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“Trading daughters for livestock”: An ethnographic study of facilitators of child marriage in Lira district, Northern Uganda

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Stella Neema^{1*}, Christine Muhumuza², Rita Nakigudde³, Cecilie S Uldbjerg⁴, Florence M Tagoola⁴, Edson Muhwezi⁴

Makerere University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology¹; Makerere University School of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology & Biostatistics²; Department for International Development (DFID) Uganda³; United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Uganda⁴

*For Correspondence: Email: sheisim@yahoo.com; Phone: +256 772457576

Abstract

Child marriage remains a significant challenge in Uganda despite national policies, legislation and programs for improved rights of girls. This ethnographic study aimed to explore underlying drivers of child marriage in Lira district, Northern Uganda. We applied a triangulation of qualitative methods; in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and observations. Data were analysed using qualitative thematic content analysis. Our study findings showed that child marriage is still prevalent in the study area and the practice was also carried out at designated markets, at which girls were traded in exchange of livestock. The main drivers of child marriage were identified as poverty and survival strategies; socio-cultural beliefs and norms; and school dropouts. Determined efforts are needed to address the socio-cultural drivers of child marriage, keep girls in school, address poverty through targeting the family and individual level with appropriate incentives to address the economic needs of girls and families to delay marriage, enforce laws prohibiting the practice of child marriage, equip teenagers with accurate information on SRHR and ensure that parents support their daughters to be educated and responsible adults. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2021; 25[3]: 83-93).

Keywords: Child marriage, livestock, ethnography, Uganda

Résumé

Le mariage d'enfants reste un défi majeur en Ouganda malgré les politiques, la législation et les programmes nationaux pour l'amélioration des droits des filles. Cette étude ethnographique visait à examiner les facteurs sous-jacents du mariage d'enfants dans le district de Lira, dans le nord de l'Ouganda. Nous avons utilisé une triangulation des méthodes qualitatives; des entretiens approfondis, des groupes de discussion, des entretiens avec des informateurs clés et des observations. Les données ont été analysées à l'aide d'une thématique qualitative pour l'analyse de données. Les résultats de notre étude ont montré que le mariage d'enfants est toujours répandu dans la zone d'étude et que la pratique a été également effectuée dans des marchés désignés, où les filles étaient échangées contre du bétail. Les principaux moteurs du mariage d'enfants ont été identifiés comme étant la pauvreté et les stratégies de survie, croyances et normes socioculturelles et le décrochage scolaire. Des efforts résolus sont nécessaires pour traiter les facteurs socioculturels du mariage d'enfants, faire en sorte que les filles restent à l'école, lutter contre la pauvreté tout en ciblant des incitations appropriées pour répondre aux besoins économiques des filles au niveau individuel et familial et des familles pour retarder le mariage, faire appliquer les lois interdisant cette pratique du mariage d'enfants, fournir aux adolescents des informations précises sur la SDSR et veiller à ce que les parents donnent soutien à leurs filles à devenir des adultes éduqués et responsables. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2021; 25[3]: 83-93).

Mots-clés: Mariage d'enfants, bétail, ethnographie, Ouganda

Introduction

Child marriage is by definition any marriage, or informal union, where one or both the parties are under 18 years of age¹. Overall prevalence of child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa shows a slow and uneven decline, however, the region has rapidly

growing young population with limited economic growth and social development². The practice is increasingly recognized as a key roadblock to global health, development, and gender equality³. Efforts to combat the vice seem to be hitting a dead end as the number of girls married by age 18 is increasing. Most countries have laws against child

marriage, but the proportion of girls forced into child marriage remains high in many developing countries. The highest prevalence of child marriage is reported in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Uganda is ranked 16th among 25 countries with the highest rates of child marriage⁴. In Uganda, it is estimated that 12% of girls marry before the age of 15 years and 40% marry before the age of 18 years⁵. This has detrimental consequences for the future aspirations of the children, the families and ultimately the entire country, as child marriage is closely linked to adverse health outcomes and lack of educational attainment. Marriage in sub-Saharan Africa is entrenched in social and cultural norms, traditions and economic contexts where the immediate and extended families of those intending to marry may have an upper hand in the decisions, rather than just two individuals^{2,6}.

