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Editorial

Caroline Sweetman

'A woman and an empty house are never alone for long.'
(Ethiopian proverb)

'Most women and men in the world spend most of their lives married.'
(Seager 2003, 22)

Marriage exists in some form in almost all communities throughout the world. The vast majority of adult women and men get married at least once in their lifetimes, and some marry several times. In popular culture, marriage is variously seen as the end goal of teenage romance and sex, a solemn and joyful assertion of custom and tradition, or a secure and respectable means of bringing up the next generation. But what is often less evident – particularly in affluent societies – is the essential role played by marriage in the economic survival of individuals and their families. Feminist research has long been interested in this aspect of marriage. While marriage forms vary dramatically across the world, the conjugal contract – that is, 'the terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, incomes, and services, including labour, within the household' (Whitehead 1984, 93) – is biased in men's favour in most contexts. The inbuilt inequality within marital decision-making and workloads is a powerful force that works against gender equality at home, in the workplace or in government. Hence, as writers in this collection stress, researching marriage forms and understanding how these affect women's and men's human rights and development differently is essential to programme planning and implementation.

It is only relatively recently that this interest in diverse marriage forms has evolved. Early Women in Development (WID) research highlighted the chaos created by development projects which assumed Western cultural norms about marriage to be universal. In Western-style marriage – in theory, if not in practice – men are primary providers and breadwinners, while women are carers. Providing and breadwinning is associated with working outside the home, while caring is assumed to keep women inside a sheltered sphere of domesticity, to which men return each evening. What goes on in the household from dusk until dawn is secret from outside eyes. This model of marriage and the household is responsible for much inappropriate policy making in both developing and post-industrial societies. For example, not only is the idea of provisioning being men's task alone unsubstantiated in most parts of the world, but it was also never true for most sections of the population in the West.

Some key aspects of the Western model of marriage were echoed in other societies. The idea that men are suited to be 'household head' making benign and wise decisions on behalf of the family, is one such aspect.
Ideas about men’s naturally superior qualities of leadership in marriage have gone on to colour the nature of women’s participation in public life. Ideas of women’s secondary role in the home affect the kind of employment they are deemed to suit. They have also prevented women from becoming political leaders at every level, from the village to parliament. Beyond the realm of work and politics, these gender ideologies permit intimidation, fear, and violent ‘punishment’ within marriage, if husbands judge wives as not making the grade. This socially-sanctioned abuse not only violates individual women’s human rights, but ultimately has a critical impact on the well-being of both the current and the future generation.

In the remainder of this editorial, key aspects of current debates on marriage are highlighted and the articles in this collection introduced. But first, it should be stressed that the aim of this collection of articles is to discuss the implications for development policy and practice of marriage as a key institution in gender relations, and space is limited. For these reasons, we have not focused on alternatives to marriage, for example people in same-sex couple relationships (who, in most countries, are prevented by law from marrying)¹ or on widows and widowhood,² despite their importance.

Recognising multiple forms of marriage

Non-Western communities have been invited, encouraged and coerced to adopt the Western nuclear family form since the start of the era of colonialism. In the Western model of marriage, one man marries one woman. Both parties must be in their late teens or older. There is a single wedding ceremony, held in a public place, attended by friends and family. It is traditional for the bride to adopt her husband’s family’s name. After marriage, the couple lives together and children are born. The primary role of the wife in the gender division of labour is to care for children and any other dependents living under the couple’s roof, and to perform the unpaid work of household maintenance. The husband is viewed as the primary provider for the family, going outside the household to generate income. It is important to emphasise that this model is an ideal type, which was relatively rare even in the Western nations who promoted it in their colonial territories. In nineteenth-century Europe, most households depended on the wages of both spouses, and often child labour as well, just as earlier generations had depended on the farm labour of the whole family.

Many studies exist to show the devastating effect that the export of this model had on gender relations in colonial territories. In sub-Saharan Africa, women’s significant role in agricultural production was sidelined when missionaries and colonial administrators arrived to ‘domesticate’ them (Hansen 1992). Horror about the immorality of polygamy discouraged understanding of the economic rationales for such alternative family forms. A man, his wife and children, dressed in Western clothes and attending church on Sundays, was emblematic of the progress and civilisation colonialism was bringing to the Dark Continent. African women’s contribution to household livelihoods continued to be ignored by development, until inappropriate development projects failed and it became obvious that something was very wrong. The reality of women’s agricultural work in Africa and hence their contribution to the national economy was ‘discovered’ by researchers in the 1970s – notably Ester Boserup (1970). By that time, families had been impoverished and women’s ability to make a livelihood compromised, as well as their status having been eroded.

Even today, development and social policy in the global South and North continues to make the most basic mistakes in project planning, through underestimating
women's contribution to the economy and assuming the nuclear family to be the norm. Despite this onslaught of inappropriate policy formulation, Nancy Pollock shows through her case study of a Pacific society that non-Western conjugal contracts have survived. Resourceful communities gain access to resources and status through selectively adopting particular elements of the Western model of marriage and the family.

Planners have been particularly prejudiced against matriarchal family forms, often assuming them to be backward, and trusting that they would eventually give way to patriarchal systems. In matriarchal societies, husbands moved upon marriage to their wives' natal home, and inheritance ran through the female line. While the degree to which women have real power in these societies varies (and brothers and uncles often wield a considerable amount, even while husbands have less), these alternative family forms contained important checks and balances on men's power in marriage and the family. Matriarchal systems are less widespread than they used to be. Far from being progressive, this aspect of 'development' has had a very retrogressive effect on gender relations, as Elizabeth Chacko highlights in her article on Kerala, India. Here, colonial laws based on Western ideas of gender relations reduced women's inheritance rights and undermined the matrilineal family system by introducing a system of individual inheritance to replace joint inheritance by female relatives.

Marriage as a woman's destiny: from cradle to grave

Marriage and childbearing continue, into the twenty-first century, to be the central, defining event of most women's lives. This holds true regardless of how particular women feel about having to become a wife and mother, or their willingness and interest in acquiring the many skills they need for the repetitive - but rewarding - work that accompanies these roles. The reward referred to here is not the emotional satisfaction which we all hope to get from our close relationships. It is, rather, a livelihood, which wives expect in return for their hard work and social conformity. Women who marry expect to receive both tangible resources (shelter, food and other daily necessities, a degree of protection, at least from violence outside the home) and intangible resources (respect and status in the family and community). For many women, in many contexts, these vital resources cannot be easily found outside marriage.

In any case, many women -- and men -- do not have the choice whether to marry. They are told to do so. Marriage can either take place because the spouses themselves have chosen it, or because a decision has been taken by their families, to further a social or economic need which over-rides personal inclinations. People's chances of being free to decide whether and when they marry depend to a large extent on the level of human development in the place where they live. Both never-married women, and widows, may be under pressure to conform to family and societal expectations.

'Early marriage'

There is a correlation -- though not a perfect one -- between poverty and arranged marriages. Many arranged marriages are 'early marriages' -- a widespread euphemism in development for a marriage in which the wife, at least, is in her teens or even pre-teens. Three articles in this collection focus on early marriage. The reason for this major focus is clear from the statistics given by Robert Jensen and Rebecca Thornton in their article. In the developing world, the average age at first marriage ranges from a low of about 16 years in South Asia, to a high of about 20 in South East Asia. In South Asia, the region with the highest rate of early
marriage, 70–75 per cent of women are married by the age of 18 (this issue). This means that three-quarters of all South Asian women are married as children, as far as international law is concerned: 18 is the legal age of adulthood, and the minimum legal age of marriage.

