



A Theoretical Framework for Social Norms in Child Marriage: Parents' Lived Experience in Decision-Making in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

A theoretical and conceptual framework is presented detailing the relationship between injunctive norm(s) and the decision-making process associated with child marriage based on Parents' Lived Experience. The practice of child marriage is internationally recognized as pervasive abuse and a violation of child and human rights that significantly compromises maternal and child health; the question of how and why parents make decisions regarding child marriage is modeled to provide an understanding of the phenomena based on societal social norms and values. The elucidation of the phenomena has been dominated by an exposition of the harmful effects of this practice on young girls, their families, and society, as well as the issues of economic survival, including poverty and inequality. The study examines numerous factors that contribute to and promote the practice of child marriage, such as peer pressure, sanction, and exclusion, including the use of force. The study concludes that the phenomena of child marriage are driven by societal social injunctive norms and values inherent in traditions and cultures underlined by a parental desire to gain acceptability. The continued practice of child marriage highlights a significant disconnect between communities practicing child marriage, international and national agencies, and human rights organizations and highlights the limitations in understanding the phenomenon. The model predicts child marriage relies on the parents' egocentric, projected, or benevolent behaviors and is only delayed in the case of simulated behaviors. The resulting harmful effects of child marriage and potential benefits are also described.

INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a global public health problem and a widespread harmful practice that affects enormous numbers of adolescent girls (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2013) with dire consequences, including a high prevalence of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality (Petroni, Das, & Sawyer, 2019; Raj & Boehmer, 2013; Raj et al., 2018; Tenkorang, 2019). Researchers have made substantial efforts to understand child marriage with a focus on curbing and preventing the practice (Bicchieri et al., 2014; Raj et al., 2018). The widely accepted definition of early or child marriage is a marriage with a female under the age of 18 years before she is physically, psychologically, and physiologically ready for the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing (Perlman et al., 2016; Walker, 2012). Adedokun, Adeyemi, and Dauda (2016) studied child brides in Northeastern Nigeria, the population of interest for this research. They argued that these child brides are exposed to domestic violence, forced sexual acts, marital violence, and intimate partner violence (IPV). Tenkorang (2019) explained the links between child marriage and IPV and argued that education, self-efficacy, and skills are needed to circumvent patriarchal norms that threaten the security and well-being of young girls.

The practice of child marriage is internationally recognized as pervasive abuse and a violation of child and human rights that significantly compromises maternal and child health

(Raj et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2017). Universally, the teenage and early adolescence are critical for girls, and what takes place at this stage shapes their future life circumstances. Marriage is central to any discussion concerning the sexual and reproductive health of adolescent girls in many patriarchal societies in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (Montezeri et al., 2016). An interplay exists between religion, culture, and gender as they relate to marriage, and the universal valuation of marriage is backed by taboos and religious sanctions against premarital and extramarital sexual relations (Montezeri et al., 2016; Wangila, 2015).

BACKGROUND

Experts have described child marriage as a persistent health and human rights violation that affects approximately 700 million girls worldwide and translates into an intergenerational health and social crisis (Agege et al., 2018; Raj et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2018). In Nigeria, child marriage is most prevalent in the predominantly Muslim northeastern region, which has been identified as having one of the highest rates in the world: between 36% and 76% of the female population is married before the age of 18 years (Adedokun et al., 2016). Boko Haram, a militant social group, has ravaged the region, exploiting poverty and campaigning against Western education (Adedokun et al., 2016; Comolli, 2017; Mates, 2017). Researchers contended the phenomenon is deeply entrenched in tradition and concluded that reasons

for child marriage rely on a mix of cultural, social, economic, and religious factors, with poverty as the core driver in the region. The study by Adedokun et al. (2016) is vital to this research because of the common geographical location with the same population of interest and the associated emphasis on maternal health risks among adolescent girls. Other authors described strategies to end child marriage in the study area. They recommended mass and compulsory education of girls concerning options to early marriage and childbearing and increased involvement of parents in curbing the phenomena (Perlman & Adamu, 2017).