A number of national and international initiatives have been put in place to protect the fundamental right of children not to marry before the age of 18 years. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality calls for ending all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, including harmful practices of child, early and forced marriage⁷. Through commitments to the SDGs, Uganda is obligated to prioritise these concerns. This is reflected in recent efforts and legal instruments to prevent child marriages and improve the lives of girls. But despite deliberate national efforts in addressing harmful practices and promoting gender equality gaps, the burden of child marriage remains a significant challenge in the country.

Various factors contribute to the persistence of child marriage in Uganda. Existing literature have recognized that the commencement of puberty marks a time of increased vulnerability to child marriage for many girl⁸. Child marriage is more likely to occur among girls who are poor, have low educational attainment and live in rural areas⁹. In some cultures, child marriage is engrained in social norms and perceptions, including a high value attached to women's reproduction as well as economic and social expectations through the so-called bride wealth system¹⁰⁻¹³. However, specific drivers of child marriage may differ by context and cultures. Therefore, this study aimed at identifying

underlying drivers of child marriage in a rural setting in Northern Uganda.

Methods

Study design

The study applied an ethnographic research design to identify the underlying drivers of child marriage in rural Northern Uganda. Ethnography comprises a collection of different ways of eliciting and collecting data, including observations of individuals or groups of individuals, unstructured interviews, documentary analysis and use of field notes. A central method is long-term participant observations, where the researcher spends an extended period of time with a group in order to collect data and generate a holistic picture of cultural practices^{14,15}. The research team stayed in the community for nearly four months (June to September 2019) to investigate the study population in their own environment and generate evidence on the underlying drivers of child marriage.

Study setting

The study was carried out in Lira district in Northern Uganda. The district is mainly rural with 75% of its population living in rural areas. Lira is a post-conflict setting, which was affected by the insurgency movement of Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) that plagued the Northern region of Uganda for 20 years (1986-2006), resulting in death and massive population displacements. Most people have since returned from the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, but the legacy of the war and its effects continue to be apparent, since the local population was left in dire economic, social and psychological conditions.

Data on child marriage were collected from five sub-counties: Central and Ojwina divisions (for urban settings) and Aromo, Agweng and Barr sub-counties (for rural settings). These were chosen because they had the highest rates of child marriage in the Lira district.

Study population and sampling

The study population comprised of teenagers, parents, leaders/officials and other community

members. These were residents of the study areas and were selected with the guidance of the village health team members and the area local councils. They were approached by the research assistants and consent was sought before being interviewed.

Participants were purposively selected to ensure a diverse study population, quality answers and a thick description of the phenomena. The different categories of participants were important to get various perspectives and insights about child marriage in the study area. The selection of the study population was based on the following inclusion criteria: teenage girls (in school/out of school); parents/caretaker of these teenagers; partners; and community members as well as key stakeholders at district, sub-county and community/village levels. Finally, a total of 108 participants: 31 teenage girls, 21 parents, 14 leaders/officials and 42 community members were sampled to participate in the study.

Data collection and tools

A triangulation of methods was used to collect data for the study. This included key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGD) and observations. The in-depth interviews were held in the community at the participant's home and the FGDs were either held in a community hall or under a tree. Key informant interviews were conducted at the interviewee's offices. All interviews were conducted by trained research assistants and performed in the local language, Lwo. Some of the key informant interviews were conducted by the primary investigators. The latter were performed in English and with support from a research assistant. An interview guide was developed for each type of interview and was guided by the objectives and research questions. All interview guides were pretested during the training and final tools were revised based on feedback from the research assistants. Key questions covered sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) issues, experiences with child marriage, perceived underlying causes of child marriage, local terminologies, prevention and coping strategies as well as suggestions for improvement. The data collection methods for the specific interviews are further explained below.

Key informant interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with various stakeholders involved with young people at district, sub-county and community level. At district level, we interviewed local governments and community leaders (civil, social, political and religious), district health officers, district education officers, community development officers, probation officers and district planners. At sub-county level, we interviewed the local council III assistant community development officers, health assistants and parish chiefs. At village/community level, we interviewed local council chairs, secretary for women and health, and the Village Health Team (VHT) members. A total of 14 key informant interviews were conducted, and each interview lasted about 40 minutes.