Naana Otoo-Oyortey and Sonita Pobi explore the connections between poverty and the early marriage of girls, and highlight the implications of this analysis for development policy and practice. Despite increasingly widespread acceptance that human rights and gender equality are essential prerequisites for development, development agencies do not give sufficient attention to this issue. This is, perhaps, surprising, since there is such a clear argument for addressing early marriage on grounds of economic efficiency, in addition to the human rights argument. Being forced into sex, marriage and childbearing before you are physically or mentally mature is not only an abuse of children, but harms their chances of ever breaking out of poverty and contributing to national development. The article also highlights the implications for women and their families of the big age gap which exists between women married early and their husbands. The smaller the age gaps between spouses, the greater the likelihood of equality within marriage.

Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi’s article concludes with an agenda for development agencies concerned with early marriage: promoting girls’ education, promoting sexual and reproductive health, and promoting knowledge of the human rights of girls. Above all, motives for choosing not to marry daughters off early need to be increased, and factors which currently encourage early marriage decreased. Families in poverty will continue to resort to early marriage as a part of household livelihood strategies, while they benefit financially from a marriage (via bride price or dowry), education is hard to come by and low in quality, and job opportunities for qualified women do not exist.

In the final article on early marriage, Enobong Akpan points out the importance of early marriage to the livelihood strategies of families in many of Nigeria’s poor rural areas. Through interviews with young women who have suffered birth injuries which lead to ostracism from their husbands and families, she also shows how precarious marriage can be as a livelihood option. It is particularly poignant that being married very young means girls who are rejected by their husbands have even less chance of making an alternative life for themselves than older women.

**Marriage, livelihoods and economic efficiency**

Ideas about the role of women and men in society are closely linked to ideas about the kind of work they should do within marriage, and the value of that work. The sexual division of labour within the home is relevant to economic analysis in three ways. First, ‘women’s work’ is valued less than men’s, which both reflects and perpetuates the fact that women have a lower status than men in most societies. Second, these norms about work inside the home affect women’s ability to take on work outside, for money. If you can’t earn money, you have less power in a world where access to cash is of critical importance almost everywhere. Third, the division of labour within marriage and the home, and the undervaluing of women’s work, is reflected in employment outside it. In factories, offices and marketplaces, women are found in lower-status occupations than men, and jobs which draw on skills associated with care for people and households are paid less than equivalent jobs in ‘male’ labour sectors. This is not only because women are perceived as unskilled if they use skills acquired at home, but also because they are assumed to rely on a main wage from a man.

While marriage is often an economic necessity to women, and frequently also
critical to their natal families, it is also very important to men in societies where family labour is essential to obtaining goods and services. Even if a man in a remote rural area in South Asia or Africa has time to fetch water, and the skills needed to process and cook his food, the gender division of labour will act as a powerful constraint. Conversely, if a woman needs to plough a field or sell a cow and these activities are seen as men's work, she may not be able to do so. Economists see this as inefficient, and rightly so.

Of course, the gender division of labour and associated norms are under constant challenge, because of poverty and desperation. In South Asia, women from the Dalit community are not always able to observe laws on seclusion, while in East Africa women go out to informal sector work and their unemployed husbands remain in the house, covertly doing the family wash. But, while individuals may be forced to challenge prohibitions on the kind of work they do, it would be rash to assume that this leads to a permanent change in gender ideologies, or to a change in women's status vis-à-vis men. In male-dominated societies, gender stereotypes continue to exist which depict men as primary providers for their families, despite overwhelming evidence that in many cases women have taken over this role. In her article, Amali Philips focuses on the lives of women in plantation communities in Sri Lanka, highlighting the fact that although they earn higher wages than their husbands, ideologies about men as providers remain unchanged. Kelley Ready's article focuses on lone mothers' fight to get men to face their responsibilities as providers in El Salvador.

Being a primary provider justifies a man's role as head of the household, representing the interests of his family in community-level decision-making or on councils or other governing bodies. Because staying at home to care for dependants, cook and clean is usually seen as primarily a job for women, men are potentially free to do work which takes them out of the house all day, in farms, factories, offices, or the marketplace. In contrast, in the vast majority of cultures, women are stereotyped as homemakers—even if they actually spend all day in the marketplace or field. Productive activities are usually seen as secondary to caring for the family, and women are expected to combine the two tasks. This leads, once more, to economic inefficiency in household livelihoods, since a woman who is well-qualified to earn a higher wage than her husband is still usually assumed to be the one who will provide the bulk of the childcare.

Stereotypes about women's and men's roles within marriage and the family have another far-reaching implication for poverty alleviation. As Amali Philips points out in the context of tea production in Sri Lanka, global business depends on low-paid labour forces; women are attractive labour forces for global agri-business, manufacturing and services. This is not only because they are willing to take work in worse conditions than men because of their direct responsibility for their dependants, but also because gender stereotypes provide business with a (conscious or unconscious) rationale for paying women lower wages than men, since a woman can be assumed to call on her husband's earnings as well as her own. Ironically, while men are stereotyped as primary providers, it is women who are the first port-of-call for children who need a meal on the table. On the plantations, it is the women who 'put the rice on the plate' (this issue).

**Hard work, violence and bodily integrity in marriage**

If your body is not capable of hard work, due to disability, illness or frailty, you are most unlikely to find a man to marry you in contexts of poverty, although the same is not always true for men – women who need to
be married to gain social acceptance and status may sometimes be grateful to marry a disabled man (Abu Habib 1997). Marriage is hard physical work for women, who, in addition to their daily workload, have to contend with the effects of their fertility. In many cultures, a husband is permitted a considerable degree of freedom to use his wife’s body as he wishes. The impact on women’s physical and mental health of being unable to decide whether or not to have sex, or use contraception, is extreme. Meenakshi Thapan focuses on women’s resistance to male authority over their minds and bodies in marriage. Her article presents the experience of women living in a slum in Delhi. Memorably, she asserts that ‘[w]oman’s embodiment is rarely experienced for pleasure or joy; the body is an instrument for survival. Women’s bodies are weapons used to survive a harsh everyday life, in a world that is ordered by relations of gender inequality and economic necessity’ (this issue).

Many women face socially-condoned physical violence from their husbands as well. It is well-known that while men are more likely to be beaten up in a public place, a woman is most likely to face violence from a known man inside her own home (Pickup et al. 2001). In her article, Rebecca Surtees charts the appalling extent of domestic violence in Cambodia, emphasising its severity and the widespread social acceptance that is given to the principle that men can beat their wives if they are judged to have failed in their marital responsibilities. Comparing the work of two NGOs which have evolved from Cambodian civil society, Surtees distills lessons for development practitioners, emphasising that lasting solutions to the violence need to emerge from an understanding of Cambodian culture and the meaning of marriage within it, joined to a commitment to ending what is ultimately an abuse of women’s human rights.

Conclusion

The links between gender-based inequality and the roles and responsibilities of women within marriage and the home are complex. In most societies, the conjugal contract is biased in men’s favour. Women’s lower status in society is justified on the grounds that ‘women’s work’ is of less value than that of men. Work which women perform is seen as less skilled and useful than that of men, because of women’s low status in society. In reality, women perform almost all the care work for their families, as well as bringing home money and resources, yet men are commonly accorded the credit as the primary provider and household head.