Numerous in-depth studies have described the association between child marriage and lower wealth, education levels, and labor force participation in Nigeria (Wodon, Onagoruwa, Savadogo, & Yedan, 2017). These are, however, only correlations and not necessarily causal effects. Perlman and Adamu (2017) identified customs, gender discrimination, ignorance, peer group influence, and unexpected pregnancy as contributing factors, but the extent to which these affect different communities is not clear. The various traditional, cultural, religious, and economic factors that influence child marriage practices in the region are complex (Adedokun et al., 2016; Perlman et al., 2017; Walker, 2017). The influence of parents, friends, families, and community leaders are considered the most influential factors in the practice of child marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa. Wodon et al. (2017) argued that it is not simply a matter of belief that there is a right age for marriage, as parents are motivated to marry off their children young to protect them or to escape poverty. It is also essential for parents to protect the sexual virtue of their daughters, especially in a culture that forbids premarital sex (Perlman et al., 2016). These contributions highlighted the role of parents and near relatives in influencing the practice of child marriage and contended that most marriages are prearranged (Association for Reproductive & Family Health [ARFH], 2018; Perlman & Adamu, 2017; Perlman et al., 2016).

Several empirical and theoretical studies on child marriage have presented theories about the origin and increasing persistence of child marriage; however, this has resulted in too many explanations that lack academic rigor (Bicchieri et al., 2014). Another gap identified in the literature is the lack of comprehensive studies that track the health of child brides during the decision-making process and afterward in their marital homes. This work provides an example of patriarchal societies, such as Northeastern Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, where parents are the primary decision-makers, and the girls have little or no role in the decision-making processes (Perlman et al., 2017). The central research objective in this study was to understand the role of health in the parental decision-making process by exploring the social and cultural norms that perpetuate child marriage practices (Bicchieri et al., 2014; Veen et al., 2018). Increased understanding of the role of the child bride's health and social and injunctive norms in child marriage practices in these communities

would provide useful details required in the design of social and health interventions by policymakers and practitioners. Knowledge of the decision-making process would also provide the necessary background for raising awareness within the community of the harmful effects of child marriage. Moreover, such knowledge could provide avenues for challenging unequal gender norms and supporting social action against child marriage in favor of children's rights in the community. These data would also help identify the perceived incentives that may be perpetuating the practice and why the practice makes sense to communities that engage in child marriage. Currently, it is unclear what factors motivate and influence parents to marry off their underage children and to ignore the immense harm child marriage may cause. Further, the role of the bride's health in the decision-making process is unknown. These factors may, in part, be the reasons why the practice of child marriage continues to be prevalent regardless of the numerous social and health interventions. A major behavioral transformation is required to change the community's attitudes toward child marriage and bring about a positive social change by preventing child marriage.

SOCIAL NORMS AROUND CHILD MARRIAGE

An in-depth understanding of social norms and the perceived value of child marriage in the target community is necessary for determining how the parental decision is reached. Child marriage is a highly valued tradition and has a special significance with origins in the community's cultural heritage as passed down through generations. The acceptable marital age of a girl in the community ranges but is generally accepted as less than 15 years of age. In practice, the girl is determined to be ready for marriage at the onset of puberty, between 10 and 12 years of age (Perlman & Adamu, 2017). Premarital engagements are reached much earlier in a few very specific cases. It is permissible for parents to give their daughter a hand in marriage even when she is not fully grown, albeit such marriages are typically not consummated, and the girl remains at home with her parents until she reaches puberty. Child marriage is used to prevent girls from having sexual relations and possible pregnancies before marriage to preserve family honor. Girls who refuse marriage are thought of as promiscuous (Veen et al., 2018). Protecting the girl and her family's identity and morality before she engages in immoral behavior is important in the community. It is perceived that child marriage is most beneficial to the girl and is needed to ensure her safety in the community. Child marriage practices are rooted in tradition, and virtually everyone in the community would go through the practice as handed from fathers and ancestors. The practice of child marriage is perpetuated and defended by community members through tradition, culture, religion, or superstition (Watson, 2014).

