37] Behind this perception is a mistrust of girls and women and a belief that they will act immorally if not protected (Girls Nots Brides n.d.–b).

More female (22.6%) than male (17.4%) respondents noted fear of the stigma attached to being old and unmarried (*bayra*). This creates a social sanction for girls who choose to delay marriage, as they risk being viewed as poor marriage partners. In addition, girls who wait to marriage could be considered infertile. The concern for high fertility is related to the importance of having many children (specifically males) to boost the social status of the father, his family, and his ethnic group (Backlund and Blonqvist 2014).

In addition, families may generate economic benefits from their daughters' marriages. As noted above, poor families may use a daughter's bride wealth to pay for the marriage of a son.[38] Some respondents asserted that families marry off their girls to reduce their economic burden or improve their economic situation (Nour 2009). One man explained, "Poor families marry their daughters to reduce their economic burden, since the husband provides her with all her needs"[39] (Mathur, Greene and Malhorta 2003; Khalid 2013). A woman similarly elaborated, "Some marry their daughters to improve their economic situation, as the poor family expects a well-off

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[35] Interview with community leader, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016.
[36] Group interview with women age 17-30, married, rural area 2, 13 Dec. 2016.
[37] The practice of FGM is also based on *sutra*.
[38] Interview with community leader, primary education, rural area 2, 9 Dec. 2016; interview with 25 years old woman, secondary education, rural area 1,10 Dec. 2016.
[39] Interview with 34-year-old man working in informal sector, rural area 2, 13 Dec. 2016

bridegroom to support them."[40] Some interviewees mentioned "exchange marriages" of brothers and sisters of rich families as a way of enlarging the family business and keeping wealth within the families.[41] Bushra (2005, 281), writing about the Rashayda of Kassala, states that a "marriage strategy may . . . be used in order to retain control over the wealth that accompanies the brides within the same lineage."[42]

Some women added other reasons for child marriage related to gender inequality, culture, and educational policies:

- "Girls are brought up to highly value marriage and undervalue education."
- "Continuing education is difficult, since the school uniform for girls is not acceptable to our families and going to school on public transport is not culturally approved in our communities."
- "There are no secondary schools in our areas to motivate families and girls to continue their education."[43]

A middle-age woman, added a somewhat different reason related to girls exercising their rights to choose, "It is believed that if girls are allowed to continue their education and grow up they may not accept their parents' decisions about marriage and may insist on their right to choose a husband and the timing of marriage."[44] In several interviews some women and men asserted, that men marry girls young to control them.[45] These responses demonstrate families' resistance to girls' education and empowerment, and that families try to maintain the submissiveness of females

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[40] Interview with 30-year-old educated woman, urban area, 9 Dec. 2016.

[41] Interview with 35-year educated woman, urban area, 9 Dec. 2016; interview with 25-year-old woman, secondary school education, rural area 1, 10 Dec. 2016.

[42] In a similar vein, Bushra (2005) highlights the importance of marriage for building political alliances among Rashayda lineages in rural area 1. Although respondents in the current study did not mention this factor, it relates to the fact emphasized previously that families prefer marrying their daughters to maternal and paternal cousins to maintain ethnic group ties and traditions.

[43] Group interview, with females, age 17-30, primary education, married, rural area 2, 13 Dec. 2016; multiple individual interviews with married and unmarried women, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016.

[44] Interview with middle-aged, primary school educated woman, and housewife, urban area, 10 Dec. 2016.

[45] Multiple individual interview with males, rural area 2 (12 Dec, 2016); and multiple individual interviews with women of different ages, urban area, (14 Dec 2016).

through male-dominated practices (Svanemyr et al. 2015; Girls not Brides n.d.–a). This is not a surprise, considering the limited interventions for promoting gender equality in Kassala State.

It is apparent that most people in the research sites are still controlled by their traditional thinking and are not contemplating alternatives to their current outlooks. Multiple interrelated factors embedded in Sudanese culture—including traditions, norms, and religious beliefs—perpetuate the practice, promoting the submissiveness of girls and women submissiveness and denying children and women their basic human rights. In addition, it is evident that child marriages are arranged for economic, social, and political reasons that serve the interests of families and ethnic groups, while potentially harming the interests of the girls themselves (Parsons et al. 2015).

4.3.2 Risks of delaying marriage

Given that child marriage is the norm, we asked about the problems girls and women face if they delay marriage. As the table 5 shows, the problems cited by respondents are that girls will miss the chance to marry and will be socially stigmatized as *bayra* ("unmarriageable"). Some individuals (especially women) explained that girls and women face no problems if they delay marriage, since marriage is by "God's will" and should not be questioned.