In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with teenage girls who either got married before the age of twenty or passed through the teenage years without getting married (See Table 1). These interviews were conducted individually, as the topic was considered sensitive to young people and we needed to understand their lived experiences. A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted, and each interview lasted for about one hour.

Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions were conducted with groups of teenagers, parents/guardians/community members, and teenage boys in and out of school (See Table 1). Each focus group discussion comprised of 6-10 participants. A total of 10 FGDs were conducted, and each discussion lasted for about 1.5 hours.

Observations

Observations were used to capture participants' perspectives by directly entering and studying their everyday life. Observation in ethnography is a comprehensive and on-going process in which investigators and research assistants record all relevant information guided by an observation schedule to get well acquainted with the context of their work. In our case, we observed all events related to the context of child marriage. For participant observation, we engaged in i) social activities during teenagers' spare time, ii) informal

conversations between teenagers and their parents/guardians and iii) events and gatherings in the community, such as weddings, market days, disco places and traditional ceremonies.

Data management and analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research assistants and quality checked by the investigators. Field notes collected during the interviews (formal and informal) were expanded and typed in Microsoft Word. Both investigators and research assistants read through the transcripts to get intimate with the data and to get an overall feeling of the data. The transcripts were organized and coded using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd).

Data were analysed using a qualitative thematic content analysis approach¹⁶. The following steps were involved: 1) generating “first order concepts” (i.e. data expressing informants’ terms and understandings); 2) generating “second order themes” (i.e. abstract level themes and a larger narrative describing in theoretical terms); and 3) identifying larger dimensions to help explain various themes suggested in the data¹⁷. Meanings were formulated clustered into themes. To ensure inter-reliability of the data and findings, two researchers separately completed coding and analysis and eventually compared their findings¹⁸. This analysis was performed on a rolling basis as soon as data were received from the field. The iterative analysis enabled swift identification and focus on themes as to whether data was relevant for the study¹⁹. Finally, the research team went back to the district of the study and conducted validation meetings with different stakeholders in order to get their insights into the study findings.

Assessing quality of data, approaches and methods

To ensure rigour and trustworthiness of the data and methods used, we employed Lincoln and Guba’s guidelines²⁰, in which rigor was enhanced through a triangulation of the different methods of qualitative data collection sources. During analysis, two researchers separately completed coding and analysis and afterwards compared their findings.

Dependability and conformability were guaranteed through external audit trail. Finally, the research team went back to the district of the study and conducted validation meetings with different stakeholders in order to get their insights into the study findings.

Results

This section presents key characteristics of the study population and qualitative findings under three thematic areas: 1) poverty and survival strategies; 2) socio-cultural beliefs and norms; and 3) school dropouts. The identified thematic areas were often crosscutting and intertwined, as socio-cultural beliefs and norms influenced gender inequalities and the resultant poverty and school dropouts and vice versa. Figure 1 presents the main themes, subthemes and overall thematic structure of the drivers of child marriage.

Characteristics of study population

Overall, participants from the in-depth interviews were of low educational status, with 8 out of 15 having attained any primary education and 6 having completed any secondary education. Nearly all the participants from the in-depth interviews were subsistence farmers. For the FGDs, 7 out of the 10 FGDs were female-only groups. The age range of the FGD participants were between 13-50 years. The specific characteristics of the study population are illustrated in Table 1.

Theme 1: Poverty and survival strategies

Poverty and survival strategies at household and community levels were mentioned as critical drivers of child marriage in the study area. Nearly all participants expressed that a need for money and livestock to get out of poverty encouraged trading of girls as wives. This biting poverty was often lured by men who would then use money to get girls into sexual relations. After the girls gave into the sexual demands, the men would usually abandon them, including those girls who got pregnant and ended up getting married early. It came out prominently from the interviews that some girls who have sexual relations with men do so due to lack of adequate basic necessities such as food,