In the Hausa-Fulani ethnic communities, traditions and culture form the basis of strong social norms that are not

to be questioned or compromised. The practice of child marriage in the community is not perceived or identified as a form of violence against girls in contrast to the views held by national and international human rights treaties and agreements for which Nigeria is a signatory (African Union, 2005; Perlman et al., 2017). Child marriage is an important traditional practice that has withstood time and history and is treasured in these male-dominated communities as a tradition and a belief passed down through successive generations. Over time, there has not been a significant shift in the child marriage tradition and practice. As a tradition, the institution of marriage is highly valued for ensuring instrumental family cohesion, building extensive relationships in the community, and promoting bonding and continuity. Members of the communities and their families hold on to these local traditions to uphold their image and protect their place and that of their families in the community. The tradition of child marriage is maintained because culture demands it, and refusing to follow the traditional norms may bring about sanctions and be perceived as the spoiling of a culture.

Injunctive social norms underpin child marriage practice in the community; these norms serve as rules of behavior that people in the communities adhere to because they believe they are expected to and that others do so as well. Alexander-Scott, Bell, and Holden (2016) and Haylock (2016) discussed social norms as a rule of behavior that people in a group adhere to because they believe the majority in the group act according to the rule and that most other people in the group believe they ought to behave accordingly. The majority group, reference group, or reference persons are terms used to refer to people whose opinions matter to a person and influence their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior (Alexander-Scott et al., 2016). These are close and extended family relations and community and religious leaders in Northeastern Nigeria. These groups intend for their rules of behavior to be protective, and families that comply with these injunctive social norms can gain status by being seen as respectable, admirable, and honorable. The accepted perception is that a woman's role is predetermined and relegated to the household to serve her family: the social norm is to get married and be a good wife and mother. Four injunctive social norms perpetuate child marriage practice in the community: a respectable woman marries early, a respectable woman is submissive to male authority, a suitable woman is not promiscuous, and a woman is worth more as a wife than as a daughter (Veen et al., 2018). Individuals within the community perceive these norms to be approved by the community, and anyone who transgresses these injunctive norms will be subjected to sanctions by their reference group, including violence (Alexander-Scott et al., 2016). Four main consequences (peer pressure, sanctions, exclusion, and force) vary among communities and are described below (Veen et al., 2018).

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure comes mainly from family and extended families who pressure the girls into early marriage. Peer pressure that results from breaking injunctive norms based on tradition or cultural practice can be significantly severe. In response, girls may run away or be moved to other cities by supportive parents to evade the practice.

Sanctions

Condemnation is the most common sanction affecting the girl and her mother: the girl is seen as indecent and promiscuous and the mother is seen as promiscuous, stubborn, and evil. For child marriage, people will condemn the girl first, which later may also damage a family's honor. If her rejection becomes known, the girl will be demoralized, insulted, rejected, and laughed at by her peers and the broader community.

Exclusion

The exclusion of girls and mothers refusing to participate in the act of child marriage results in the condemnation of community members. The community then isolates girls who break such important social norms—their peers will refuse to associate with them and others will ignore them.

Use of Force

Force is rarely used in the community as a girl does not act contrary to parental decisions. However, isolated cases have been reported in Nigeria of killings or suicides over refusing early marriage (Morineke, 2010). Occasionally, individuals can opt to internalize potential social sanctions, which affect their self-esteem and feelings of acceptability in the community. Everyone in the community seeks to maintain the proper name of their family by being well-mannered and securing a good marriage before getting too old. The status and honor of the family are at stake, and it would be inconceivable for parents to have a girl stay unmarried up to 15 to 16 years of age.

The situation for boys is different; whereas girls are groomed and destined for marriage and motherhood from an early age, boys mature when they can support their families. The social norm specifies that it is a mistake to marry off boys at a young age, as they need to be mature enough to support a household.

Injunctive social norms and the corresponding rules of behavior are not static: over time, they are negotiated continuously within families, communities, and towns. Families influence social norms on traditional practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, with friends, community traditions, and religious leaders as active players. Social norms can either facilitate or prevent individual changes in attitude and behavior and might result in positive social change. However, changes in individual attitudes and behaviors can impact social norms. The change in social norms can also affect and influence family decision-making positively or negatively. This is a socially conservative and

religious way of thinking, for which traditional practices are sustained over time with minimal or no shift, even as several cases of rebellion on these beliefs arise. Contemporary views are perceived as a misunderstanding and or misrepresentation of the cultural beliefs in the community. Child marriage remains prevalent, driven by sociocultural and economic forces that influence the norms and practices of parents and children.