Yet, where there are few livelihood opportunities for women, marriage continues to be essential to their survival. Ultimately, girls’ education and employment opportunities for women are needed, so that the possibility of different ways of making a living exists, and marriage ceases to be the only viable survival strategy. Once it becomes possible to choose not to marry, the terms of the conjugal contract change: women who do marry find their bargaining position is improved, and it becomes possible to consider leaving marriages which are violent, abusive, or simply unhappy. These notions fuel poverty, inequality, violence and abuse. The links between social status and economic role, and between the institution of marriage and other institutions which distribute resources, need to be much better-known than they are at present.

Notes

1 For a discussion of this in the context of integrating same-sex sexualities into development debates and planning, see Jolly (2000)
2 For analysis of the issues facing widows internationally, see Owen (1996).
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Abu Habib, L. (1997) Gender and Disability: Women's Experiences in the Middle East, Oxford: Oxfam GB


Jolly, S. (2000) "Queering" development: exploring the links between same-sex sexualities, gender, and development', in Gender and Development 8:1


Early female marriage in the developing world

Robert Jensen and Rebecca Thornton

Many women in the developing world are subject to marriage at an early age. Most such women have little choice in the age at which they marry, or whom they marry. In this article, we examine patterns and trends of early marriage in the developing world. The incidence varies widely, from a high of 70 per cent in south Asia to a low of 30 per cent in South East Asia. Women who marry young tend to have less education and begin childrearing earlier, and have less decision-making power in the household. They are also more likely to experience domestic violence.

In most societies, marriage is among the most significant of life events for both men and women, signalling the emergence to adulthood. It sets in motion a variety of other life changes, and is the beginning of building a new family (or new part of an extended family). Because of the huge impact marriage has on the lives of women in particular, researchers, advocates and policy makers have increasingly sought to consider marriage through a human rights framework, especially with regard to issues of consent and age at marriage. For example, Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that ‘Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses’, and that ‘Men and women of full age...are entitled to equal rights as to marriage...’. Correspondingly, the United Nations’ 1962 Convention on the ‘Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration and an Associated Recommendation’ calls on member states to establish a minimum age of marriage of no less than 15 years. The 1979 Convention on the ‘Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women’, and the 1990 ‘African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child’ suggest a minimum age for marriage of 18 years, consistent with the definition of childhood articulated in the ‘Convention on the Rights of the Child’.

Yet despite these various resolutions, corresponding national laws, and the efforts of various national and international organisations, many young women (and to a lesser extent, men) in the developing world are still subject to early marriage. Often, these young women have little choice over the age at which they marry, much less the partner they marry, because the marriage is typically arranged or orchestrated by the parents. Thus, the issues of early marriage and consent are often intertwined; in fact, in most societies, no contract of any type entered into by a minor is legally binding, since young persons are less capable of understanding the implications of long-term decisions and do not have the full autonomy and
independence or the mental and emotional maturity required for such decision-making. Therefore, early marriages, even when they occur with the seeming consent of the child, violate the basic rights of the child, since by legal definition a child cannot give consent.

Early marriages are also a cause of concern because of the potential adverse consequences for women's physical, mental and emotional development and well-being. First, early marriage is often associated with early age at first childbirth, often before physical growth and development is complete. Many studies have shown that early childbirth can have adverse health consequences for both woman and child (Senderowitz 1995). Second, marriage is typically a barrier to education, since women are often expected to leave school in order to devote their time to the care of their new home or to childbearing and childcare. Finally, the relationship between husband and wife may be influenced by the age of the woman at time of marriage, as well as the husband-wife age gap. In particular, women who marry young and who marry much older men may be less capable of asserting themselves and establishing their position in the household. As a result, they may have less power, status, agency and autonomy within the household. In fact, men may choose younger brides for this very reason.

The goal of this article is to undertake an empirical examination of the patterns and trends in age at marriage in the developing world, and the conditions and well-being of women who marry young. Of course, early marriage is an issue of concern for boys as well as girls. However, we will focus on girls both because the phenomenon is not as widespread among boys, and because many of the consequences, such as the physical dangers associated with early childbirth, or status and power in the household, are specific to girls.

Patterns of age at marriage

To explore the patterns of age at marriage in the developing world, this article uses data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), a series of representative surveys of women aged 15-49 conducted in a variety of countries over the past few decades. These surveys are particularly valuable for the present paper, because they gather data on marital history, as well as education, fertility and other factors which may be affected by early marriage. We restricted our analyses to women in the samples aged 25 and older, since by this age all but a very small percentage of women are, or have been, married. We also disaggregated the data into birth cohorts, in order to examine trends over time. In particular, we focused on the marriage patterns of women born in the intervals 1950-54, 1955-59, 1960-64, and 1965-69. It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to explain why such differences may exist across societies; our goal in this section was modest, namely just to describe the patterns and trends, in order to demonstrate the nature of the problem, and pinpoint where the greatest problems exist.

In Figure 1, we present data on the patterns and trends in age at first marriage in major regions of the developing world. The underlying data, from 35 individual countries surveyed since 1995, are provided in the appendix.

Looking first at panel A, the average age at first marriage ranges from a low of about 16 years in South Asia, to a high of about 20 in South East Asia, with all other regions falling in between. These figures are all well below the average age at marriage for higher income countries; according to the UN World Marriage Tables 2000, the average age at first marriage for women is 26.2 in Western Europe, 26.9 in Northern Europe, and 28.1 in North America (UN, http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/ww2000/table2a.htm).
Figure 1: Trends in age at marriage and early marriage

A Age at first marriage

B Married 18 or younger
However, even within these regions, there is a great deal of diversity, as seen in the appendix table, ‘Trend of age at first marriage’. For example, from 1950 to 1970, within West Africa, the average age at marriage is as low as 15 years in Niger, and as high as 19 years in Ghana. Five countries, all in Latin America, have average ages of 20 or above (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia and Peru). At the other end of the spectrum, in Bangladesh the average is only about 14.

Panel A of Figure 1 also shows that there has been little overall change in average age at marriage for most of the regions. The notable exceptions are the Near East and North Africa, where the average age of marriage has increased by about a year over the two decades spanned by the data, and Latin America, where it has decreased by about a year. The data for the individual countries in the appendix confirm these findings, but also show many exceptions. For example, while most countries in West Africa show almost no change in age at marriage over this period, the average age has declined by about a year in Ghana and 0.75 years in Nigeria. Five countries (Ethiopia, Tanzania, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Turkey) experienced increases in age at marriage of a year or more, over the two decades. By contrast, Ghana, Mozambique, Guatemala and Nicaragua have all experienced declines in age at marriage of about one year, with Bolivia and Brazil experiencing declines of nearly a year and a half.

Panel B shows the patterns and trends in the incidence of early marriage, which we define here as marriage before age 18, to be consistent with international conventions. As a region, the highest incidence of early marriage is found in South Asia, where 70–75 per cent of women are married by age 18. This is followed by West Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, with an incidence of 50–60 per cent, and then the Near East and North Africa, Latin America and South East Asia. However, even among the lowest groups, the rate is still very high, with 30 to 40 per cent of women marrying before the age of 18. Like the average age at marriage, over the two decades spanned by the data, the incidence of early marriage was largely unchanged for all regions other than the Near East and North Africa, where both Egypt and Turkey have seen large declines in the incidence of early marriage and increases in age at marriage.

