Why context matters for social norms interventions: The case of child marriage in Cameroon

Abstract

Child marriage is a global health and human rights issue. In Cameroon, 30 % of women are married before age 18 but little research exists on the drivers of child marriage in the country. This qualitative study contributes to understanding the role of social norms in sustaining child marriage in Far-North and East Cameroon. Participants in the study (N=80) included women and men from four, ethnically different, rural communities (two in the Far-North, two in the East). Methods for data collection included 16 semi-structured focus groups, in which we investigated the system of social norms sustaining child marriage in these communities. We asked participants about typical age at marriage for girls (local practices) and whether they believed that age to be appropriate (their attitudes). We found the relation between practices and attitudes to be different in each community. We discuss the implications of these different relations for social norms interventions, enriching existing theoretical explanations. Evidence emerging from our findings suggest that effective social norms interventions should be embedded within cultural understandings of the relations between people’s attitudes and practices.

Keywords: Social Norms; Gender Norms; Child Marriage; Intervention; Cameroon.

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# Introduction

Child marriage (CM) is defined as a formal or informal spousal union in which (at least) one of the persons getting married is under 18 (Nawal M. Nour, 2009). Data from 2015 suggest that, globally, 700 million of the women alive that year were married in childhood; the number of women who were child brides is likely to increase to 950 million by 2030 (UNICEF, 2015a). CM has been defined as a harmful practice and a human rights violation with negative consequences on girls’ health and wellbeing. For instance, compared to women married as adults child brides are at higher risk of early pregnancy, school drop-out, and increased risk of HIV (Chandra-Mouli, Camacho, & Michaud, 2013; Gage, 2013; Godha, Hotchkiss, & Gage, 2013; Neal et al., 2012; Nawal M Nour, 2006; Nawal M. Nour, 2009; A. Raj, 2010; Anita Raj & Boehmer, 2013; A. Raj et al., 2010; Santhya, 2011). Their children are also negatively affected, as they are more likely to die at birth or be born underweight (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2013; Gage, 2013; Godha et al., 2013; Neal et al., 2012; Nawal M. Nour, 2009; A. Raj, 2010; Anita Raj & Boehmer, 2013; A. Raj et al., 2010; Santhya, 2011). While, globally, age at marriage for girls is increasing (Koski, Clark, & Nandi, 2017), CM is still common in many places partially because initiatives targeting the practice do not always address the actual factors contributing to it. While internationally significant time and resources have been spent to ensure that governments make child marriage illegal, a recent 60-country study found that the impact of such a legalistic approach on the practice is very small, if not inexistent: no countries reported a decrease in the practice as a result of its criminalisation (Collin & Talbot, 2017). The lack of effectiveness of criminalisation could be due partly to the fact that CM is often practised in countries where, due to scarce resources and low population density, it is difficult for the government to exert control over the entirety of their territory. The finding that criminalizing child marriage has little to no effect on reducing its prevalence suggests that more proximal contributing factors need to be taken into account when designing effective policies and interventions.

Social norms – the unwritten rules of acceptable behaviour in a group – have emerged in the last decade as a promising entry point for facilitating abandonment of child marriage (Cislaghi & Bhattacharjee, 2017; Jain & Kurz, 2007; Lee-Rife, Malhotra, Warner, & Glinski, 2012; Lilleston, Goldmann, Verma, & McCleary-Sills, 2017; Loaiza & Wong, 2012; UNICEF, 2014). Social norms theory is multi-faceted and includes several explanations of what social norms are and how they influence behaviour. In Global Health research, most follow Cialdini’s [27] definition of social norms as one’s beliefs about: 1) what other people in one’s group do (called *descriptive norms*) and 2) the extent to which other people in one’s group approve of a given action (called *injunctive norms*) (Chung & Rimal, 2016; Cislaghi & Heise, 2018a; Mackie, Moneti, Shakya, & Denny, 2015; Miller & Prentice, 2016). Focus on social norms theory has helped explain why people comply with a harmful practice even when they hold an attitude against it. The distinction between attitudes and norms is important: while attitudes are internally-motivated judgments that people have about something (e.g. I don’t personally approve of child marriage) (Albarracín, Johnson, Fishbein, & Muellerleile, 2001; Cislaghi & Heise, 2018b; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), social norms, as we mentioned, are beliefs about what other people do and approve of (e.g. people in my community approve of parents who give their daughter in marriage when she is 15) (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991; Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000; Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2018). People might thus hold a negative attitude towards a given practice, and yet comply with it to follow the norm. Much research and practice on changing social norms to reduce child marriage has focused on situations where attitudes and norms diverge (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018b; Freij, 2010; Lee-Rife, Malhotra, Warner, & McGonagle Glinski, 2012; Sr & S, 2012; Vaitla, Taylor, Horn, & Cislaghi, 2017). Research in other fields of health, however, suggests that norms and attitudes are often aligned. In this case, people practice child marriage both because they think it’s a good thing and because they think others approve of it.