In this parochial society, other associated factors, such as gender roles, relations, and expectations, within marriage remain rigid and are prescribed by discriminatory norms guiding behaviors and deep-seated notions of honor and shame, both of which contribute to stigmatize social norms around gender and ideals of masculinity and femininity (Watson, 2014). In this community, the role of the mother is to educate her daughter by teaching the accepted values and reinforcing social norms, including applicable sanctions. The mother is expected to serve as a loyal wife and support her husband as the head of the household, backing any decisions regarding their underage daughter's marriage.

SOCIAL NORMS AND THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Social values theory (SVT) proposes that decision-making for others is based on the social value placed on the action, leading to a norm for how to decide for others (Dore et al., 2014). This contrasts with self-decision, which is influenced by several additional factors. Consistent with risk-aversion norms, parents make more risk-averse decisions for their adolescent children than for themselves. Figure 1 illustrates the mechanism of decision-making proposed by SVT (Dore et al., 2014): the social values underline the process, or the norm referred to as an injunctive norm and the decision-making process. The surrogate decision-making process for self and others or self-other after Tunney and Ziegler (2015) was utilized to explain the parental risk preferences.

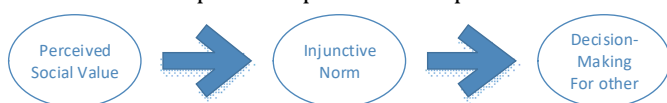


Figure 1. Mechanism for decision-making in social values theory.

The other elements of SVT are the perceived social norms and the decision-making processes that combine with the perceived social value to determine parental decision-making. SVT combined with a surrogate decision-making model (Tunney & Ziegler, 2015) further accounted for the parental decision-making process and the associated risks. The research questions were centered on whether the parental decisions are in the child's best interest, such as the girl's health and well-being, under a benevolent perspective. The model attempts to conceptualize parental decision-making concerning child marriage. For example, would the parents have done the same for themselves if they were the recipients or the ones to be married at this early age?

Similarly, the projected perspective of the model attempted to simulate what the child would choose given a choice to marry or not or the simulated perspective. The parents may also make a decision that serves their interests irrespective of the wishes of the underage child or egocentric perspectives in the decision-making process. Parental attitudes toward the institution and practice of child marriage are determined by the risk preferences involved (Batteux et al., 2017). Risk preferences are attenuated when parents make surrogate decisions for their children in the practice of child marriage; parents take more risk for their children than they would take for themselves. Community religious leaders were not incorporated into this research because of the limited scope of the research; however, the important role they play in conducting the marriage rituals was acknowledged. These leaders also served as the reference group that might administer sanctions when parents failed to conform to the accepted social norms prevalent in the community.

This concept supports the assertion that subjective risk is attenuated in surrogate decision-making processes, as the level of risk and inconveniences affects self-decision-making more than decisions for one's child and underpins the theoretical background for risk-averse surrogate decision-making (Batteux et al., 2017; Dore et al., 2014). In this study, I investigated whether the parental decision-making process is conducted in the child's interest by considering the child's health and identifying the risk factors that influence decision-making processes. SVT postulates that norms play an essential role in decision-making processes. Dore et al.'s (2014) analysis of the parental decision-making process suggested two distinct mechanisms by which norms could influence decision-making for self and others. The authors examined how parents' decisions are influenced by a decision-making norm and how this norm differs for self-decisions versus decisions for one's child. They showed that stronger risk aversion in decisions for one's child rather than for oneself could be explained by the influence of a stronger relationship between the norm and decision when deciding for one's child over oneself.

Norms play a stronger role in decisions, making the process for one's child more significant when looking at the effects of inconvenience and risk in decisions for oneself. SVT suggests that norms have a smaller effect on self-decisions and other factors can play a role independently without impacting the decision (Dore et al., 2014). The analysis implies that parents make more risk-averse decisions for their adolescent children than they would for themselves and that their self-decisions were influenced to a greater extent by the level of inconvenience and risk in the decision situations were commensurate with the decisions made for their children (Dore et al., 2014). These effects occurred partly due to a stronger norm to make risk-averse decisions for one's child than for oneself and a stronger relationship between the decision norm and the resultant decision when deciding for one's child versus oneself.