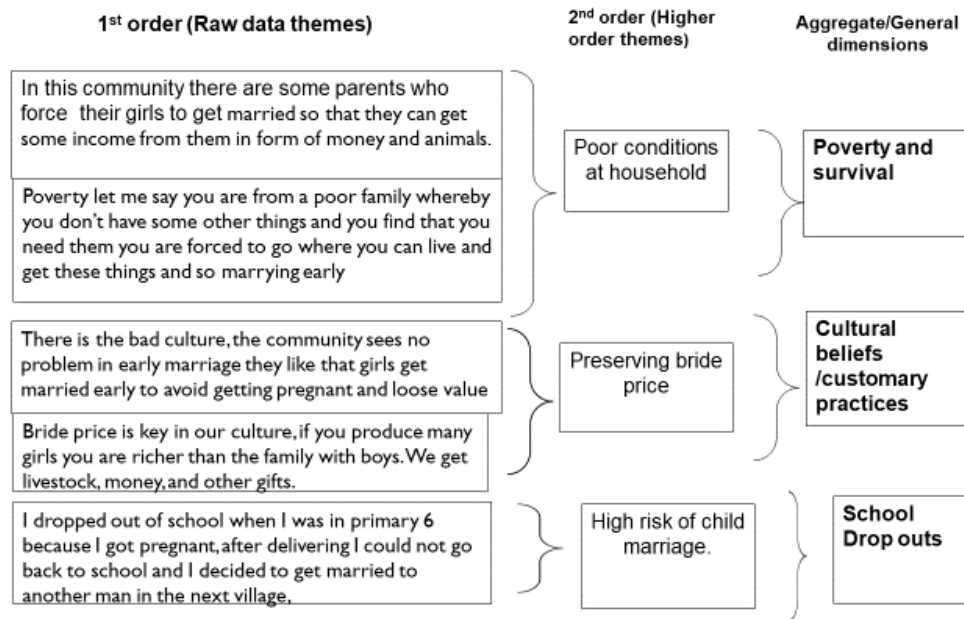


Figure 1: Thematic Structure of analysis

clothing, soap and transport money. Some of these men demand that the girls get married to them. On the other hand, poor families with little money for food and basic necessities, marrying off their daughter early was an economic survival strategy. From the in-depth interviews, girls reported that getting married early was a way of getting out of poverty and into a better life, even if the girl did not like the husband or the husband was as old as their father.

I was married off when I was young. I did not like it but I had nothing to do. We were so poor at home that we sometimes ate one meal a day. I wanted Vaseline, soap to look clean and good but my parents were so poor, so when a man requested my parents that I get married to him I accepted just running away from this biting poverty (Teenager, married early, in-depth interview)

In Lira district, girls are traditionally married off in exchange of a so-called bride wealth or bride price, which is paid by the groom or his family in form of cash, property or other form of wealth. Through the bride wealth, child marriage is cherished as a transaction, often representing a significant

economic activity for a family. It was noted that poor families often perceived a daughter as economic liability and the only guaranteed source of commodities and cash. Therefore, many poor families preferred marrying off their daughters to get economic gain. Some participants also mentioned that families would marry off girls at a very early age due to fear of the girl becoming pregnant. If the girl got pregnant, it would reduce her worth and value.

Because of poverty, some parents deep there in the villages look at their daughters as a source of wealth for example you hear them say, I think we can get something from Akello so let's marry her off and you find on market days marriages happening secretly. So poverty is making our parents do what they are not supposed to do (NGO worker, key information interview).

Instead of marrying off girls in the more traditional way, the study showed that some parents even take their daughters to markets to trade them. Participants in the rural communities we interacted with described cases in which young girls were traded at designated markets in exchange for

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of study population

Socio-demographic Characteristics of In-depth Interview participants				
No	Category	Age	Education	Occupation
01	Unmarried Teen with a child	19	S1	Subsistence Farmer
02	Father of Pregnant teen	67	P2	Subsistence Farmer
03	Guardian of Pregnant teen	21	P6	Subsistence Farmer
04	Passed through teenage not pregnant	22	S4	Subsistence Farmer
05	Passed through teenage not pregnant or marrying early	24	S6	Business
06	Unmarried teen with a child	17	P5	Subsistence Farmer
07	Unmarried teen with a child	19	P5	Tailoring
08	Teen currently pregnant	18	P6	Subsistence farmer
09	Partner of pregnant teen	27	P7	Security guard
10	Guardian of perpetrator	67	P7	Subsistence farmer
11	Teen married <20 years old	19	S2	Subsistence farmer
12	Partner of teen <20 years old	26	S3	Subsistence farmer
13	Mother of Pregnant teen	51	P7	Subsistence farmer
14	Passed through teenage not pregnant	20	P7	Waitress
15	Father of teen who passed through teenage not pregnant or marrying early	48	S4	Business
Socio-demographic Characteristics of Focus group discussion Participants				
No.	Category	Number of participants	Age range (years)	Gender
1	Mothers of teenagers	8	37-50	F
2	Fathers of teenagers	8	39-46	M
3	Teenagers in School	8	13-18	F
4	Teenagers who got pregnant <20 years old	9	19-23	F
5	Teens who married >20 years old	10	20-24	F
6	Community members	8	21-39	Mixed
7	Married when they were teens	10	20-24	F
8	Teenagers in School	8	13-18	M
9	Teenagers out of school	9	14-19	F
10	Community members	9	25-45	F
Total		87		
Key Informant interviews per level		Number interviewed		
District (local government officials)		4		
Sub-county (local council officials and sub-county chief)		6		
Village/community (local council leaders, opinion leaders)		4		
Total		14		