Table 5. Beliefs about risks of delaying marriages after completing primary and secondary schools, as reported by respondents from Kassala State, Sudan

What risks does a girl takes by delaying marriage until after completing her education?	After completing primary school		After completing secondary school	
	Female Respondents (155) %	Males Respondents (144) %	Female Respondents (155) %	Males Respondents (144) %
She will miss the opportunity to marry	32.9	15.3	39.4	23.6
She is stigmatized as *bayra*	30.3	27.1	32.9	31.3

Nonetheless, families that delay their daughters' marriages were perceived by respondents as living in fear that the opportunity for their daughters to marry will be reduced or that they may not marry at all. These responses emphasize that there are risks and sanctions for families who choose to support their daughters' education and delay their marriages. This is expected because laws, policies, and interventions to change norms supporting the abandonment of child marriage are not yet in place in Kassala State.

Table 6. Beliefs about the risks to families of delaying the marriages of their daughters so that they can continue their education, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan

What are the consequences to families of delaying the marriage of their daughters?	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %
They live with the fear that their daughters will not marry	34.8	28.5
Their daughters become unmarriageable	11.6	34.0
There is no stigma; these families are seen as trying to change traditions	25.8	29.2
There are no risks; their educated daughters can work to support the family	15.5	7.6

Some respondents had different views, however. For example, as shown in table 6, over a quarter of respondents indicated that families that allow their daughters to continue their education are positively trying to change traditions. This indicates a realization of positive outcomes from delaying girls' marriages and a potential readiness for change in the research communities. Furthermore, some respondents reported positive consequences that connected delaying marriages to women's success in education and marriage. For example, a primary school educated woman elaborated, "There are girls who complete secondary school, get jobs, and marry without being stigmatized, such as the daughters of our community leader."[46] This anecdote reveals the emergence of a new understanding that educating girls does not constrain their marriage opportunities and suggests that expectations about female roles are starting to change.

Some respondents also emphasized the prospects for change. A male teacher in rural area 1 asserted that "We have 15 girls from the village's primary school admitted to secondary school"[47]. A woman, in a group interview added, "Our parents approved us continuing our education, although we were strictly watched by our fathers and brothers on our way to and back from the secondary school.[48]" Another indicator of the good prospect for change in these very gender-restrictive communities is that daughters of one community leader's family obtained educations and worked as teachers. Young women between 20-30 years of age, interviewed in rural area 1,

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[46] Interview with middle-aged female, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016.
[47] Interview conducted with a male teacher, university graduate, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016
[48] Group interview with women, primary and secondary education age 20-30 years, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016.

stressed that if there had been a secondary school in their community, many girls would have succeeded in continuing their educations[49].

In a group interview with educated women, in the urban area, several participants questioned the alternatives for changing the situation of girls and women. One voiced loudly, "Boys and men have choices and alternatives, but we do not. We really do not know who can help us get out of the restrictive situation, and how."[50] Yet the opinions of young men seem to be changing. In a group interview with young men ages 23 to 30 in the urban area, some admitted that they support girls and women obtaining an education because educated mothers are better able to socialize their children[51]. Although this sentiment relates the education of women to their traditional domestic role, it still reflects prospects for change among future fathers.

In a group interview in the urban area, other young, educated unmarried women ages 20 to 25 noted other indicators of potential change, such as the fact that the consummation of a child marriage is more often being delayed until the girl grows up and is prepared to manage a family and that some girls are being allowed to continue their education after marriage.[52]

4.4 Child marriage harms children and communities

4.4.1 Social costs

Child marriage has a number of negative consequences, especially for girls. As displayed in table 7, early divorce is potential negative outcome of boy child marriages. In addition, about half of female and one-third of male respondents noted boys taking a second wife is a problem when boys marry young. This is a good sign, since polygamy is understood as male religious right and wives have traditionally been blamed if their husbands divorce them or take another wife.

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[49] Group interview with women, primary and secondary education age 20-30 years, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016.
[50] Group interview with women age 20-25, secondary and university graduates, married and unmarried, urban area, 15 Dec. 2016.
[51] Group interview with young men, 23-30 years, urban area, 14 Dec, 2016.
[52] Group interview with women age 20-25 years old, secondary and university school graduate married and unmarried, urban area, 15 Dec. 2016.

Table 7. Social problems resulting from child marriage, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan

What problems result from child marriage?	For Boys		For Girls	
	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %
No problems	72.3	68.8	70.3	65.3
Some boys refuse to live with in-laws	9.0	6.3	14.2	20.8
Some divorce early	29.7	29.2	36.8	27.1
Some boys marry again	51.0	29.9	0.0	0.0

These social costs of child marriage are tremendous for girls. Over one-third of female and about one-third of male respondents indicated that early divorce is a problem for child brides (table 7). When girls marry and divorce early, they lose opportunities for education and prospects for earning income. This in turn reduces their productive value to society. (Mathur, Greene and Malhorta 2003; Mann, Quigley, and Fischer 2015; McCleary-Sills eth al. 2015).