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Figure 2 shows two potential mechanisms by which norms could work when making decisions for the self and decisions for others. It depicts that there could be a stronger norm when the decision is made for the child than for the self (link A). Alternatively, regardless of the level of strength of the norm for the two decisions, a stronger relationship could exist between the norm and the resulting decision in the child condition than in the self-condition (link B; Dore et al., 2014). Furthermore, the evidence could support the existence of both links A and B; perhaps the norm is stronger for the child than for the self, and the relationship between the norm and the decision is stronger for the child than for the self. The same explanation would hold for the interaction between a decision target and the factors of inconvenience and risk. These results are consistent with SVT, which states that decisions for others will be based predominantly on socially valued factors (Stone et al., 2013).

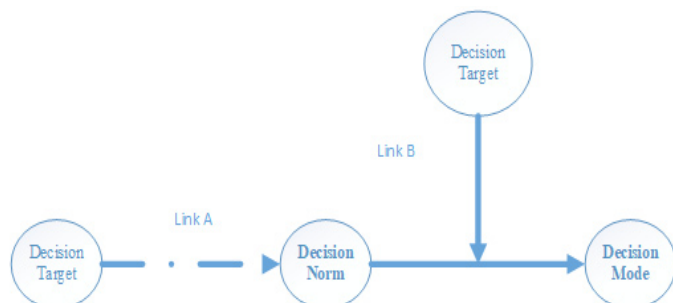


Figure 2. Two potential mechanisms by which norms can work in decision-making for self and others (Dore et al., 2014).

SVT further postulates that the self-decision-making process is based on additional nonvalued factors, such as the level of inconvenience that would be unexpected to influence the decision norm (Stone & Allgaier, 2008). Furthermore, additional nonvalued factors could significantly impact self-decisions more than decisions for one's child. The strong link between the norm and resulting decisions for one's child rather than for oneself suggests that parents' decisions for adolescent children are influenced more by the norm than are their decisions for themselves. Self-decisions are influenced more by other supplementary nonvalued factors, providing support for a basic tenet of SVT. Decisions for others are based more on perceptions of social norms than self-decisions. Parental decision-making for adolescent children entails greater responsibility for the decision-maker.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The previous section described the perceived value and norms around child marriage and the relationship with parental decision-making in the target community. Next, a theoretical and conceptual framework detailing the theoretical relationship between injunctive norm(s) and the decision-making process associated with child marriage is presented. SVT underpins the theoretical framework for parental decision-making regarding marrying their children at an early age. First, SVT expediently explains the immediate

question of whether decisions people make for other people differ from those they would make for themselves in cases involving risk aversion, such as those involved with child marriage. SVT further explains why parental decision-making relies on the dominant factors when making marital decisions underscoring the significance of the perceived value of child marriage in the community. These factors are interrelated with injunctive norms that are socially sanctioned by society and consistent with established explanations for the causes of child marriage.

The perceived value of child marriage is significant in the community and is backed by tradition and cultural beliefs as being pivotal to the existence of the extended family; it is an instrument used in creating relationships and promoting family bonding within the community. Child marriage is an acceptable institution and is practiced through generations in the target community. The parent's choice to marry off their underage children is not entirely self-regarding as perceived by outsiders, even as most literature reviews on the subject have pointed out that adolescent girls are voiceless and have no autonomy (McDougal et al., 2018; Perlman et al., 2017; Veen et al., 2018). From the parents' perspectives, they want to have what is best for their children, including getting good husbands and being good wives and mothers.

Bicchieri (2006) defined social norms in the context of social expectations of child marriage as a collective practice sustained by empirical and normative expectations. The author further explained that not all social expectations matter for social norms. For example, parental decisions to marry off underage children are conditional on their expectations about what others do and think. In this regard, parents do not care about what people do or think in other villages or other countries, as they are only concerned and influenced by what particular people think as part of their reference group. The reference group in a town or village might consist of other parents, elders, and community leaders. Although not everyone in the reference group may condone and accept child marriage practice as a behavior, the practice is driven by conformity sanctioned by the majority in the reference group and as the rule to behave in a certain way (Bicchieri et al., 2014). An illustration of the social norm concept is shown in Figure 3.