Practitioners’ interest in changing the social norms that sustain child marriage has considerably increased in the last decade; yet, few programmes integrate a social norms perspective (Malhotra, Warner, McGonagle, & Lee-Rife, 2011). As social norms theorists have suggested, two issues are critically important to design effective social norms intervention. The first is to understand the strength of a norm: not all norms exert the same influence. (Rimal & Lapinski, 2015). The second is to uncover the relation between norms and attitudes (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018b). Elsewhere in this journal, we analysed different data from the dataset of this paper to uncover how the strength of the child marriage norm varied across four settings in Cameroon (Cislaghi, Mackie, Nkwi, & Shakya, 2019). In the present paper, instead, we provide key reflections on how understanding the differences between attitudes and practices related to CM through a social norms lens can inform the design of effective interventions to reduce it. In the first section, we offer some background on child marriage in Cameroon. In the following section, we provide information on the methods we used to collect and analyse the data presented in the subsequent results section. Finally, we present some implications for practice and offer some concluding remarks.

# Child Marriage in Cameroon

Little research has focused on child marriage in Cameroon. Yet, the rates of child marriage in Cameroon are high. DHS data collected in 2018 reveal that 10% of women in Cameroon reported being entered into union before reaching the age of 15, and 30 % before age 18 (UNICEF, 2018). A recent report commissioned by the Cameroonian Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Family investigated the financial incentives for child marriage in the Southwest of country (Niger-Thomas, Ayukotang, & Atim, 2014). Parents borrow money on the condition that they will give their unborn girl in marriage to the lender when she’s old enough. Young girls (as young as 8) are then married to the lender who then cancels the debt; girls exchanged as part of this practice are known as “money women”. Elsewhere (McDougal, Shakya, Mackie, Nkwi, & Cislaghi, 2017), we reported on a DHS analysis of child marriage data from Cameroon collected in 2014. We found that, while median age at first marriage in Cameroon is 18.5, great differences exist across social and geographical contexts. Median age at first marriage goes down to 16 for women in the lowest wealth index, for those with no education, and for those in the three norther regions of Adamaoua, North, and Far-North. Overall the age of first marriage is increasing across the country, with marginal increases in the Far-North, and but notable decreases in the East.

# Methods

Qualitative research is particularly useful in identifying patterns of thinking and beliefs, including those that fit the definition of social norms (Berg, 2001; Creswell, 2007). Focus group discussions, in particular, are a helpful method to uncover beliefs shared by members of a group. Focus group discussions offer the opportunity for participants to discuss the meanings that they attach to the cultural practices under investigation, often resulting in conversations around the norms that motivate their compliance or non-compliance with those practices (Bloor, 2001; Hughes & Huby, 2001).

To collect the data, we worked with 8 local interviewers (four men and four women). Interviewers were anthropology PhD students studying at the University of Marua (Cameroon) who had previous experience in collecting qualitative data. In total, the interviewers conducted 4 focus groups discussions in each village, for a total of 16 focus groups with 5 people each, for a total of 80 participants [See Table 1]. The focus group discussions lasted, on average, 45 minutes.

[Table 1 here]

The 80 participants in our qualitative study were men and women living in four villages located in rural areas of Far-North (2) and East Cameroon (2). We chose these two areas to capture diversity in the existing child marriage practices: high but decreasing in the Far-North, low but increasing in the East. At the same time, we also selected villages of different religious and ethnic groups within each region. People living in these four villages identified themselves as being part of four different ethnic groups; they respectively defined themselves as Mafa (Far/North, Christian), Maka (East, Christian), Mbororo (East, Muslim), and Musgum (Far-north, both Muslim and Christian). We created a sample that was likely to generate data saturation, while, at the same time, provided enough diversity to identify patterns within and across villages (as we describe below). Potential participants were randomly selected using a randomization technique by household. 83 people agreed to participate in the focus groups; 80 eventually presented at the focus group sessions. Interviewers explained content, format, and duration of the focus group to all participants. All participants gave informed consent before the focus group started. Those who couldn’t write, gave oral consent (recorded on the audiotape). The research protocol was approved by both the IRBs of the University of California San Diego and the Cameroon Ministry of Health.