But as before, the data on individual countries show significant variation within regions. For example, the incidence of early marriage has decreased by 8–12 percentage points or more in six countries (Cameroon, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Indonesia and Egypt), and by about 15 percentage points in four countries (Ethiopia, Tanzania, the Dominican Republic, and Turkey). By contrast, the incidence of early marriage has increased significantly in far fewer countries, with only Bolivia and Brazil having increases of 8 percentage points or more. There have also been several cases of extremely sharp declines in the incidence of early marriage, such as Cameroon (women born 1950–54 versus those born 1955–59), Guinea (1955–59 vs. 1960–64), Ethiopia (1960–64 vs. 65–70), Kenya (1955–59 vs. 1960–64), Tanzania (1955–59 vs. 1960–64), Zimbabwe (1960–64 vs. 1965–70), the Dominican Republic (1950–54 vs. 1955–59) and Turkey (1960–64 vs. 1965–70).

Well-being and condition of women in early marriages

As stated earlier, early marriage can adversely affect women along several dimensions, such as early termination of education and onset of childbearing, and women’s status and position within the household. To explore these issues further, we focus on four countries in detail, chosen because the surveys from these countries contain useful measures of women’s status and well-being. These are Benin, Colombia, India, and Turkey.
Early female marriage in the developing world

Table 1: Well-being and age of marriage in selected countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Education</th>
<th>Age of Marriage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<td>Turkey</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of First Birth</th>
<th>Age of Marriage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16-20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>17.6</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Husband - Wife Age Gap</th>
<th>Age of Marriage</th>
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<td>16-20</td>
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<td>Benin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
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1 This sample refers to ever-married women over the age of 25 sampled by the DHS for whom we have data on the age of marriage.

Table 1 shows that there is a strong correlation between a woman’s age at marriage and the amount of education that she receives. Uniformly across the countries, early marriage is associated with lower educational attainment. For example, Indian women who marry before the age of 15 receive less than one year of education, on average, and women marrying between the ages of 16 and 20 receive just under two years. By contrast, Indian women whose marriage is delayed until after age 21 receive three to four years of education. Since marriage and schooling appear incompatible, early marriage is likely to be a significant barrier to women’s education. By contrast, increasing the demand for female education may contribute to delayed age at marriage for women.

The table also shows a relationship between early marriage and the onset of childbearing. Across the four countries, on average, women who marry before age 15 have their first birth between the ages of 15 and 17. This is, on average, three years less than among women for whom marriage is delayed until age 15 to 20, and seven years less than those who marry between the ages of 21 and 25. The relationship is fairly continuous, with women who marry at later ages having much later ages at first birth, especially because social norms in most societies emphasise the importance of childbirth taking place only within marriage. Because of a lower awareness of health knowledge, and because physical growth and development are not completed until later teenage years, women who bear children at early ages face a much higher risk of maternal health problems, disability and death, in addition to risking problems for their children.

The table also reveals that women who marry younger are also more likely to marry much older men, as indicated by the husband–wife age gap. The pattern is most
striking in Benin, where women who marry under the age of 15 marry men who are on average 11.1 years older than them. In contrast, women who delay marriage until after they are 30 have an average husband–wife age gap of 4.9 years. The other countries show a similar pattern of a declining husband–wife age gap, as women's age at marriage increases.

These age differences between husband and wife can affect the power, status and autonomy of women within the household. Older men, or their mothers and families, may be able to manipulate or exert control over younger women to a greater extent than in marriages with no such age difference, because women are less mentally, emotionally and physically mature, and/or capable of asserting themselves. Behaviour, attitudes and power relations that are formed early in a marriage may persist over time, especially as regards a woman's status and position in the household. For these reasons, autonomy and status of women may be affected by women's age at marriage and the husband–wife age gap.

There are obviously many dimensions to power, status and agency. Even defining such complex concepts, much less measuring them, is difficult. However, for the purposes of analysis, the selected DHS surveys provide several useful indicators, although the exact questions varied across the surveys. In particular, in India, regarding autonomy and independence, women were asked whether they needed permission to go to market or to visit relatives or friends, and whether they were allowed to have money set aside. They were also asked whether physical violence by the husband towards them can be justified in various instances, including: if the wife is unfaithful, if her family does not give money, if she shows disrespect, if she goes out without telling him, if she neglects the house or children, or if she does not cook properly. These questions indicate the woman's view regarding her status, and especially her status in relation to men.

As in the India survey, women in Benin were asked whether physical violence towards them is justified in various situations, such as if a woman neglects the children, if she goes out without telling her husband, if she argues with him, if she refuses to have sex with him, or if she burns the food.

In Colombia, questions regarding women's status included whether the respondent's husband accuses her of unfaithfulness, does not permit her to meet her girlfriends, tries to limit her contact with family, insists on knowing where she is, or doesn't trust her with money. Additionally, women were asked whether their husband threatened leaving, taking the children away, or withdrawing economic support, or whether she had ever been physically or sexually abused.

In the Turkey survey, women were also asked whether men are justified in beating their wife in a variety of circumstances, in addition to a variety of questions relating to whether they believe that women are or should be subordinate to men. In particular, they were asked whether they believe that important household decisions should be made by men, whether men are wiser, whether women should not argue with men, and whether it is better for a male child than a female child to have education.

Table 2 provides data on the relationship between these measures of status, and women's age at marriage. In India, 70 per cent of women who marry under the age of 15 need permission from their husbands to go to market or to visit relatives or friends, and whether they were allowed to have money set aside. They were also asked whether physical violence by the husband towards them can be justified in various instances, including: if the wife is unfaithful, if her family does not give money, if she shows disrespect, if she goes out without telling him, if she neglects the house or children, or if she does not cook properly. These questions indicate the woman's view regarding her status, and especially her status in relation to men.
Table 2: Status of women: the effects of age at marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Age at Marriage</th>
<th>Beating ever justified</th>
<th>Threatened</th>
<th>Emotionally abused</th>
<th>Physically abused</th>
<th>Sexual violence</th>
<th>Beaten in past year</th>
<th>Need permission</th>
<th>Beating ever justified</th>
<th>Not allowed money</th>
<th>Women subordinate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>&lt;=15</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;=15</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 - 20</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 - 20</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21 - 25</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21 - 25</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 This sample refers to ever-married women over the age of 25 sampled by the DHS for whom we have data on the age of marriage.

2 For Benin, ‘Beating ever justified’ refers to the percentage of women who think it is justified for a husband to beat his wife in any of the following circumstances: if she neglects the children, if she goes out without telling her husband, if she argues with him, if she refuses to have sex with him, and if she burns the food.

3 For Colombia, trust is measured as an average of whether a respondent’s husband accuses her of unfaithfulness, does not permit her to meet her girl friends, tries to limit her contact with family, insists on knowing where she is, and doesn’t trust her with money. ‘Threatened’ is the average of whether a respondent’s husband threatened leaving her for another woman, taking the children from her, or withdrawing economic support. ‘Physically abused’ is the average of whether a woman’s husband had ever pushed, shaken, or thrown something at her, ever slapped or twisted her arm, or ever hit with fist or something harmful. ‘Sexual violence’ refers to whether her husband ever physically enforced sexual relations when it wasn’t wanted.

4 For India, ‘permission’ is an average of whether the woman needs permission to go to market or to visit relatives or friends. ‘Beating ever justified’ is what percentage of women think it is justified for a husband to beat his wife in any of the following circumstances: if she is unfaithful, if her family does not give money, if she shows disrespect, if she goes out without telling him, if she neglects house or children, and if she does not cook properly. Each respondent was also asked whether she was allowed to have money set aside.

5 For Turkey, ‘Beating ever justified’ is what percentage of women think it is justified for a husband to beat his wife in any of the following circumstances: if she burns the food, neglects child care, argues with her husband, talks to other men, spends needlessly, refuses intercourse. ‘Women are subordinate’ is the average of whether she thinks that the important decisions should be made by men, whether men are wiser, women should not argue with men, and it is better for a male child than a female child to have education.
power or autonomy, with women marrying earlier faring much worse than those for whom marriage is delayed.