In addition, girls who experience divorce or polygamy incur the social loss of being stigmatized as divorced or living with the tension of a co-wife or wives. In the case of divorce, she may also risk losing her children, since by law the father gets custody of his sons at seven years old and his daughters at nine years old. If her family is poor, the child bride also may suffer economic pressures, since most girls begin having children within their first years of marriage. If she and her husband divorce or her husband takes another wife, her share of her husbands' income is reduced.

Living with in laws is also a problem for young married girls because they are expected to accept the dominance of their in-laws and at their young age they may not be prepared to deal with such pressures.

Importantly, the fact that child marriage continues in spite of a recognition of these social problems (especially of divorce) suggests that parents and communities are not concerned with the social well-being of their girls. Communities and families seem to prioritize family honor and ties over their daughters' future and comfort. These concerns are rooted in a culture of gender inequality. Sadly, no one mentioned a husband taking a second wife 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. Divorce and polygamy are forms of social oppression that are not recognized as such by many in the researched Kassala communities.

Notably, high percentages of both male and female respondents to the surveys asserted that child marriage does not pose any problems. In addition, *all* those individuals who were separately interviewed denied any social problems of the practice. This suggests that members of these communities do not want to denounce community norms.

In addition, respondents and interviewees did not seem to recognize 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 participants in the study discussed the economic dependency of girl brides (ICRW 2011), since this is culturally the norm. Finally, there was no recognition that the marriage of girls is associated with a deprivation of human rights; rather, girls' rights are simply not recognized in these research communities.

4.4.2   Health costs

As presented in table 8, a substantial percentage of both male and female respondents recognized that child marriage has negative health consequences. Many of the female and some male respondents noted issues of obstructed labor, pregnancy complications and maternal death (Nour, 2009). Some respondents also perceived infertility as a negative health consequence of the practice, which means child marriage may actually work *against* the societal expectation that wives bear many children.

Table 8. Health problems resulting from child marriage, as reported by respondents from Kassala State

What health problems do child brides have?	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %
Obstructed labor	60.6	47.9
Death during child birth	43.2	28.5
Infertility	14.8	7.6
Frequent pregnancies with complications	32.9	37.5

However, it is apparent that despite the realization of negative social and health implications, child marriage is still a prevalent practice in the researched areas. The communities researched have not been motivated to negotiate their traditions or to question the contradictions in their culture.

4.4.3   Educational costs

Opportunities for married girls to continue their education

Nearly half of females in the urban area and rural area 1 reported that married girls have opportunities to continue their education (see table 9). One example that came out in the interviews was that the daughters of one ethnic group leader have continued their schooling, and one now studies medicine at the university[53]. In the urban area, young women in their 20s also cited cases of girls continuing their education after marriage[54]. One woman asserted: "My cousin is married and is now in her third year in secondary school"[55] Only very small percentages of male and female respondents in rural area 2 noted that girls have the opportunity for continuing education; this is because girls have only recently had a separate primary school in the area and there are no prospects for establishment of secondary school in their area in the coming years. Table 9 demonstrates a huge discrepancy between the percentages of male and female respondents who think girls have opportunities for education after marriage. This was also evident

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[53] Interview with a 25-year woman, secondary education, rural area 1. 10 Dec, 2016.
[54] Group interview with young women, age 20-25, secondary and university graduate, urban area, 15 Dec. 2016.
[55] Interview with a 35-year woman, primary education, housewife, urban area, 15 Dec, 2016.

in interviews with young and adult men. The discrepancy reflect women recognition and realization of changing opportunities for girls and women and males denial or hidden resistance of change. Men generally think that educated girls challenge their dominance. Since men actually control society, they will continue constraining education of girls and women, even if women do think this is possible.

Table 9. Educational opportunities for married girls, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan

Do married girls have educational opportunities?	Rural 1		Rural 2		Urban	
	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %
Yes	48.1	23.9	5.1	2.4	49.0	6.0
No	51.9	76.1	94.9	97.6	51.0	94.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Nonetheless, overall, most male (79.9%) and female (74.8%) respondents did not think married girls are able to continue their education. Respondents gave several reasons for this, as displayed in table 10. A high percentage of both male and female respondents reported the husband's refusal as a reason for discontinuing education. By law, a husband has a right to restrict his wife from any public activity and she must obey. Child care is also a barrier for girl brides who become mothers.