To elicit an understanding of social norms around child marriage in the focus groups, we used vignettes, as they can be particularly appropriate for exploring social norms within groups, and the cultural narratives around which those norms are reinforced (Cislaghi & Heise, 2017; Mackie et al., 2015). They give participants the opportunity to discuss in detail the cultural practices and beliefs that operate within their communities, as well as the sources of contention around those practices, and the ways in which the practices may be changing. We used a factorial design, an approach particularly appropriate from comparison across subgroups. A factorial design approach involves holding discussions with separate groups, each homogenous in terms of having common *control characteristics*, but different in terms of as *break characteristics* – that is, characteristics that differentiate groups from each other (Knodel, 1993). For instance, in our study we split our sample by age (18-35, 36+) and gender, creating groups for older men and younger men, older women and younger women for each village. We used a common set of vignettes across all of the focus groups so that we were able to see how topics and ideas diverge or converge across gender, geography, and generation.

In the focus groups, we first asked participants about existing marriage practices and ceremonies (see Table 2). We then presented a series of vignettes in which we created hypothetical situations involving child marriage, and then asked participants to respond based on decisions made by the hypothetical actors in each scenario (see Table 3).

[Table 2 here]

[Table 3 here]

The development of the focus group guide was led by local Anthropologist PN, who ensured its cultural relevance, in discussion with the other authors. The vignettes were designed using a validate norms analysis tool commonly adopted in social norms research: the SNAP framework (Stefanik & Hwang, 2017). Compared to other data collection tools, the SNAP framework is particularly helpful because it helps analyse FGD data on social norms. The focus group guide was pilot tested during the training and modified to accommodate the learnings that emerged during the piloting.

Interviewers audiotaped the focus groups. Two local interpreters translated focus groups recordings (from participants’ language into English), transcribed, and anonymized them. Using software nVivo, we then coded the data, identifying emerging themes of interest for our study. The coding process took place in two steps. Under the authors’ supervision, three research assistants conducted the initial “open” coding, attributing codes to fragments of the transcripts. Eventually through this process we reached data saturation, where further coding was no longer feasible and the ability to obtain new information from the data was no longer possible (Fusch & Ness, 2015). We then proceeded to revise these codes and group them through “axial” coding (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). We discussed the code categories and structure until there was an overall agreement.

The next section reports on the participants views on “age at marriage”, looking at both 1) what participants in the four focus groups said about typical age of marriage (particularly for girls) and 2) whether they personally approved or disapproved of that age. We particularly compared people’s attitudes and descriptive norms, advancing a hypothesis of the reasons they diverged.

# Results

We asked participants in the focus groups what they believed to be the average age of marriage for girls (and boys) in their village (the observed practices and descriptive norms), and what they thought about that age (their attitudes): in their opinion, was it good or bad for a girl or a boy to get married at that age and why? Age of marriage for boys and young men was similar across three of the four ethnic groups, varying between 20 and 30 years of age. The exception was the Maka village, where participants reported boys getting married as young as 13. However, we found greater differences in what participants said to be the typical age of marriage for girls, and in what they personally thought to be a good age for a girl/young woman to get married. Note that some of the results that we present in this section build off the paper mentioned in the introduction. To provide the reader with critical context, we mention them here too, referencing the other paper we when do so.

### Mafa

Mafa participants reported, on average, an age of marriage of 17 for girls in their village (Cislaghi et al., 2019). Mafa participants’ own attitudes towards child marriage were generally negative; they were particularly disapproving of marriage at very young ages: they generally thought that yes, 17 is a good age and so was 18 or more. Men were more likely than women to express disapproval of child marriage. Elder men thought that women who married at the age of 20, or even 22, did the best for themselves and their family; a woman needed to “experience social life in the community before she can get married”. Asked explicitly if they thought 15 to be a good age for marriage, younger man also remarked that 15 would be too early: “She must be older [than 15] because she has to be mature before she can get married”.