As stated earlier, in India, Benin and Turkey, questions were asked regarding whether a husband is ever justified in beating his wife under various circumstances. To interpret the results, we created an indicator that equals one if the female respondent reports that a husband is justified in beating his wife under any of the particular conditions asked, and zero otherwise. Despite the fact that the specific circumstances mentioned varied across the surveys, the levels and patterns across the three are similar. Of the women who were married before age 15, 67 per cent of women in Benin, 62 per cent of women in India, and 64 per cent of women in Turkey believed that physical abuse from a husband may be justified under certain circumstances. By contrast, among women who marry between the ages of 26 and 30, only 42 per cent in Benin, 40 per cent in India, and 36 per cent in Turkey believed such violence may ever be justified. Some of these views both reflect, and can be explained by, women’s own view of the position and status of women. For Turkey, the measure of whether respondents believed that women should be subordinate to men is an average of answers to the questions mentioned above (if important household decisions should be made by men, if men are wiser, if women should not argue with men and whether it is more important to give education to boys than girls). Overall, 47 per cent of women who marry before age 15 agreed with these statements, compared to only 24 per cent among those marrying after 30. This is evidence that younger women may be more impressionable and easier to control than those who marry at older ages.

In addition to power or autonomy, the data for India show that age at marriage is also correlated with physical security. About 12 per cent of women who married at age 15 or younger say their husband has beaten them in the past year. This is more than twice the rate among women who married between ages 21 and 25, and three times the rate among women who married after the age of 25. The survey for Colombia also asks explicitly about the incidence of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Of women who married early, 25 per cent say that they have in some way been threatened emotionally by their husbands, in comparison to 13–14 per cent who marry after the age of 25. There is also a large difference between women married early and later in the incidence of physical and sexual abuse. While 20 per cent of all women who married under the age of 15 said that they had been physically abused, delaying marriage until after the age of 25 reduced the incidence of reported violence by almost two-thirds.

For almost all these measures, the largest differences, or the greatest improvements for women, correlated to delaying marriage from 15 or younger to after the age of 15, and especially waiting until after age 20. In fact, for many measures, there was little difference between women married at ages 21 to 25 and women who had delayed marriage until after 25. Of course, for many measures in these countries, women’s status overall is still very poor, even for women who marry later, which is a concern in its own right. However, the results do suggest that large improvements in women’s well-being may be achievable with even small increases in female age at marriage, or reduction in the incidence of marriage at the very youngest ages.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Our analysis has shown that there remains a very high incidence of early marriage in the developing world. Aside from a few notable exceptions, there is little evidence of declining trends, and in many cases, the trends suggest increases in early marriage. Further, we have shown that women who marry young have numerous, sharp disadvantages in terms of education, status and autonomy, even including physical
Early female marriage in the developing world

Safeguarding the problem of early marriage, there needs to be an integrated approach, involving stakeholders at the household, community and national levels.

Legal and institutional reform

At the national level, where laws prohibiting such marriages do not exist, an important first step is to enact them. Such laws signal the importance of the issue, and are a salient symbol of the recognition of the rights of women in marriage. However, as evidenced by the large number of early marriages in countries where such laws do exist, bans and minimum age requirements are not sufficient. In many cases, enforcement of these laws is weak, both because of a resistance from local officials due to prevailing social norms and practices, and because of practical difficulties in enforcing them, such as the widespread lack of birth registration, which makes age verification impossible. The latter underscores the importance of developing the capacity of local and national governments to collect and store vital statistics records for births and marriages. Where the former is the problem, local law enforcement officials and community leaders need to be sensitised to the need to enforce these laws, and to encourage the elimination of early marriages.

Even where local practices and customs favour early marriages, they are in general superseded by national and international laws and conventions. For example, the Preamble of the UN Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration explicitly states that nations ‘...should take all appropriate measures with a view to abolishing such customs, ancient laws and practices...’ that contradict the dictates of the Convention. Necessary steps in this regard include information and awareness programmes and activities aimed at civic authorities and community leaders, as well as at the broader community.

Challenging the economic and social rationales for early marriage

Beyond bans and minimum age laws, it is also essential to focus on the underlying causes of early marriage. In doing so, it is important to recognise and understand the incentives, forces and constraints acting on both the ‘supply’ side – that is, why households marry their daughters at a young age, and the ‘demand’ side – that is, why men prefer younger brides. Both sides may be acting in ways that are ‘rational’, given the prevailing economic, social, health and political environment.

On the supply side, households may marry their daughters at young ages because of the high costs of raising children (food, clothing, education and health care). This is particularly likely in contexts where fertility is high, and parents have many children. In such cases, girls may be viewed as an economic burden, so parents may prefer to marry them out of the household at an earlier age. In addition, national economic conditions or crises, or individual economic shocks, such as a bad harvest or the illness or death of a primary income earner, may also cause households to marry their daughters early. The economic pressures for early marriage may be strengthened where grandparents or other relatives are left to care for children orphaned by AIDS. In this regard, it may even be seen as in the best interests of the child to marry her into a more financially stable household. Similarly, in places where crime and/or violence are high, including regions in conflict or without a strong rule of law, parents may view early marriage as a way to protect young girls from violence or sexual advances from men. A vulnerable household, such as a female-headed household, or one in which an elderly grandparent is left to care for a child, may feel that the child would be better off and safer if married into another household.

On the demand side, from the perspective of the groom, younger brides may be preferred for a number of reasons. First, women who are younger have longer
reproductive lives during which to have children. In regions where desired fertility is high, and/or infant mortality rates or rates of miscarriage are high, there will be a stronger demand for younger brides. Men and their families may also view younger brides as more desirable because they are more easily controlled, and less assertive, because of their lack of physical, mental and emotional maturity. Younger brides may therefore be viewed as more 'trainable'. They may also be better able physically to perform household activities. Finally, younger brides are less likely to have had previous sexual contact, which, due to social norms and the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, may be considered important or essential to the groom and/or his family.

The overall incidence of early marriage is, therefore, influenced by a variety of factors on both the supply and demand side. The demand for young brides in and of itself will not generate significant numbers of early marriages, unless there is a supply of young brides available. Similarly, even if all parents wanted to marry their daughters young, if there were no demand for young brides, no early marriages would occur. Consequently, policy cannot focus on just one side of this interaction. As the old dictum states, 'demand begets supply' and 'supply begets demand'. In particular, where there is strong demand for young brides, parents who delay the marriage of their daughters may have to pay a higher dowry or receive less in bride price, or may find less attractive marriages are the only ones possible as the advancing age of their daughter makes her less marriageable. These forces pressure them to marry their daughters young, even if they would prefer otherwise. Alternatively, if most households prefer to marry their daughters young, even those men preferring older brides would face pressure to marry young brides, because they may fear that most of the more 'desirable' brides will be married early, or that they will have to pay a higher bride price or receive a lower dowry in order to secure a 'desirable' older bride. Thus, policy interventions aimed only at one side of the problem will be less effective, because if either the demand or supply remain strong, the forces of the marriage market will continue to yield a high incidence of early marriage.

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Notes
1 The data and further documentation are available from www.measuredhs.com.
2 Since many of the women born to cohorts later than this will not have yet married at the time of our survey, we are unable to analyse patterns in their age at marriage and the incidence of early marriage.