Table 10. Reasons married girls do not continue their education after marriage, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan

Why are married girls unable to continue their education?	Females (155) %	Males (144) %
They have children	32.9	18.1
They are not accepted in school	4.5	1.4
Their husbands do not let them attend school	51.6	72.9
They have no use for education after marriage	11.0	4.2
Their communities would not accept them attending school	36.1	20.9

Fewer respondents reported that girls cannot resume their education after marriage because the community would not approve. An even smaller percentage indicated that girls are not encouraged to go back to school because girls do not have any use for education in their lives. This misperception of education is expected, since these communities place little value on education, even for boys. An educated man, noted: "Education is not important to girls and women, as their main responsibilities are to care for children and home"[56]. A male community leader added: "Our community do not have value for girls' education"[57] In addition, there is little awareness in the research communities of the importance of women and girls' education to economic welfare and development.

A few respondents also reported that some schools' principles do not allow married girls to enroll in schools, even though there is no law that forbids married girls from doing so. This shows how the patriarchal culture governs local institutions.

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[56] Interview with a young man, 27 years old, university graduate, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016
[57] Interview with a community leader, university education, rural area 2, 11 Dec. 2016.

Change in views towards girls' education

Table 11. Respondents views on continuity of girls in education, based on survey of rural and urban communities in Kassala, Sudan

Through what grade level should girls continue school?	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %
Third	11.0	15.3
Fourth	14.2	8.3
Fifth	11.6	6.9
Sixth	7.7	14.6
Seventh	5.2	9.0
Eighth	39.4	29.2
Secondary	5.8	9.0
University	4.5	3.5
Girls should not go to school	0.6	4.2
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**

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 11 shows, more than one-third of female and less than one-third of male respondents favored completion of primary education for girls, but very few female or male respondents believed girls should receive a secondary or university education. Education is also not highly approved even for boys and young men. For example, in rural area 1, there is preference for their engagement in trade. This is no surprise, since the researched communities generally undervalue education, especially for girls.

Furthermore, nearly 40% of female respondents think girls only need to be educated through 5th grade. This is asserted by a woman, "Our communities support levels of education that enable girls to read the Koran and pray."[58] This is a rather limited objective for education and reflects the

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[58] Interview with a woman, member of community popular committee, urban area, 10 Dec. 2016.

limited efforts of local governments in raising awareness for importance of education for all aspects of life.

However, some respondents still asserted that girls should not go to school. A religious leader in rural area 1, noted, "Education for girls is not approved in our community. The community does not see any value to girls' education."[59] Some respondents even perceived that education could have a negative impact on girls. For instance, a 27-year-old man from rural area 2 explained, "Girls are not allowed to get an education because educated girls discuss and express opinions, and males do not accept this."[60] It is apparent that there is a low awareness of the benefits of education for individuals' life in the two rural communities.

Table 12. Reasons girls drop-out of school, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan

Why do girls drop-out of school?	Female Respondents (155) %	Male Respondents (144) %
Girls drop out to get married	78.7	58.3
Customs and traditions do not support girls receiving an education	33.5	29.9
Girls only need to attend *Khalwa* to know how to read Koran[61]	43.2	19.4
Girls are needed to help at home	43.2	16.0
Education is not important for girls	21.3	20.8
The costs of education are too high	8.4	11.1
Girls drop out to give a chance for their brothers to attend school	8.4	5.6
The local school is too far away from home	2.6	4.9
The school in our area is mixed gender	4.5	0.7

[59] Interview with a male religious leader, rural area 1, 12 Dec. 2016.
[60] Interview with 27-year-old primary school educated man, rural area 2, 12 Dec. 2016.
[61] The *Khalwa* represents the first cycle of the Islamic system of education. Children join the *Khalwa* at age four or five and begin by learning reading, writing, and then the Koran, memorizing all its verses. *Khalwa* students may continue their education in a regular primary school, if accessible.

Responses on the reasons girls drop out of school also demonstrated a low awareness of the importance of education. The majority—79% of female and 59% of male respondents—indicated that marriage is the primary reason girls leave school. According to table 12, one-fifth of male and about two fifths of female respondents think girls should attend only *Khalwa*, for the limited purpose of enabling them to read Koran, (religion book). This attitude suggests that communities in Kassala State have limited incentives for supporting the education of girls, especially after they have achieved basic reading skills. This is compounded by the costs and accessibility of educational facilities, which are in turn related to inadequate government policies.

Traditions and customs are another important reason girls drop out of school. In group interviews, educated, married women, ages 20–25, emphasized, "Our communities are against education, as they believe that education helps girls to resist traditions and customs of the ethnic group."[62] This is not only a misperception of the purpose of education but a denial of girls' rights to challenge restrictive traditions.