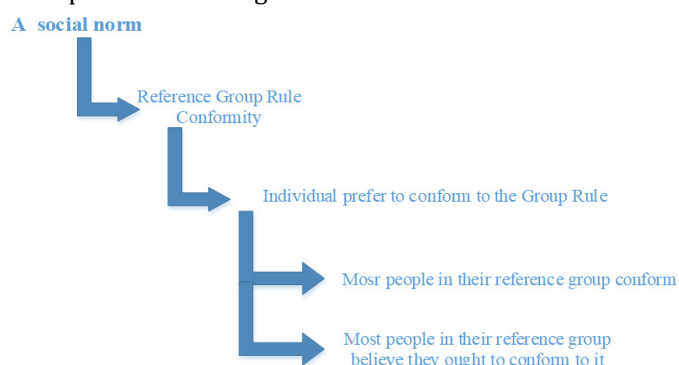


Figure 3. Illustration of the concept of a social norm (Bicchieri, 2006).

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SVT accentuates the importance of social value in the form of social expectations to the existence of norms, which indicates that behaviors as cultural beliefs are interrelated. Social norms and beliefs define what behavior is acceptable and what is not in a society or a group (Bicchieri, 2006). Parental decision-making is generally influenced by social expectations prescribed by families, friends, and the community (Bicchieri, 2006; Bicchieri et al., 2014). Similarly, McDougal et al. (2018) explained that many individuals and social influences are involved in the marital decision-making process. Child marriage behavior includes a combination of several individual behaviors that need full comprehension to appreciate why parents make such suboptimal decisions. Notably, parents may be ignorant of or underestimate the risks and the harm child marriage might cause.

To understand and appreciate parental decisions to marry off their underage children, one needs to know what the parents are doing and thinking and what factors are influencing such behaviors. Figure 4 shows that this practice is sustained by many individuals (actors) and different things (behaviors) that influence child marriage, for example, family, friends, the community, community and traditional leaders who pressure parents directly or indirectly. The actors in red font constitute the reference groups in the community consisting mainly of one's community and family. Pressures are exerted by the reference group; for example, extended family members might initiate or arrange the marriage by selecting potential suitors. Other pressures might be in the form of gossip and direct influences within the community. The primary influence arises when parents intend a forceful arranged marriage in which the girl must obey the parental arrangements between the groom's and the bride's parents within the community.

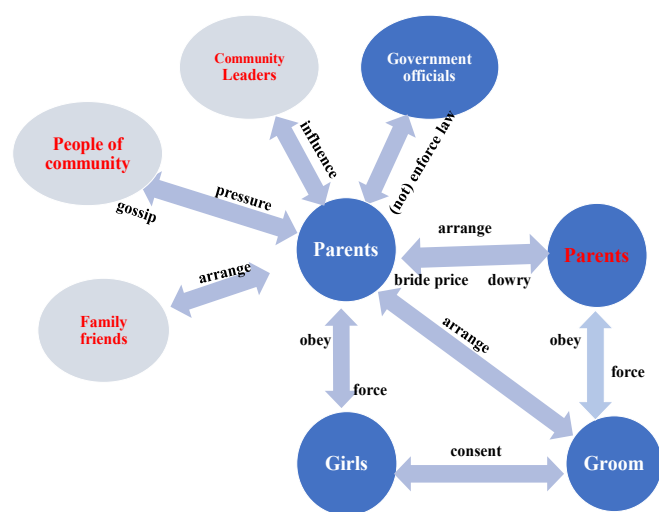


Figure 4. Different people (actors) doing different things (behaviors) that have an impact on child marriage (the practice). The actors in red constitute the reference group of the parents (Bicchieri et al., 2014).

The straightforward case is the 'Romeo and Juliet' scenario with consensual approval between the girl and the groom. It

appears that different factors could have a different impact on the practice of child marriage (Bicchieri et al., 2014). The social norms caused by individuals drive these factors; family and community interactions are responsible for sustaining the practice of child marriage in the community (Bicchieri et al., 2014).