References
Appendix: Trend of Age at First Marriage, By Year of Birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Age of Marriage</th>
<th>% Married Under 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>West Africa</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>18.84 18.84 18.74 18.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>17.56 17.42 17.66 17.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>17.05 17.75 18.05 17.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivory Coast</td>
<td>18.93 18.78 19.04 18.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>19.63 18.74 19.29 18.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>16.79 16.62 17.24 16.65</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>18.29 17.25 17.89 17.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Togo</td>
<td>18.79 18.62 19.11 18.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-Saharan Africa</strong></td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>18.42 18.76 19.40 19.60</td>
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1 This sample refers to ever-married women over the age of 25 in the DHS for which we have data on the age of marriage.
Rethinking culture and development: marriage and gender among the tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka

Amali Philips

Marriage is the most auspicious rite of passage in the life of a Tamil woman worker in Sri Lanka's tea plantations. It supposedly confers on her the power to bring wealth, prosperity and health to her family, and to enhance the well-being of her husband. In reality, however, married women on the plantations experience self-denial, sacrifice and subordination in impoverished male-ruled households, even as they suffer exploitation and gender discrimination as workers in the capitalist system of plantation production. Patriarchy and the plantations, or kinship culture and capitalist agriculture, complement each other in subordinating women as wives and workers. In this article, I explore the connections between gender-based inequality and culture, focusing on women’s experiences of marriage and work. I then reflect on the possible directions for development programmes undertaken in the plantations.

Where gender issues and women’s rights are concerned, development programmes should support women’s empowerment by challenging ideologies and practices that are offensive to women. Too often, development programmes fall into the trap of what is called the ‘cultural relativist fallacy’ – that is, the idea that the cultural beliefs and practices of others are beyond criticism and should not be questioned. An equally erroneous idea that also informs development programmes is that cultures are monolithic and unchanging. No culture is monolithic, unchanging, or beyond improvement, and when it comes to women’s rights, it ought not to be so.

The material for this article is drawn from a pilot study on Gender Ideologies and Gender Relations in the Tea Plantations of Sri Lanka (Philips 2001), for which I was the principal researcher. The study was undertaken in 1999/2000, by the Participatory Action and Learning Methodologies (PALM) Foundation (a Sri Lankan NGO with funding from the Netherlands), as part of a larger Plantation Communities Project, sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The CIDA project recognised the need to ensure that women’s and men’s gender needs were separately identified and addressed in development programmes. The purpose of the gender pilot study was to look at gender ideologies and relations between women and men in the tea plantation communities, and to explore opportunities for empowering women in key areas of life where they were marginalised.

In particular, the study identified opportunities to undertake specific programmes with a focus on gender-based inequality, that would target women as agents of their own development, rather than as mere ‘problems’ or ‘beneficiaries’ of development. This reflects the emerging recognition among development activists and feminist NGOs that the empowerment of women calls for the problematising of ‘gender relations’, rather than women themselves (Jackson and Pearson 1998).
The changes promoting empowerment, must, however, be mediated from within, and must come from women themselves and cannot be delivered by an external agency.

**Gender relations in the plantations**

From British colonial times, through independence in 1948, and phases of nationalisation and re-privatisation of the estates since the 1970s, the culture of the plantation communities has been sustained by a system of capitalist agricultural production based on a captive labour force living in an ethnic enclave. The tea plantation communities are a socially marginalised and economically deprived group in Sri Lanka’s multi-ethnic society. Most Sri Lankans are Sinhalese, and the majority of these are Buddhists. There is a significant minority of indigenous Hindu Tamils, and smaller proportions of Sinhala and Tamil-speaking Christians and Muslims. Eighty per cent of the tea estate workers are Hindu Tamils, whose ancestors were brought as indentured labour from South India by the British colonialists in the nineteenth century. The Indian Tamils number around seven per cent of Sri Lanka’s population of 18.5 million, and 70 per cent of them live and work on the plantations (MEDA 1998, 4). The majority of the families on the plantations go back three or four generations: many of the parents, and even grandparents, of today’s young workers were born on the estates.

The isolation of the plantations from the rest of Sri Lankan society has contributed to the consolidation of traditional caste divisions, and gender relations, including marital relations, among the plantation Tamils. The majority of the workers belong to the lower castes, most of whom are organised into labour gangs, under labour supervisors known as *kanganies*, who, until recently, belonged to the higher castes. Women comprise over half the workers in the tea plantations, and are mostly employed as tea pluckers. This is widely understood to be because of women’s manual dexterity, and their patient and passive countenance. Work and home life, production and reproduction all take place under regimented conditions, ideally suited for the transformation of both women and men workers into ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault 1979, 138). The women, in turn, are treated much like children in need of paternal control and guidance, which comes from male supervisors at work, and male kin at home.

Women experience the plantation hierarchy and household patriarchy in their multiple positions and roles, as workers, mothers, wives, widows, daughters, sisters, daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law. The ideologies underlying their different experiences of gender and kinship relations are manifest in religious precepts, folk tales, and stories, part of the popular culture of the plantation. These ideologies animate everyday actions and rituals of the plantation itself, and the households within it. Gender ideologies in the plantations characterise women as docile, dependent, ignorant, inept and sexually weak, emotional and irrational, lacking in leadership skills, and incapable of taking the initiative. The men on the plantations dismiss women’s work as monotonous and unskilled, and trivialise women’s contributions. I saw gangs of female workers being supervised by baton-wielding *kanganies* who bully, verbally abuse and, I was told, sexually proposition the women workers. There are virtually no women *kanganies* because, according to male *kanganies*, ‘women lack initiative, ambition, responsibility and brains’.

The economic contributions of women to their households and families through their earnings as tea pluckers, and their role as workers contributing to the country’s tea and export production, have clearly not translated into a higher status or autonomy for women. In kinship and gender discourses, wifehood and motherhood are
considered to be the essential and defining social relations of women, but women's dependent status is never left in doubt.

**Marriage in the plantations**

Marriage, in Tamil culture, is the most celebrated rite of passage for a woman, and fulfils the purpose of her being. The importance of marriage for a woman is demonstrated by the practice of horoscope recording, used in match-making. The horoscope record for a woman begins at birth, and continues through her first menstruation and other significant events in her life. Women who participated in focus group discussions on marriage listed the ideal matching traits for spouses as 'patience, obedience and passivity' for a woman, and 'aggressiveness and anger' for a man. Horoscope matching is intended to match the sexual compatibility of spouses and their individual personalities, so that spousal conflicts emerging from an assertive or aggressive wife can be avoided.

In the popular culture of the plantation, marriage 'cools down' the woman's sexuality; the woman is seen as sexually loose, and her sexual energies can be controlled and directed towards procreation only by her husband in the context of a family. 'Being a family' is how women describe sexual relations within marriage. An elderly woman explained female sexuality to me as stemming from women's 'irrational, spontaneous and emotional' nature. A young married woman told me, 'women must be controlled, for if there is no control women will go astray. A wayward husband, on the other hand, will find his way back to his wife' (interview, June 2000). As I will illustrate later, women's experiences of marriage rarely justify these views on female sexuality: it is men, and not women, who tend to be guilty of marital infidelity.

As in other Tamil communities in South India, women are considered incomplete as women until they marry and acquire social respectability as 'wives' (Kapadia 1995). Marriage (literally, 'auspiciousness', in Sanskrit), transforms women from 'nobodies' to 'somebodies'. The social identity they acquire is based on their attachment to their husbands. The status of respectability as an 'auspicious woman' is conferred on women by the men who choose them as their wives. The act of 'choosing' is always the man's right. This is so whether marriages are arranged by elders, or contracted by individuals in what are called 'love marriages'. Wives are expected to reciprocate the favour by performing daily and yearly religious rituals to petition for the well-being and long life of their husbands. The cultural mantra among women is that 'a woman cannot live alone without a husband'. The husband is regarded as the 'protector' and 'provider' for the wife.