livestock. The case study below describes this process of trading daughters for livestock at markets.

Trading of girls in markets: The Moo Cwari market case

The Moo Cwari (“to look for your husband”) is a market in Aromo sub-county in Lira District that is designated to the trading of girls. The market day occurs every Tuesday and attracts people from as far as South Sudan, Acholi sub-region and Lango region. The buyers of girls are typically the parents of a young teenage boy or a middle-aged man looking for a second wife. Negotiations usually take place prior to the exchange, and the market is

mainly used as camouflage to authorities. At the market, the husband (or parents if it involves a young boy) will bring cows or other livestock as if selling them to the girl's parents. The transaction can be an exchange of two to four cows for one girl. The girl, who has not consented as she is underage and has no ability to provide consent is then forced to follow the new husband and become a wife.

The case example shows how young girls are traded for livestock at a local market in Lira district. The girls were as young as 13 years, and because of their age, the exchange was done in a disguised way as going to the market to buy livestock. A person working at the market described low income and the perception of girls as a source of income as key reasons for these exchanges.

Basically, teenagers get a lot of challenges and one of them is the problem comes from the parents, there comes a point when they can't take care of their girls and to make it worse they look at these girls as a source of income.... Some are exchanged for cows in our Moo Cwari market (Market worker, key information interview).

Some participants stated that the community leaders were trying to change the name of the market from *Moo Cwari market* to *Aswa River market* as a way of discouraging the transactions. The authorities had supposedly made some arrests of culprits, but the perpetrators were not prosecuted and eventually ended up going back to the same business. This could have been a disguised way of paying bride price for the girl children.

Theme 2: Socio-cultural beliefs and norms

The perceived status of women and girls in the cultures and communities were emphasized as an important driver of child marriage. Most participants indicated that a girl child is not valued as much as a boy child. A common perception was that when rearing a girl child, parents were actually rearing the girls for another clan. In that sense, it was considered a waste of money to invest in or educate a girl child, because when she was married off, she would benefit another clan. Most participants echoed this perception, and many parents in the communities would favour educating boys and thus the boy child was more likely to be educated and get gainful employment. While boys were at school, girls were expected to do domestic work at home. This norm was prevalent in most rural areas in the study area.

You see in our Lwo culture, believe it or not, even among the educated, we know that a girl will leave and go to another clan, educating her you are helping the family where she will get married, yes you can educate her but the boy is the one to stay at your home and look after you and take over your property when you grow old or die (Community members, FGD)

Another cultural perception and norm emphasized by the participants was that girls were considered ready for marriage, when they reached puberty.

Traditionally, onset of womanhood was seen as a signifier of readiness for marriage. For instance, some people in the communities believed that it is acceptable for a girl to marry when she has gotten her first menstruation or she started to grow breasts. Further, some law enforcers and community members often did not see significant problems with child marriage, so they did not have a reason for preventing it.

[...] and then the other issue is cultural beliefs and traditions. How we perceive the value attached to girls is totally different from how the local people look at them. We as an NGO follow up cases, where there are reports about parents giving in their teenage girls for marriage and they are arrested, however the biggest problem sometimes comes from the police side, the police accept that these two parties should come and negotiate, and settle their cases outside the court (NGO worker, key information interview)

Parents encourage girls to get married early like the case of yesterday. The parents wanted to negotiate for marriage but it is because the case is already brought before the local council that the parents feared to be jailed (Member of local council, key informant interview).