### Maka

Maka participants reported, on average, an age of marriage of 13 for girls in their village, which they attributed to an increasing trend of very young girls choosing to get married (Cislaghi et al., 2019). Maka participants’ own attitudes towards child marriage were mostly against marriage at a young age. This was true across all focus groups. For instance, one young woman remarked that “women get married here when they are 14 or 15. To me the appropriate age of marriage is 25: at that age you are a woman and can take care of a house”. Most young men also expressed attitudes against marriage at age 12-15. One, for instance, said, “For me, to get married at 12 years is not good. Good marriage, in my opinion, happens when the girl is 16”. Elder women and men also spoke against very early marriage. One elder woman, for instance, expressed her disapproval, reflecting on the fact that age at marriage was going down: “In our time, you would get married when you are 16 to a man you love. Now instead girls as young as 12 or 13 years are getting married”. Older men expressed the same reservations, stressing they were worried because they observed the age of marriage falling. One, for instance, said “I married my wife when she was 25, and we now have a large family. Now even a 15-year-old woman can get married”.

Another descriptive norm reported by Maka participants was that girls were increasingly choosing who and when to marry. Some expressed concern this could be the reason for the age of marriage falling in their community. One young man, for instance, remarked: “Young girls marry young because of their stubbornness, because many parents do not want that. Here, we generally think that a marriage is good when she’s 20 or 24”, and another elder woman said: “Children should just be patient [and wait before getting married]”. A young woman suggested that nobody else but the girl has the ultimate decision in a wedding. If a suitor comes recommended by her parents and she doesn’t like him “She can simply say to her father that she is not interested in marrying him”. Not all Maka participants said child marriage existed because of increased girls’ agency. One man, for instance, remarked that poverty was also playing a role, when he said: “If a family is poor, the parents will want to get rid of their daughter. Which is why she gets married when she’s 11 or 12”.

### Mbororo

Mbororo participants reported, on average, an age of marriage of 14 for girls in their village. Their attitudes were aligned with the descriptive norm (the observed practice): they generally agreed that girls were getting married at a good age. A young woman, for instance, asked “You said a 14-year-old girl can get married, is it a good or bad thing?” responded: “It depends whether the girl’s body is ready or not”, suggesting physical maturity to be a critical factor determining whether it is acceptable for a girl to be married. Another young woman, commenting on a vignette about a 15-year-old girl named Awa getting married, reflected on the importance of not having sex outside of marriage, “Awa must be 15 years old. That’s the right age to get married; if she waits, she might experience sex, and that’s bad. It is good that she gets married when she’s 15, at that age she is ready for marriage”.

### Musgum

Musgum participants talked extensively about age of marriage. While the reported average age of marriage in their community, the descriptive norm, was 15, there was large variation in their responses, mostly motivated by the fact that two communities exist with different ideal ages for marriage. The community of Christian Musgum (who advocated for a later marriage) and that of Muslim Musgum (who advocated for a younger marriage) (for a lengthier discussion of which see: Cislaghi et al., 2019). Both descriptive norms and attitudes differed between communities.

Most Christian Musgum participants agreed that 12 is too young to get married: “A girl who gets married at 12 years is young. She will suffer a lot because her body is not ready for marriage”. Muslim participants instead were more supportive of child marriage. Some thought 13 or 14 to be a good age. A young woman, for instance, said: “14 years is a good one. For a girl should not have her menses while still at her parents’ home, otherwise she risks getting pregnant”. And other women in the same focus group agreed with that, suggesting that “When she’s 16, a girl will start going out with men and can possibly become pregnant”; and another: “15 years is better because she is still a virgin”. In our data, we also found evidence that girls’ age at marriage among the Christian Musgum had increased in the last generations. One elder man explained how the practice changed since his parents’ time:

My father was Christian. In his days, a girl of 6 years could be destined for marriage to a boy. When they reached puberty, they would get married [forcibly]. But today, things have changed. A boy and a girl meet. They love each other, that is all.

Recall our findings from DHS data suggesting that child marriage was decreasing in the Extreme North, which seem to corroborate what Musgum Christian participants said.

# Discussion

Participants in the four villages held different attitudes (fairly homogenous per village, but fairly different across villages) towards best age at marriage for a girl, and those attitudes varied in their degree of convergence with the descriptive norm. Table 4 below summarizes descriptive norms around the typical age of marriage for girls and participants’ opinions of that age as being right or wrong. Table 4 gives an overview of participants’ attitudes by age and gender for each ethnic group.