The practice of dowry is not a problem in the Tamil communities in the plantations, as it is in other South Asian societies. This is mainly because worker-families in the plantations have hardly any property to give as dowry. Women's work as tea pluckers brings in a regular income; an independent entitlement to the living quarters, if the husband is working outside the plantations; and the security of a pension fund after retirement. Thus, women's work as pluckers brings benefits which are regarded as compensating for lack of dowry. Parents send their daughters to work in the plantation as soon as they reach the minimum age of 17, to ensure they can trade their daughters' employment status against dowry. In other instances, men might demand dowry by promising to support the wife at home rather than have her work. Despite men's pre-marital promises, women invariably end up continuing to work since, in practice, the husband's earnings are never enough to support a family. Women work longer hours than men in their work as tea pluckers, and earn more, because the demand for plucking labour is generally greater than the demand for men's work in estate maintenance.
Marital practices complement the system of labour supply in the plantations. Marriages involving workers on the same estate have no impact on the distribution of labour between estates, but men or women marrying outside their own estates results in the movement of labour. It is more common for women to marry and move out of their estates than it is for men. A woman moving out of her estate after marriage to live on her husband’s estate is consistent with the practice of patrilocal residence in south Asia (that is, the newly married husband and wife live in the locality of the husband’s father’s relatives). Whether an in-marrying woman is hired as a tea plucker on her new husband’s estate depends on her previous employment status, and on her husband being employed on the estate himself. In contrast, a man marrying out of his estate and moving to his wife’s estate (corresponding to the practice of matrilocal residence – that is, moving to live in the locality of the wife’s relatives), is not usually hired on the new estate. His employment in the new estate does not depend on his wife’s employment status, but only on the demand for labour in that estate.

**Marriage forms and rituals**

The plantation Tamils have a Dravidian kinship structure – that is, a system which permits the marriage of close and distant cross-cousins from the father’s and mother’s sides of the family. Thus, a woman or man can marry the children of opposite-sex siblings or any other cousin who is terminologically equated with a cross-cousin. Cross-generational kin, such as uncle/niece pairs, are also allowed to marry provided they are not too far apart in age. In the research, both men and women justified cross-kin marriage preferences, as ‘preserving the closeness of kinship’. The living arrangements of extended families on the plantations tend to encourage marriage between family members. Families inhabit overcrowded and adjacent housing quarters. Most people do not move away, due to lack of alternative economic opportunities.

Finally, there is a cultural norm that people will marry within their caste, which restricts the pool of marriageable spouses. Marriages within castes lead to many intermarriages among previously related families. Women tend to prefer cross-kin marriages, as opposed to marrying strangers, in the hope of avoiding spousal abuse, alcoholic husbands, infidelity and abandonment. A young woman who is married to her maternal uncle explained to me that ‘a woman could more easily secure the affection of her husband if he is kin and not a stranger’. Alas, kin or no kin, marriage does not always give a woman the security she expects in terms of ensuring her husband’s affection, and the support of the extended family. While spouses who are cousins share the same kinship status prior to marrying, there is no equality in the marital relationship of husband and wife where male superiority always prevails.

Other types of marriages include levirate marriages (a man’s marriage to a deceased brother’s wife) and sororate marriages (a woman’s marriage to a deceased sister’s husband), as well as polygamy. Multiple unions are not formalised or accepted by most first wives, who tolerate them for the sake of peace and security. Women tend to blame themselves for their husbands’ lapses from fidelity, since women are brought up to assume responsibility for the sexual transgressions of their husbands. Men use their wives’ alleged infertility as the reason for their own infidelity, and it is always the woman who takes the blame if a couple do not have children. In many instances, extramarital unions involve the man’s sister-in-law; men may also take sexual advantage of their sisters-in-law who live alongside them in extended family households. A woman whose husband had forced himself on her sister tried to play down her husband’s infraction, on the basis of the ‘special blood bond’ between sisters.
(interview, December 1999). If at all, women would rather have their sisters as ‘co-wives’, as opposed to women who are not part of the family. I also came across cases where young women who were forced into sexual acts by their older sisters’ husbands, ended up committing suicide to escape their shame and humiliation.

Tamil society prepares women for their reproductive roles as wives and mothers, through an elaborate system of life-cycle rituals. Puberty rituals and fertility rituals are other life-cycle rituals of women. The ritual of first menstruation marks the beginning of a girl’s sexuality, and establishes the code of conduct for the pubescent girl to keep her sexuality strictly under control until her formal marriage. Marriage rituals project the image of the ideal wife - virtuous, auspicious and the bearer of children - and distract from the sorry (and even sordid) realities of married life. In the Tamil marriage ritual, the tying of the tali (the marriage pendant, suspended on a yellow thread or gold chain), represents the central rite of marriage. It is a rite of passage that marks a woman’s entry as ‘wife’ into her husband’s domain. The tali is the woman’s ‘protective amulet’ (Reynolds 1980), that signifies the protector role of her husband, and defines her sexual, marital and domestic boundaries. As the wearer of the tali, the wife is delimited by a code of conduct marked by chastity, fidelity and devotion. Married women are expected to demonstrate this through daily and yearly rituals of tali renewal, and offerings for the health, long life, and the well-being of their husbands. The tali is periodically cleansed by dipping it in ‘purifying’ turmeric water, and the threaded tali is renewed by replacing the frayed thread.

Marriage, as I have suggested, confers auspiciousness on women, while bearing children confirms this state further and makes women ‘beautiful’ and ‘complete’. Women are considered to be incomplete as women until they have had children, while women without children are viewed as being barren, malevolent, envious and unattractive. Women perform fertility rituals and go on pilgrimages to designated temples to appease the goddess Kali whose wrath can destroy a woman’s foetus or render her infertile. Women long to have children, so that their husbands do not have a reason to desert them.

In contrast to the ‘auspicious’ married woman, a widow is ostracised as one who has failed in her wifely duty to preserve the marriage by keeping her husband alive. The songs at the husband’s funeral describe the widow as a sinner who longs to join her husband. As one woman noted, ‘a woman has life only when her husband is alive, but once the husband is dead the women’s life is over’ (individual interview, March 2000). The widow has to remove her tali 16 days after her husband’s death, and the tali removal makes her ritually inauspicious, and socially inconspicuous. If the widow has a son, however, she can continue to wear the tali, since the son assumes the role of her ‘protector’. Lower-caste widows can overcome the negative state of widowhood by remarrying, but upper-caste widows do not have the same option, since re-marriage has no social sanction among the upper castes.

From the time of the British colonial rule, ritual practices have been incorporated in the ‘production culture’ of the plantations. Fertility rituals conducted in the domestic and work spaces of the plantations embody women’s role as ‘reproducers’. Operating in parallel to the household rituals are the seasonal fertility rites, performed by married women on the tea hills in worship of the tea goddess, who makes the tea crops fertile. These agro-fertility rituals have become an integral part of plantation work organisation, and are performed at the beginning of the planting and plucking seasons, to invoke the deity’s blessings for a bountiful season. The estate management provides resources for, and actively participates in, these rituals. They are given the same
importance as the fertility rites of individual women, since the livelihood and daily wages of women depend on a good harvest of tea. Widows, barren women, and menstruating women are banned from fertility rites, as they are considered to be inauspicious and impure. But there is no such taboo against the inauspicious women toiling away as tea pluckers and home-makers.

