

Early Child Marriage in Somalia: Is it a Challenged Social Norm?*

Background

Somalia is among the highest gender unequal countries in the world but has the highest data gaps to reflect recent changes. Child marriage is among the extreme forms of violation of child rights affecting adolescent girls. The ongoing humanitarian crisis has exacerbated poverty, insecurity and access to education, factors which drive child marriage. Recent figures, however, show decline in the prevalence of child marriage. Percentage of girls aged 15-19 years who have ever been married in the country have declined from 25 in 2006 to around 10 in 2016. The south and central parts of the country still registers relatively higher prevalence of child marriage. Despite of this silent progress made, there is minimal documentation actual dynamics of this change. This research explores perception and practices of early and child marriage.

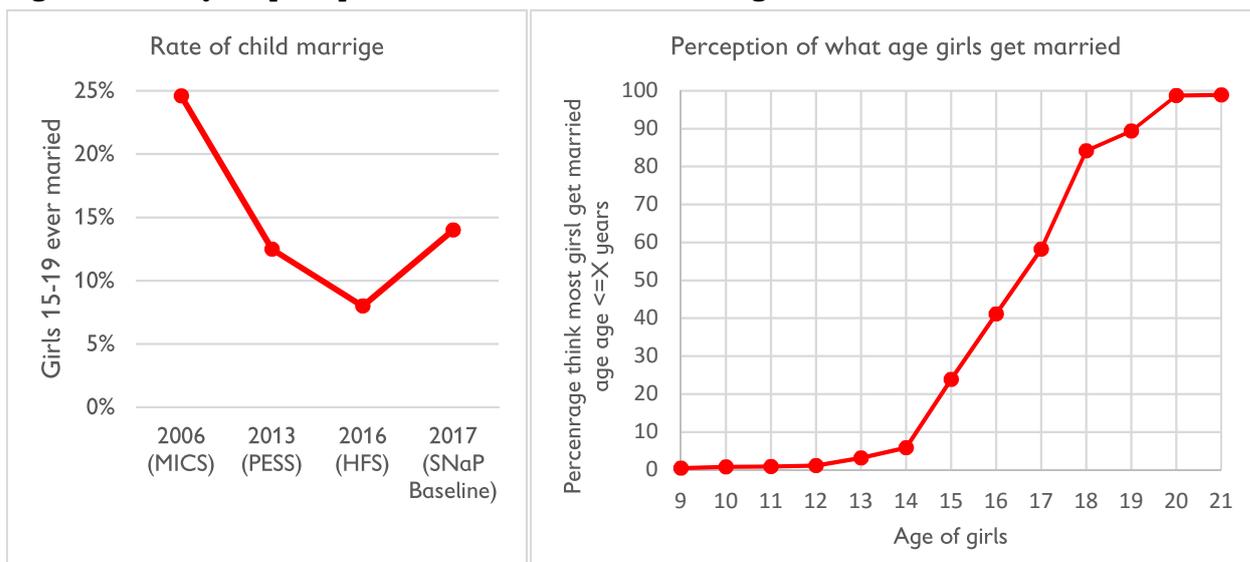
Data and methodology

This factsheet presents findings from the baseline survey for the SNaP project conducted in Feb-Mar of 2017. The survey covered 2581 respondents: 430 community leaders, 1118 female and 1033 male adults sampled from 55 communities in 11 districts of Somalia. Each community was divided in to two artificial clusters: the intervention and comparison. From each cluster, 10 male and 10 female respondents were randomly sampled who were then asked to name “opinion leaders” in their respective communities. The five most frequently cited individuals in each cluster were targeted for interviewing as opinion leaders.

Findings

As shown in Figure 1, over the years there has been a remarkable decline in rates of early child marriage among adolescent girls. Similar to recent surveys, results in this study show a current prevalence rate of 14%¹. When we look at the 55 communities considered in this study, we notice very few of the communities have prevalence more than 20% (Figure 2), which indicates the observed reduction is not driven by most communities being located either at very high and very low child marriage rates. We, however, find child marriage is more prevalent in south and central regions of the country. These parts of the country have consistently witnessed prolonged humanitarian crisis compared to other parts of the country, thus increasing vulnerability to early marriage. Poverty rate is also higher in these southern regions (89%) compared to northern regions (72% - 75%). Despite the general decline, majority of the community members do not seem to notice this phenomenon as about 60% of the respondents think majority of the girls in their communities actually get married by 17.

Figure 1: Reality vs. perceptions of the rate of child marriage



* This Fact Sheet is based on a baseline report for evaluating SNaP project. We thank all the relevant team members of the consortium partners (International Rescue Committee, Care International and Save the Children) for their active supports in data collection and analysis. The SNaP project is supported by UKAID and Norwegian Embassy.

¹ This baseline survey is not representative estimate for the country but only reflects project sites in 11 districts. The other data sources are Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Population Estimation Survey in Somalia (PESS) and High Frequency Survey (HFS).