[Table 4 here]

[Table 5 here]

Maka participants reported an average age of marriage to be around 13, and most disapproved of this age. Mafa participants noted an age of 17 or 18, which most participants agreed was acceptable, although male participants believed that an age of 20 or 22 was even better. Mbororo participants reported 14 as the average age of marriage for girls; they approved of that age and anticipated other people’s approval too. Finally, Musgum participants were split in their attitudes towards child marriage, with Muslim participants being in support of a marriage age of 14, and Christian participants disapproving of marriage at that young of an age, and instead reporting the appropriate age as around 18.

These differences have important programmatic implications and offer the opportunity to reflect on how social norms interventions should adapt when the relationship between practice/attitude differs. In the case of the Mafa participants, both descriptive norms and their attitudes were supportive of later marriage. They didn’t generally practice child marriage, and most individuals reported attitudes against it. In this case, a social norms intervention that aims to reach possible pockets of practicing families could help create an injunctive norms (beliefs of what others approve and disapprove of) against child marriage. For instance, since 2014 Population Foundation India has been airing on the radio a campaign called Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon (I, a woman, can achieve anything) to strengthen injunctive norms against child marriage (Wang & Singhal, 2017).

Both practices and attitudes of Mbororo participants were supportive of child marriage, with injunctive norms also contributing to the practice (recall, for instance, that they said that people in their community thought girls shouldn’t have their second period in their fathers’ house). In this case, an intervention should begin by creating the space where a core group of participants can be exposed to the knowledge and reflection they need to change their own personal attitudes towards child marriage. Once this core group is motivated to achieve change, the intervention would help them motivate others in their community to join the movement for change, eventually changing the norm (Bajaj, Cislaghi, & Mackie, 2016). The SASA! programme offers a model of how community-led norms change can be achieved. In each village where it is implemented, SASA! Facilitates discussions on power and gender norms that have resulted in effective change in the practice of intimate partner violence (Abramsky et al., 2014). A similar approach is used by the Tipping Point Project, that works in Bangladesh and Nepal to motivate individuals to become actors of change in the larger community (CARE, 2015; Karim, Greene, & Picard, 2016).

A norm existed among Muslim Musgum that girls shouldn’t wait too long to get married, otherwise they will age out of the marriage market, whereas the Christian Musgum believe it is better to wait until a girl is more mature. A social norms intervention should be very careful to frame the message to reach out to both Christian and Muslim Musgum to avoid the “out-group effect” (Cislaghi, Manji, & Heise, 2018). The out-group effect takes place when a specific group of people are exposed to a normative message portraying people from a different group. For instance, a no-smoking campaign depicting upper class white men might alienate working class black women who could possibly increase smoking to differentiate themselves from others with whom they don’t want to be associated. Muslim members of the Musgum village might perceive that later marriage is a ‘Christian’ practice and increase their support for child marriage in response. An intervention should thus be careful to work with local religious authorities to change the child marriage norm, for instance having Muslim religious leaders giving arguments in favour of later marriage and making them aware of other Muslim people (ideally Musgum) from Cameroon who practice later marriage. Insights of how this can be done have begun to emerge in the child marriage literature. Walker (2015) conducted a review of programmes that worked with faith leaders to end child marriage. Her conclusion suggests that leadership training workshops with faith leaders can provide them with the skills to engage publicly against child marriage. However, she cautions that, even when faith leaders recognise child marriage as a problem, their actions might be limited by the norms existing at community level. When people of different faiths are residing within the same community, such as with the Musgum, faith leaders should be carefully trained to work directly within their own subgroups in ways that relate to the religious and cultural sensitivities of that group without exacerbating group differences in ways that could incite negativity.

Finally, Maka participants held attitudes against child marriage but reported the practice as widespread in their communities. Without further ethnographic understanding, practitioners might assume that child marriage in the community continued because of the existence of a social norm supporting it. That is, one might think that people privately disapproved of it without knowing that many others disapproved it too. In this case however, our data revealed a different set of factors that explain the divergence between local attitudes and practices. Adult community members disapproved of early marriage but felt incapable of controlling the decisions made by the girls in their communities. While adults’ attitudes were against the prevalent practice, injunctive social norms among the parents were not strong enough to counteract the (child-led) practice. Efforts to curb child marriage in similar settings, where parents disapprove of the practice and yet child-led marriage continues, would need to investigate further why girls are independently opting to marry early despite the general attitude of disapproval that pervades their community. Such interventions would also need to carefully navigate an approach that might increase support for parental oversight and authority, while not creating a context in which girls lose all agency over their life trajectories. As our and other recent findings suggest (Boyden, Pankhurst, & Tafere, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2016; Taylor, Horn, Vaitla, Valle, & Cislaghi, 2019; UNICEF, 2015b), a nuanced understanding of girls’ role in child marriage would help uncover the factors contributing to the practice and in the design of effective interventions. These factors might include the fact that girls might marry to try to obtain status among their peers (Vaitla et al., 2017) or escape abusive situations at home (Taylor et al., 2019).