Parental decision-making for marrying off underage children can be analogous with other everyday decisions made on behalf of others or surrogate decision-making. Tunney and Ziegler (2015) explained the outcome of the surrogate decision-making process is one that would impact another person. Surrogate decision-making is often used for people who are unable to make informed decisions for themselves, as in the case of child marriage. Based on this assertion, parental decisions to marry off their underage children can be modeled into four main categories based on intent: benevolent, egocentric, simulated, and projected. The outcomes of the decisions are determined by the differences in the intention and ability of the parents to meet the perceived wishes and aspirations of the child. Examples of wishes and aspirations of girls may include avoiding the risks associated with child marriage, marrying at an older age, and preventing the associated health consequences. Based on the contributions from Tunney and Ziegler (2015), a model (Figure 4) was drawn to predict the parental decision-making process qualitatively.

Benevolent

Parental decision-making can be selfless or other-regarding. This type of decision results in one based on what the parents think is best for the child irrespective of the aspirations, goals, or desires of the child. The focus here is on *what the parents should do*. The judgment is based on an appraisal of the utility of the outcomes based on the situation; since the decision is not intended to match the child's wishes and desires, any match is incidental as not preplanned. In this regard, the benevolent decision reached can be an error regarding intent but not the outcome; for example, parental decisions can coincidentally align with the child or become flawed in both intent and outcome when the option is chosen in contrast the child's best interests.

Egocentric

Parents can be perceived as selfish and egocentric when they fail to meet the child's expected aspirations and goals of well-being. The focus here is on *what is wanted by the parent*. The decision to marry off the child would maximize parents' wishes and desires as entirely self-regarding, rather than the child's perceived aspirational goals. Decisions occur because the decision-maker, the parent, is inherently selfish and unable to see other perspectives or is ill-informed about the numerous risks and health consequences associated with child marriage. This type of decision happens when, for example, a parental decision to marry off a minor is made to overcome socioeconomic problems, such as poverty, or bring to achieve honor in the community or material gains.

Simulated

Parents can attempt to model the goals and aspirations desired by the child, or what is best for the child, by targeting the decision outcomes to match that of the child. The focus here is on *what would the child do?* Such decision-making assumes a normative model, which is an others-regarding decision-making option, making the parental preferences align with that of the child. Simulated surrogate decision-making is useful and can influence parental decision-making by modifying and changing prevailing norms to help prevent and curb child marriage, thereby achieving the desired positive social change in society by marrying at an older age.

Projected

The projected parental decision is based on what the parents would do or prefer if they were in the child's position. The focus here is on *what would the parent do?* Although the surrogate's intentions might be good concerning the normative expectation, their judgment is based on their utility functions or goals. The decision-maker, or the parent, is assuming similarity with the recipient's (child) utility function or goals. The decision-maker is cognitively capable of a first-order simulation of what they would prefer in a hypothetical scenario but fails to construct a second-order simulation of what another person might do. As is the case with simulation, the accuracy of the projected surrogate decision is the extent to which it matches that of the recipient.

Figure 5 shows the schematic representation of the SVT conceptual framework. SVT forms the primary construct on the perceived social norm and suggests that parental decision-making relies on the social norm, in this case, conformity with the reference group behavior rules or belief in acting according to what the reference group accepts as a norm. Bacchieri et al. (2014) argued the sensitivity of parents to the reference group, determined by the lack of agency or individual autonomy for parents, ensures group rule and fear of community sanctions.

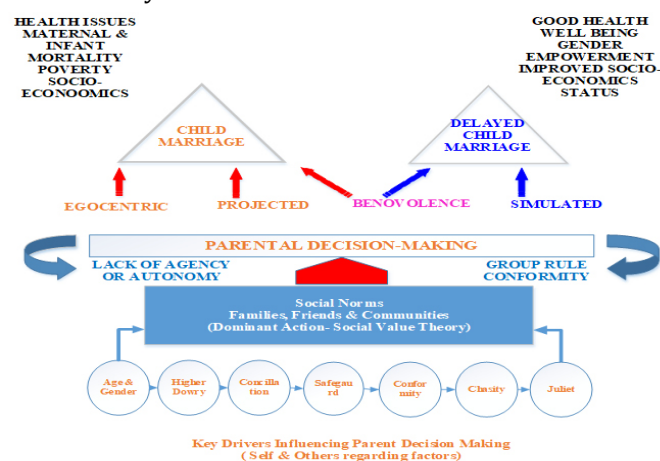


Figure 5. A conceptual framework for the parental decision-making process for child marriage. Associations between the elements are indicated.