The preference of educating boys and the need for girls to take on domestic responsibilities were also noted as factors pushing girls out of schools. These are discriminatory gender norms inherent in the cultures of communities researched. The interviews elaborated on the restrictive perceptions of the roles of girls and women. In a group interview with educated women, in urban area one of them explained, "It is difficult for girls to continue their education. They and their families would be stigmatized because going to school girls interact with strange people, and in public transportation they closely interact with males. This is not acceptable in our traditions."[63] A man from that area added, "Some families who were interested in letting their girls continue their education had to move to other neighborhoods or localities to avoid social stigma and sometimes exclusion."[64]

Despite the low awareness of the importance of education, some girls in these communities have completed primary school and are unmarried, as reported by 71% of female and 60.4% of male respondents. In addition, half of female and one-third of male respondents reported that they know unmarried girls who completed secondary school and went on to attend university.

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[62] Group nterview with educated women, age 20- 25 years, urban area, 14 Dec. 2016.
[63] Group interview with educated women in their 20-30 years old, married and unmarried, secondary and university graduates, urban area, 14 Dec. 2016.
[64] Interview with primary school educated male, member of community popular committee, urban area, 10 Dec. 2016.

Nonetheless, in spite of these assertions, most community leaders denied that unmarried girls and women were completing their education, suggesting that leaders are purposefully denying (or perhaps even attempting to suppress) this societal change.

Girls who continue their education and their families are role models who challenge the cultural boundaries of restrictive norms and traditions drawn by their communities. Some of these role models were university graduates in the urban area who participated in group interviews. They explained,

'Our families resisted us continuing our education, but we insisted, changed the uniform to one acceptable to them and to the school's authorities, and convinced our families to pay for us to attend a private college. Now the community is changing. As educated women, we prefer educated men and we will definitely let our daughters complete all educational levels. ' [65]

Girls themselves have helped catalyze change by persisting in overcoming the hurdles to attending secondary school in their areas. This emerging trend can create momentum for other girls continuing their education and delaying marriage.

4.5   School girls wish to continue their education

Since primary school girls are the main victims of child marriage, focus group discussions highlighted their knowledge about child marriage and their views on their future prospects for continuing their education. We conducted these focus group discussions with school girls ranging from 11 to 16 years old in schools in the three research areas. The meetings with girls were held in schools after taking permission from the school managers and explaining to the girls the purpose of research and discussion; some girls from different classes volunteered to engage in the discussion.

Our discussions revealed that girls are aware of their limited choices, their parents' control over their lives, and the tradition of child marriage in their communities. The girls in rural area 2, highlighted that there were no female students in eighth grade, and one explained, "Girls are

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[65] Group discussion with young women, age 20-25, university graduates, married and unmarried, urban area, 15 Dec. 2016.

forced to drop out of school for marriage or for helping mothers in domestic chores"[66] In urban area, the girls also reported, "If girls resist marriage, they will be forced into it."[67] "In our community, there is perception that education is not important for girls, as it empowers the girl to voice her opinion and that means she gets out of control of her family."[68]

The school girls interviewed in both rural and urban, recognized the risks of child marriage and mentioned cases of girls who married in the third or fourth grade (ages 9 to 12) and died in childbirth.

Most girls who participated in the focus group discussions emphasized that they wanted to continue their education. Some noted that their parents' lack of awareness of importance of education to females is a constraint to continuing in school. One student said, "Parents usually tell us that girls have no value, regardless of whether they are educated or not."[69] Another student related, "Our parents tell us, 'We do not waste our money on girls."[70] In short, girls are socialized to believe they have little value.

However, some girls in rural and urban settings are optimistic about the prospects for change and emphasized that their parents may allow them to continue their education if schools are accessible and education is free of cost. To them, the constraints to continuing their education are the lack of secondary schools in rural areas and the cost of education. They added girls from their communities succeed in obtaining an education, they will pave the way for others to follow. This suggests that some girls are negotiating educational barriers to help create change in their communities. They are potential agents of change.