Theme 3: School dropout

School dropouts were another identified factor for the continued practices of child marriage in the study area. Despite a national policy of Universal Primary Education, most participants noted that school dropouts and consequent lack of educational attainment remained a significant issue. Participants indicated several reasons for girls dropping out of school in the district such as high levels of poverty to pay school fees, negative attitude of the parents towards education, poor academic performance, age of pupils and lack of interest. Regardless of the reason for dropping out of school, the girls were perceived to be at higher risk of child marriage. Even when child marriage was not the initial cause of dropping out of school, girls who dropped out of school were more likely to end up marrying early. In some cases, the girl was left with no other option but to get married.

I left school when I was in primary six because my mother died and we were taken to my grandmother. There was no school nearby and my father did not tell my grandmother to put me in school. I stayed with her helping her with work at home including digging in the gardens... I was 15 years old. At 16 years of age, my father came and told my grandmother that he had got me someone to marry me because I might get pregnant and nobody will like me. That is how I got married at 16 years, as there was not much I was doing (Teenager, married early, in-depth interview)

The parents who gave away their daughter early for marriage seemed not to care about their daughter's education or future aspirations. They often failed to provide school requirements such as school materials, menstrual pads or lunch. This was reflected by many of the teachers at schools with high rates of school dropouts.

The interest of parents towards education is not there. They don't support education; you have to first report to the sub-county chief to arrest them. You can also witness the children's performance... the support from parents is not there. So if you want a child to study you need to involve the sub-county chief to the extent of arresting those parents. It is worse for girls; parent only wants to see them get married and they get bride price (Teacher, key information interview)

While some girls actually go to school, they are often enrolled late and therefore risk stigmatization because they are older than their classmates. It was reported that many of these girls eventually decide to drop out of school and instead pursue marriage.

Discussion

In this study, we identified the key drivers of child marriage as poverty and survival strategies; socio-cultural beliefs and norms; and school dropouts. These factors were reinforcing each other at different levels of society to drive practices of child marriage. The findings are in line with other studies exploring drivers of child marriages in Sub-Saharan Africa, affirming that child marriage is deeply rooted in the intersections between poverty, inequitable gender norms, cultural, perceptions and

inadequate investments by parents in education for girls^{21,4,9}.

Poverty has already proven a critical driver for the persistent child marriage in Uganda^{9,12}. Traditionally, the bride wealth has served as a respected and integral part of marriage customs in African culture²². Not only is the bride wealth perceived as recognition and appreciation of the wife's dignity and worth, it also provides a much-needed income for many poor families. A participatory action research study in Uganda similarly found that poor families critically depend on the bride wealth and turn to child marriage as a survival strategy to deal with poverty²³. Other studies have also emphasized that poverty can result in inability for parents to take care of their teenagers' needs, which drive some girls to look for alternatives to survive, increasing the risk of child marriage^{4,9}. Our study also highlighted this critical role of parents in the context of child marriage, though we found parents to function as active players in marrying off their children, and not only indirectly in terms of limited support to the girls. The trading of girls at designated markets appeared as an untraditional way of achieving the bride wealth, in which parents directly participated in the transactions of their daughters. It was not unusual that family members determined the spouse for the girls to marry, implying that parents sometimes play a profound harmful role in practices of child marriage.

Our findings also provide evidence to demonstrate that socio-cultural perceptions and norms are detrimental in supporting child marriages in the study area. Child marriage was common and perceived as culturally accepted in many communities. Another ethnographic study from Lira district noted similar concerns, in which bride wealth was a certificate for marriage to take place and hence an acceptable part of marriage. They also found that livestock conveyed significant social, economic and cultural importance in Uganda, and therefore exchange of girls for livestock was justified within almost all ethnic groups²⁴. A formative study on child marriage in Uganda argued that the justification of marrying off girls also hinged in the cultural perception that transition from childhood to adulthood is largely constructed around marriage and reproduction²⁵. Indicators of