Data from these four cases point to the importance for social norms interventions to integrate a contextual understanding of how a practice is or is not sustained by people’s individual attitudes. Interventions that deliver information to individuals (for instance about the dangerous consequences of child marriage) can fail because of normative influence; that is, people might still comply with what they think is common or expected of them in their social group, the persuasiveness and accuracy of the information delivered notwithstanding. What is more, assumptions about the reasons for discordance between practices and attitudes might be misleading. Our data suggest that interventions that aim to help adolescents decide for themselves when and to whom to get married, especially in contexts in which girls have limited opportunities, might not necessarily achieve reductions in child marriage. Girls might want to accelerate the marriage process, aspiring to achieve psychological, social or material goals through it.

Our findings call for a deep understanding of the context when planning social norms interventions to facilitate reduction in child marriage, particularly with regard to the relation between people’s attitudes and their practices. These findings invite practitioners and researchers alike to both make sense of the practice as embedded in the local socio-cultural context, and devise strategies that fully take that context into account.

# Conclusion

In this paper we reported a qualitative study of child marriage practices in four villages in rural Cameroon. Specifically, we conducted focus groups with people living in four rural villages in the Far-North and East regions of Cameroon. We asked them both what they thought to be the typical age at marriage for girls in their village, and whether they approved of that age or not. We found four different relations between the typical age at marriage and people’s attitudes towards it. Looking at each of these relations, we drew four implications for social norms interventions addressing child marriage.

First, when attitudes and practices are both protective (as in the case of Mafa participants), social norms interventions can develop the perception of and strengthen injunctive norms against child marriage. Social norms marketing approaches that publicise the prevalence of attitudes against the practice could be of assistance here (Paluck & Ball, 2010; Tankard & Paluck, 2016). We mentioned the work of Population Foundation India as an example. The charity Girls Not Brides, a global alliance to end child marriage, has recently published a global review on the social norms marketing strategies that are used in child marriage interventions that can be helpful as practitioners design such interventions (Bouman, Sarah Lubjuhn, & Hollemans, 2017). Second, when attitudes and practices are both harmful (as in the case of Mbororo participants), social norms interventions can facilitate change in the attitudes of a core group of participants and motivate them to reach out to others in their communities. The SASA! and Tipping point projects we mentioned offer good models of how this can be achieved, but other models exist in the literature, as, for instance, the Tostan project (Bajaj et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2019). Third, when multiple cultural groups exist in one area (as in the case of Musgum participants), social norms interventions should be designed to be culturally compatible with the group that the intervention wants to help abandon the practice, to avoid out-group effects that might entrench them further in the practice. The examples of interventions mentioned above, then, would need to frame their content in the right language and within the correct set of social, cultural, and religions values. Fourth, when attitudes and practices diverge – for instance when the practice is harmful and attitudes are protective (as in the case of Maka participants) – social norms interventions should be grounded within a deep understanding of what is motivating that divergence. In our case study, parents’ attitudes were protective, but they had little power to shape injunctive norms influencing girls’ actions. These findings call for a deep understanding of the context in which child marriage practices unfold. Understanding the socio-ecological niche is critical to design effective interventions. Social norms theory can help expand existing understandings of how attitudes and norms can intersect in affecting people’s compliance with existing harmful practices such as child marriage. As we mentioned in the introduction, child marriage is sustained by a variety of interlocking material, institutional, social and individual factors, none of which alone is driving the practice. Our paper specifically looks at how sociocultural factors contribute to CM and the importance of investigating the relation between people’s attitudes and social norms. Understanding divergence or convergence between people’s attitudes and norms (and the reasons for divergence specifically) has the potential to increase intervention effectiveness, ultimately helping reducing rates of child marriage by tackling the norms that sustain it.

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# Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests. We published another paper from the same dataset, also on social norms and child marriage, but using different data in the set and for a different purpose (Cislaghi et al., 2019).

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# Availability of data and material

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the agreement with the funding agency but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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