During the focus group discussions, the school girls asserted that they would be ready to volunteer in any program for abandoning the practice of child marriage.[71] This shows they would have the agency to challenge traditions if they were given the opportunity and motivation to do so. For example, school girls in rural setting 1 emphasized that there is a possibility for change, citing the

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[66] Focus group discussion with primary school girls, rural are 2, 11 Dec. 2016.
[67] Focus group discussion with primary school girls, urban area, 14 Dec. 2016.
[68] Focus group discussion with primary school girls, urban area, 14 Dec. 2016.
[69] Focus group discussion with primary school girls, rural area 2, 11 Dec. 2016.
[70] Focus group discussion with primary school girls, rural area 2, 11 Dec. 2016.
[71] Focus group discussion with primary school girls, rural area 1, 14 Dec. 2016; Focus group discussion with school girls in urban area, 14 Dec. 2016.

community leader's daughters, who are educated and engaged in politics.[72] These school girls stressed that those daughters are role models for any girl or family who is interested in allowing girls to continue their education.[73]

4.6   Efforts to end child marriage in Kassala State face an uphill battle

Since 2013, the Kassala State Council of Child Welfare has engaged in a campaign to abandon the practice of child marriage. The campaign's main activities are raising community awareness about the harmful effects of the practice, through the capacity building of volunteers who then advocate in local communities and media (radio) outlets. In addition, through interviews with CSOs, we learned that some community organizations have engaged in efforts to end child marriage, often in collaboration with government institutions. These efforts have been met with mixed reactions in local communies

For example, a representative of the Raira Organization explained that it has collaborated with the Kassala State Council of Child Welfare in several interventions in rural areas of the state; these interventions have taken into account educational, health, and religious perspectives of cgild marriage practice.[74] The projects' manager of Plan International Sudan explained, "In collaboration with other actors, we are working with volunteers who engage in delivering weekly educational sessions for communities. We also conduct educational sessions over the local radio, and we form child protection groups in communities to continue these awareness-raising activities."[75] Similarly, the Talawait Organization has hosted several awareness-raising sessions on the harms of child marriage to education and health. A representative of one locality explained that his locality considers child marriage in connection with the Saleema Initiative (to end FGM) and includes the issue in awareness-raising sessions.[76] A representative of the College of Community Development (CCD) at the University of Kassala explained that child marriage has recently entered the college's agenda. That institution has also used a community dialogue approach in its raising- awareness activities, to specifically promote the communication skills of women.

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[72] Focus group discussion with primary school girls, rural area 1, 14 Dec. 2016.
[73] Focus group discussion with primary school girls, rural area 1, 14 Dec. 2016.
[74] Interview with a middle age man, representative of Raira Voluntary Organization for Development, 15 Dec. 2016.
[75] Interview with an educated woman, representative of Plan International Sudan, 16 Dec. 2016.
[76] Interview with coordinator of community popular committees in West Kassala Locality, 20 Dec. 2016.

However, in spite of all these CSOs efforts in Kassala State, political and community resistance remains a steep hurdle. A representative of the Talawait Organization noted, "The responses of the community are weak. There is resistance to abandonment from religious leaders, community leaders, and elderly women"[77] The Raira Organization's director elaborated, "The religious leaders have different stands. Some support the practice and others are against it. But the executives and parliamentarians are generally very weak in generating change."[78] The CCD representative also explained, "The college hosted some seminars and dramas to send messages about the importance of abandoning the practice to health providers and religious leaders. But we realized that one main constraint is misperceptions about the practice."[79]

About 58% of female and 66% of male respondents mentioned efforts of state and national institutions to educate communities about child rights. Most of those who have not been exposed to such information are from rural area 1, and some respondents from this area noted that the community does not allow NGOs working on raising awareness for eradication of traditional practices to come to their village to talk about any cultural issues.[80]

As table 13 demonstrates about 38% of male and 46% of female respondents, from the three research settings, had heard about the negative impacts of child marriage from NGOs and/or media. Figure 4 shows variations of exposure among the three areas. The least exposed are in rural area 1 and their source is the media as they do not allow organizations working on raising-awareness for child marriage abandonment to work in their area. School girls who participated in a focus group discussion in the urban and rural areas explained that they had learned about the National Child Act 2010 and the harms of child marriage from the media and from their teachers.[81]

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[77] Interview with an educated woman, employees in Talawait Organization, 20 Dec. 2016. In researched communities elderly women are known as gatekeepers of traditions and cultures.

[78] Interview with an educated woman, director of Raira Organization for Awareness and Development, 4 Mar. 2017.

[79] Interview with an educated woman, representative of College of Community Development, University of Kassala, 12 Dec. 2016.

[80] Interview with a 54-year community leader, rural area 1, 11 Dec. 2016; interview with 27-year man, rural area 1, 11 Dec. 2016.

[81] Focus group discussion with primary school girls, urban area, 14 Dec. 2016. Focus group discussion with school girls, rural area 1, 14 Dec. 2016.