sexual maturation, body changes and menstruation therefore usually signaled the onset of womanhood and readiness for marriage. In Uganda, it has earlier been noted that gendered social norms and practices are reinforced and transformed through a number of social institutions that make up the social ecology, in which adolescent girls live in⁸. These social norms interact with other socio-economic and cultural factors in driving the practices of child marriage²⁶. Our study found that gender inequality was driven partly by culture and traditions, in which male children are given preference, leading to poor treatment and priority of girls in the patriarchal society of Lira. Typically, girls were only of value because of the possible bride wealth and were perceived as inferior with limited autonomy in decision making of when to marry. These findings are similar with a study from Iran, which noted that low autonomy as a result of inadequate life skills, problem solving and negotiation skills played an important role in thrusting the girls into early marriage²⁷. Improving gender equitable norms through community sensitization programs and providing more opportunities for girls, particularly in attaining education and employment, are suggested as effective means of improving child marriage outcomes. Providing youth-friendly SRHR information and comprehensive sexuality education in addition to increasing girls' autonomy and ensuring that they know their rights may also be useful strategies⁴.

Our study further found that school dropouts made girls vulnerable to child marriage, with the majority of married girls in our study population having dropped out or never attended school. It is already well established that the more education a girl receives, the less likely she is to get involved in child marriage^{4,13}. A qualitative study from Uganda indicated that at least one quarter of secondary school dropouts among girls were due to child marriage²⁸. This means that many girls may in fact drop out of school as a result of marriage, and school dropouts thus represent a consequence of child marriage. However, it is important to note that the relationship between education attainment and child marriage may not be straightforward, and school dropouts could reflect both drivers and consequences of child marriage. Nevertheless, keeping girls in school is a protective factor against

child marriage and it offers young people an opportunity to participate in school-based support initiatives, such as peer support and life skills programmes, which support young people to make smart life decisions²⁹. Despite Universal Primary Education in Uganda, many families in our study still experience challenges in affording to keep their children in school due to required school fees and materials. Efforts to improve access to and retention of education regardless of income and eliminating gender gaps in education are important strategies for ending the practice of child marriage^{12,30}.

Strengths and limitations

The main strength of the study was the ethnographic approach to achieve in-depth understanding of the phenomena. Staying in the community for a longer period of time and the triangulation of the different data collection methods provided sufficient accuracy and reliability of the results. The rich detail of the qualitative data enhanced understanding of the context and drivers of child marriage in Lira district. A limitation of the study may be that purposive sampling was used and findings may therefore have limited generalizability to other geographical locations. It is also noteworthy that the methodology does not support the assertion of a casual relationship between the identified drivers and child marriage.

Ethical considerations

The study was reviewed and approved by Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics committee (MAKSSREC) and Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) (No. SS 4657). All data were collected in respect of confidentiality of the participants and the information collected. A number of procedures were used to ensure confidentiality: a) Interviews were conducted in private settings; b) research assistants were trained in research ethics and confidentiality and c) data were kept strictly confidential. Prior to each interview, participants were informed of this confidentiality procedure, that participation was voluntary and that they could

withdraw from the study at any time during or after the interview. Teenagers below 18 years gave assent in addition to parental consent. Emancipated minors consented for themselves.

Conclusion

Identifying underlying drivers of child marriage are critical in order to address the persistent burden of child marriage in Uganda. We identified key drivers as poverty and survival strategies, socio-cultural beliefs and norms and school dropouts. These factors were all intertwined as a cascade of events, leading to persistent child marriage in the study area. The trading of girls at the markets was perceived as a response for some poor households to access livestock. In light of these findings, we recommend initiatives to keep girls in school as an important way of preventing child marriage. In this regard, parents and communities should be sensitized on the long-term benefits of education and effective communications. There is need to address poverty through targeting the family and individual level with appropriate incentives to address the economic needs of girls and families to delay marriage. The use of incentives such as the social assistance programs should target girls education especially in poor households that are at risk of child marriage. Ending child marriage and addressing harmful social norms and traditions requires determined efforts by all relevant stakeholders. Community leaders and key influencers such as religious and cultural leaders should meaningfully participate in supporting enforcement and implementation of bylaws and ordinances to change hostile environments that reinforce child marriages in the communities. At an individual level, girls and boys need to be equipped with adequate SRHR information to understand and recognize that child marriage is a violation of their rights.

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Contribution of authors

SN, CM, FM, EM conceptualized the study and contributed to study design and instruments. SN and CM collected and analysed data, and drafted the initial manuscript. FM, EM, CU, RN contributed to reviewing the final manuscript. All authors approved the final manuscript before submission.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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