The egocentric or projected decision will almost certainly lead to child marriage, unlike the simulated decision, which favors the goals and aspirations of the child bride. The benevolent decision-making option can go either way, resulting in child marriage or accidentally aligning with the perceived goals and aspirations of the girl. This is accidental or coincidental as it is not intended to meet the young girl's desires.

Figure 5 shows how families, friends, and the community can influence the injunctive norm, depicted as a blue shaded rectangle, which is driven by various determinants or causes of child marriage—age, gender, dowry, conciliation, safeguard, conformity, chastity, and Juliet (Bicchieri et al., 2014; Perlman & Adamu, 2017; Walker, 2017). In the injunctive norm, governance by reference group through group rule conformity and a lack of agency or autonomy on the part of the parents help to influence parental decision-making. The model predicts child marriage relies on the parents' egocentric, projected, or benevolent behaviors and is only delayed in the case of simulated behaviors. The resulting harmful effects of child marriage and potential benefits are listed in Figure 5.

CURRENT STATE OF CHILD MARRIAGE

The continued practice of child marriage highlights a significant disconnect between communities practicing child marriage, international and national agencies, and human rights organizations. These organizations are vigorously campaigning and using social and health interventions to curb and prevent child marriage to affect positive social changes in the communities. A lack of success in curbing the widespread child marriage practice could indicate the ineffectiveness of international treaties and national and local laws enacted to deter and prevent the practice. This may be related to the lack of a thorough understanding of child marriage practices and how it is perceived in the communities in which they are practiced. Notably, the identified causes of child marriage in the literature are not backed by stringent theoretical rigor (Bicchieri et al., 2014). Child marriage literature has provided several explanations of child marriage with inadequate clarification on how the identified determinants of child marriage fit together. For example, child marriage has been referred to as a practice, culture, institution, convention, social norm, or religious moral imperative without being supported by theory. This is further complicated by the use of several instruments for monitoring and evaluation that lacked rigorous theoretical backing (Bicchieri et al., 2014).

A conceptual framework was drawn to qualitatively explain and predict the accuracy of parental decision-making in child marriage. The framework was theoretically grounded on the postulates of SVT and the associated surrogate decision-making processes as it relates to parents and their children in the relational situation. SVT can adequately explain how

the dominant norms sanction and drive a parent's decision-making regarding marrying off their underage children. The conceptual framework can adequately predict the outcome of the parental decision in child marriage practice and relies on the accepted social norms within the society.

Several research efforts highlighted the influence of social norms driven by tradition, cultural heritage, and poverty in perpetuating child marriage practices, among other causes. For any strategy to succeed in curbing and preventing the practice, it must consider the needs and aspirations of the community. Understanding the roles of culture, social norms, and behaviors and how they impact the practice was necessary. Most interventions were rendered ineffective because of a limited understanding of these factors and continued to rely mostly on socioeconomic factors, poverty, and gender inequality (Perlman & Adamu, 2017; Person et al., 2017; Walker, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The study attempts to close research gaps identified in the literature providing a theoretical framework analysis that explains knowledge gaps in understanding child marriage phenomena. This study examines the literature on child marriage with a summary of global, national, and target community perspectives due to regional variations of the practice. It presents a detailed discussion and analysis of the theoretical concepts and interrelated factors responsible for sustaining the practice of child marriage in the target community. A conceptual framework was described that qualitatively predicts the potential outcomes of parental decision-making in child marriage and the associated harmful consequences of the practice. The resulting harmful effects of child marriage and potential benefits. The Framework predicts child marriage relies on egocentric, projected, or benevolent behaviors of the parents and is only delayed in the case of simulated behaviors.

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Citation: Dr. Hadiza Yakub, "A Theoretical Framework for Social Norms in Child Marriage: Parents' Lived Experience in Decision-Making in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Universal Library of Medical and Health Sciences*, 2024; 2(1): 22-31.

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