Table 13. Exposure to information on child marriage abandonment, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan

Have you been exposed to information discussing the abandonment of child marriage?	Female Respondents %	Male Respondents %
Yes	45.8	37.5
No	54.2	62.5
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**

Figure 4. Exposure to information on child marriage abandonment, as reported by respondents in Kassala State, Sudan
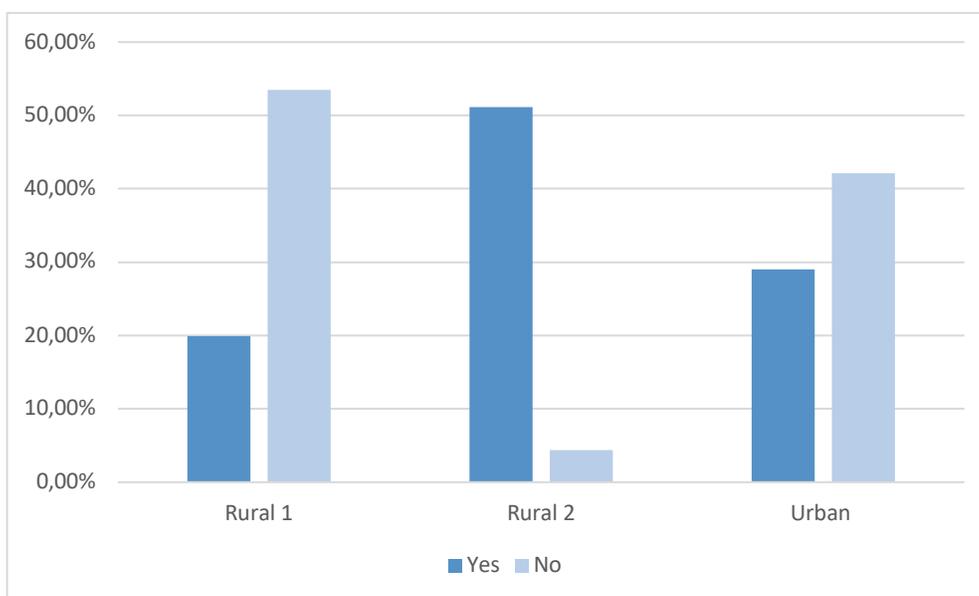
Considering the results of our research, it is evident that educational efforts for abandonment of child marriage have had a rather limited effect in Kassala State, since most of those exposed to these efforts have not been influenced by the information. Some who had been exposed to such educational information have even denounced it as against their norms and traditions, a challenge to their religious practices, and unacceptable to their elders. A male community leader explained, "Some civil society organizations came to our community and informed us about the abandonment

of child marriage. We did not accept what they said."[82] This attitude indicates that intervention messages are not working; perhaps they are not culturally sensitive, or the sources of information shared in support of abandoning the practice are not considered credible by communities. Advocates of change do not appear to be using faith-based approaches, as recommended by experts in the field (see Girls Not Brides n.d.–c; Karam 2015). It is apparent that those designing and delivering programs for ending child marriage have weaknesses. As such interventions are funded mainly by the international agencies, organizations, and embassies, the question is, why the international partners are not considering the weak capacity of actors delivering the child marriage abandonment programs if the effectiveness and sustainability of programs in changing norms are main goals in such connections?

A man community leader, in the urban area explained that no organization has talked to people in his neighborhood about child marriage.[83] This is unsurprising, since the government's abandonment strategy is still under the process of approval; thus, funding for abandonment programs is limited at present. School girls in a focus group discussion in the urban area also reported that child marriage is not discussed with them. They explained, "Plan [International] Sudan supported our school with educational facilities, but has not talked to us. Usually organizations meet with adult people from the community."[84] This highlight two issues: firstly, the missed opportunity of integrating empowerment of girls into development support of education and, secondly, a failure to include children (the potential victims) in intervention efforts.

Both respondents and representatives of CSOs and government noted that interventions to end child marriage face challenges because child marriage is a sensitive issue and conservative local communities resist engaging with advocacy groups. For instance, a male farmer with a primary school education stated, "We do not allow civil society organizations to work in our community."[85] Even community leaders cannot influence the strong hold of tradition in some communities. For example, the man, coordinator of communities' popular committees in rural are 2, stated, "I am against child marriage, but we cannot go against traditions."[86] Even in rural area 1, many community members are reluctant to recognize the community leader's initiative to educate his daughters.

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[82] Interview with a man, head of one of the community popular committees in rural area 2, 12 Dec. 2006.
[83] Interview with a man, member of community popular committee, urban area, 10 Dec. 2016.
[84] Focus group discussion with primary school girls, urban area, 14 Dec. 2016.
[85] Interview with primary school educated male, rural area 1, 14 Dec. 2016.
[86] Interview with male member of school parents' council, rural area 2, 12 Dec. 2016.