The mismatch between actual low rates and perceived high rate of child marriage is sometimes attributed to the major rural to urban migrations and continued decline in child marriage rates over the years. Rural communities still hold on to the same notion of ideal (early) age of marriage even after moving to urban areas. Therefore, we would expect these immigrants to conform to urban area practices but not letting go their ideals. Results, however, show similar rates of early marriage in rural and urban communities and thus do not conform to this hypothesis. On the other hand, with declining rates of child marriage rates, it implies young adolescents have other young adults as role models who did not get married early thus reducing social costs in not adhering to the ideal behaviour.

Figure 2: Child marriage by district and type of community

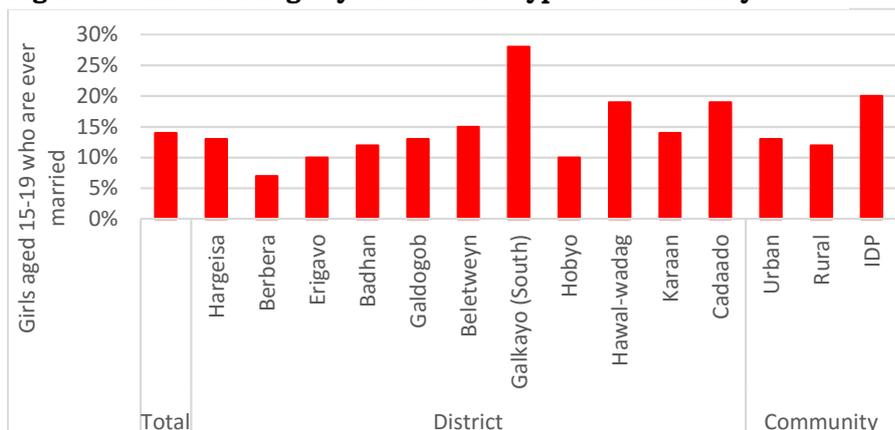
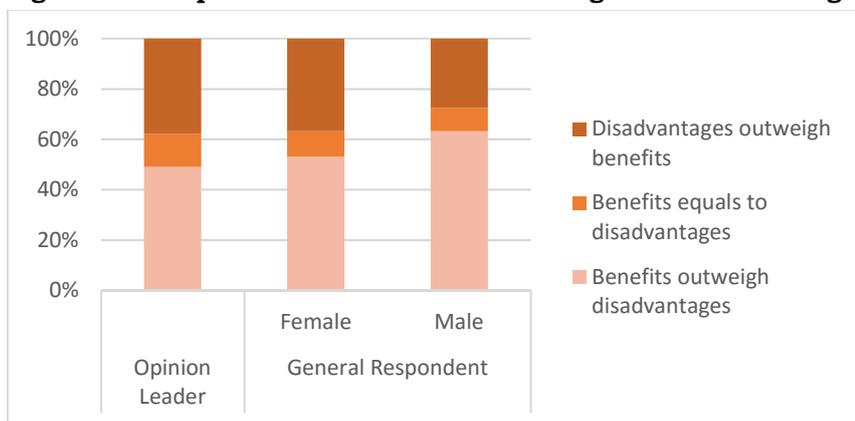


Figure 3: Perception of Benefits vs Disadvantages of Child Marriage



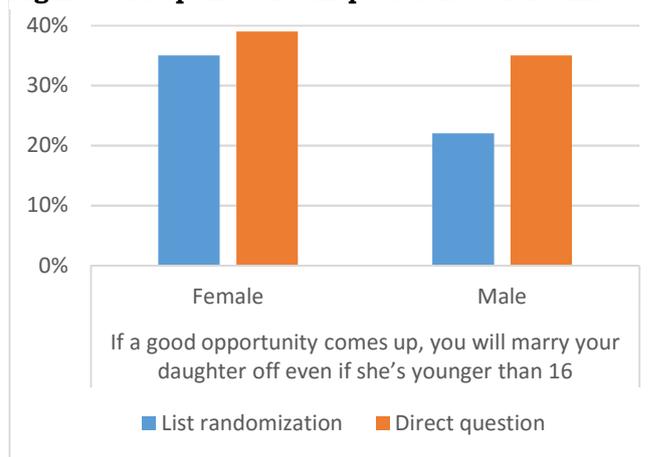
Although 36% of the respondents were aware of legal aspects of child marriage, only around 25% of reported an age less than 18 years as ideal age for girls to be married off. Most of the respondents cited “producing children early” and chastity as top most advantages of child marriage while health complications and school dropout were the most cited disadvantages of child marriage. Majority of the respondents put more emphasis on the benefits of early marriage than

the disadvantages, especially male respondent group (Figure 3).

Social Desirability Bias in Responses

In order to ascertain the level of potential bias in preference questions, we used randomized list method where respondents are provided with a number of items and are asked to report the number of items from the list that are true for them. The respondents randomly divided into two groups whereby group one received control items and sensitive question were added for the second group. Results show male respondents are significantly more likely to over report their willingness to marry off their daughters before attaining maturity age when asked directly (Figure 4). Only a 4-percentage point variation was noted among female respondents indicating low response bias by female respondents.

Figure 4: Response bias in preferences for Child



In conclusion, there is perception of early marriage being the social norm although the practice is substantially lower. This questions the general understanding of social norms influencing behaviour. We suggest a further research to explore the drivers behind the “silent progress” in reducing child marriage.