5   Concluding remarks

Child marriage in researched communities in Kassala State is a deeply rooted traditional practice, which is continuously tied to religion. Kassala is an extremely gender conservative setting in which the practice of child marriage is higher than the national average and where the youngest girls enter marriage, some as young as nine years. In particular *sutra*, protecting girls' from immoral behavior, is an important driver of child marriage in Kassala. Protecting girls' honor and reinforcing ethnic boundaries are driving young girls into marriage. For the same reasons, many respondents in Kassala State do not perceive any benefit to educating girls, because it exposes them to the danger of immoral behavior.

Other important factors driving child marriage in Kassala State are to avoid stigmatization, to ensure high fertility and economic benefits. To the extent that the respondents in this study recognize the harm to girls of early marriage, this harm is considered subordinate to the community goals of adhering to tradition and keeping ethnic ties intact. Girl children are viewed as a commodity, and in particularly in rural Kassala State they are married (actually 'traded') to enhance ethnic ties and to benefit males of family as girls bride wealth is used for marriage of their brothers.

Even though there have been some significant role models for the education of women, such as the daughters of a community leader in one rural area, some members of the community dismiss these examples in the name of tradition. Even if girls want to attend school, their options are limited. Secondary schools are not accessible in some rural areas and letting girls use public transportation (with unknown men) is considered culturally unacceptable. In addition, girls may be forced to wear uniforms that violate their community's sense of propriety.

Although some CSOs have engaged in child marriage awareness-raising efforts in Kassala State, these efforts have not led to much success. It appears that CSOs may not be effectively structuring their messages to relate to ethnic groups with deeply embedded religious practices. Efforts to reach community leaders alone appear unlikely to succeed. Nonetheless, some individuals, including girls in school, have expressed a desire for more girls and women to obtain an education.

To further cultivate an atmosphere conducive to ending child marriage in Kassala State, we recommend the following steps:

- The Kassala State government should put the eradication of child marriage high on its political agenda, criminalize the practice and design appropriate interventions
- As part of a strategy to end child marriage, stakeholders, including the national government and international groups, should assist Kassala State in making the accessibility of educational facilities a priority for all girls in the state. This includes not only making schools physically accessible, but also socially accessible (for example, by requiring school uniforms that accord with community norms).
- CSOs and other activists should examine the efficacy of their engagement strategy in Kassala State and consider whether faith-based and other initiatives may lead to better partnerships with local communities.
- The international community should give priority to enhancing capacities of those engaged in abandonment programs to ensure achievement of intended changes.

In summary, eradicating child marriage in rural Kassala State requires an approach sensitive to both the sociocultural and economic needs of the people in the area. Until girls in the state have ready access to primary and secondary schools, they will face cultural pressure to drop out of school and fulfil their roles as wives and mothers. Thus, enhancing educational infrastructure in the state is an essential first step to ending the practice of child marriage. However, even if girls have the opportunity to attend school, they face deep cultural pressure, often based on religion, not to do so. Any attempts to change the community's hearts towards the value of girls and women and the value of education to their lives must be rooted in fundamental Islamic beliefs if they are to gain any traction against deeply entrenched community beliefs. Religious and community leaders in other predominately Muslim areas (including in Sudan) have successfully advocated for girls and women's rights[87]. A culturally sensitive approach may empower leaders in Kassala State to do the same.

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[87] In Sudan there are some notable respected religious leaders such as Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and Al Sadig Al Mahdi who have been advocating for girls and women's rights for decades. In Tunisia and Morocco, there are progressive family laws that forbid child marriage and respect women rights in marriage.

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7   Appendix
Demographic data on respondents to questionnaire from Kassala State

Table 14. Age and education of all respondents who responded to child marriage survey, Kassala State, Sudan

	Rural 1		Rural 2		Urban	
	Female	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**
	(n = 52)	(n = 46)	(n = 58)	(n = 41)	(n = 51)	(n = 50)
Age	%	%	%	%	%	%
Younger than 18	1.9	8.6	3.4	2.4	3.9	2.0
18–27 years old	11.5	28.3	31.0	17.1	25.5	8.0
28–37 years old	17.3	30.4	27.6	19.3	17.5	30.0
38–47 years old	17.3	8.6	18.9	24.4	13.7	20.0
48–57 years old	36.5	15.2	15.5	26.8	15.5	26.0
Older than 57	15.4	8.6	3.4	0.0	3.9	14.0
Education	%	%	%	%	%	%
No education	36.5	50.0	48.2	53.6	39.2	12.0
Khalwa	23.0	13.0	39.7	34.1	5.9	18.0
Primary school	30.7	37.0	6.9	12.2	51.0	36.0
Secondary school	5.8	0.0	3.4	0.0	3.9	20.0
First university degree	3.9	0.0	1.7	0.0	0.0	14.0

This report investigates child marriage in Algadaref 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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