**Gender roles and relationships in marriage**

The term *manaivi* (wife) is derived from the corresponding Tamil term for a house or home, *manai*, which signifies a women’s central association with the home. The phrase *kundumpa pengal* (‘family women’) captures the central role and responsibility of wives and mothers in the family. This is often associated with ‘women’s power’ in the affairs of the household. But this association between women’s roles, responsibilities, and power is rather vacuous, given the helplessness of many women to protect themselves from alcoholic and/or abusive husbands. Despite being wage earners and contributors to the household income, women have no way of preventing their husbands spiriting away their money and pawning their jewellery for drinking and gambling. Women who are deserted by their husbands for other women have no legal avenues to claim divorce or family support. Nonetheless, women refer to their husbands as the ‘head of the household’, and describe themselves as being ‘one step lower’ than, or simply ‘slaves’, of their husbands. The man is considered to be the provider, because it is ‘he who puts rice on the plate’. This ideological assertion totally inverts the reality that, in most households, women actually earn more than men. In addition, the planning, cooking and serving of meals are always women’s responsibilities. So in both senses it is the woman who actually ‘puts rice on the plate’!

Male superiority in conjugal relationships is a fact of family life, and is manifested in the daily routines and customs of the household. Women always partake of less food than their husbands and brothers, and nutritional deficiencies are worse among women than men (interviews with estate medical staff). Women, including elderly women, sleep on the floor giving the available sleeping cots to their elderly or other male kin. Naming taboos, such as referring to the husband by his name, define forms of female respect, but husbands feel free to direct disrespectful and demeaning forms of address towards women. The latter, as I have noted earlier, are also the targets of opprobrious epithets flung at them by the male labour *kanganies* at work. A husband’s right to his wife’s sexuality results in forced sex and unwanted pregnancies as few men on the plantations are trained and/or disciplined to practise safe sex. Plantation welfare staff have noted that many pregnancies of working women result from forced sex by drunken husbands. Domestic violence and alcoholism are two of the most troubling marital experiences of women. Women in a focus group discussion on domestic violence resignedly lamented that ‘monthly beatings are part of a married woman’s life’ (June 2000).

Marital relationships are seriously affected by the overcrowded and confined space of the barrack-type housing quarters, and the resulting lack of privacy, including the presence of in-laws or parents. Wives who live in nuclear family households enjoy relative autonomy, but not necessarily greater authority. The husband’s authority over his wife is assured in either household. A woman’s marital experiences are often exacerbated by poor treatment from her mother-in-law, who may compete with her for influence over her son, because of her own insecurity. There is a saying on the plantations that: ‘a mother-in-law should never show affection to her daughter-in-law’ (interview, May 2000).

**Work and rewards**

The women on the plantations carry a triple burden of work on their shoulders, including
wage work, housework, and ritual or religious work. The bulk of the domestic work, cooking, cleaning, caring for the children and the elderly, collecting firewood and water, tending vegetable gardens and cattle are performed by women in addition to their long day in the tea fields from seven o'clock in the morning to half-past four in the afternoon. Poor water supplies and sanitary conditions, and lack of toilet facilities in some estates, add to the already tight schedule of women: they have to accompany their pubescent daughters to the bush for their daily ablutions, and to bathing places in the open areas of the small brooks that flow through the estates. While there are UNICEF-funded nurseries in some of the estates, the absence of proper childcare facilities in general, and the long trek to and from the fields take a heavy toll on women’s time, energy and health. In contrast, men’s household tasks are typically restricted to shopping, tending the cattle and occasionally collecting firewood, despite their shorter working day performing maintenance jobs, which ends at around half-past one in the afternoon. Both men and women explain that men work for shorter hours because of the ‘more physically demanding’ work performed by them.

Women’s work load and working hours have increased in recent years, due to the profit-maximising goals of private companies. The private management of the plantations began in the 1990s when the government, as part of its economic liberalisation programme, entered into long-term contracts with private Sri Lankan companies to manage groups of estates. The current management practice is to cut back on maintenance work as a cost-cutting measure, thus reducing the demand for men’s labour on the estates. Despite these changes, men are reluctant to help women with the domestic chores because housework is culturally considered to be ‘women’s work’. An elderly man I interviewed attributed women’s work burden to their ‘karma’ and the ‘sin of being born a woman’, while

women in a group discussion with a touch of sarcastic irony, described their burdens as ‘the boon we have received from the gods’ (individual interview, May 2000).

Until recently, men had the right to collect the wages of their wives and daughters, and the practice continues in a few estates, even now. Men whom I interviewed insisted that ‘women know nothing about money’, although women are clearly neither financially inept nor inexperienced. In fact, as many women pointed out during my interviews and discussions, it is almost always the woman who saves and invests the household money, whenever she is in a situation to do so. Women do not mind their husbands controlling the household finances but they complain that men squander their meagre incomes on drinking and gambling. Women also object to the fact that their husbands are free to spend as they like, yet insist that women get their permission to spend money. In focus group discussions, women argued that when they take charge of the family finances, they are far more responsible than men, and spend primarily on the children’s educational and other needs and on household necessities.

The plantation households have very little by way of physical possessions, but even these are ‘gendered’ – that is, seen as owned by either men or women. Although, as stated earlier, most women contribute as much, and often more, to the household income, men own most household possessions of worth, even when women have purchased these, although women are not barred from using or enjoying household possessions even when they have no right of ownership. The ‘line room’ where working families live, the small garden plot in front of it, the cattle possessed by some households, and electronic or leisure goods such as television and radio, are considered ‘male goods’. The women are left with jewellery (which they collect with a passion, mostly for their daughters), and the kitchen chattels.
Women’s engagement with institutions on the plantations

Dismantling unequal gender power structures is more difficult than challenging class or caste structures, as gender relations are emotionally charged, and played out within marriage and the family. The family is also the space in which the cycle of gender inequality is perpetuated through socialising young girls and women to accept inequality as the norm, through rituals, practices and ideologies.

Hence, transforming gender relations on the plantations requires organisations to support women in challenging inequality in culturally sensitive areas of life, such as marriage, family, household and religion. These, as I have shown, define a large part of plantation women’s experiences of gender inequality. I have tried to highlight the fact that pre-existing inequality between women and men is now entwined into the culture and practices of the plantation community. In other words, traditional ideologies and customs about female inferiority have not wilted under the form of capitalist production on the plantation, which has engaged both women and men as wage workers. On the contrary, the plantation system has benefited from traditional social organisation and cultural ideologies and practices, especially those relating to kinship and marriage. For the 150 years since plantation agriculture began here, women have borne the brunt of the work of tea production and looking after families on the plantation. Yet women have had no forum or opportunity to articulate their separate needs and interests.

Trade unions

The trade unions are effectively male fiefdoms, which offer little scope to women to participate. In addition, the cultural constraints against women playing an active public role persist, and men, as household heads, do not easily countenance their wives becoming active in union or political activities.

The unions fight with the management on workers’ rights in general, especially wages, but are not at all sensitive to the myriad needs that are specific to women, due to their position in the gender division of labour. Day-care facilities, sanitation, school transport for their daughters, alcoholic husbands etc., are women’s concerns, but neither the trade union leadership nor the estate management has taken any worthwhile initiative towards addressing these concerns. Women’s representation in the trade unions is provided through Mather Sangams, or women’s wings of the trade unions, but the activities of these units are limited to women’s traditional activities, including decorating for religious events, organising rituals, and gift exchanges.

Development activities: moving beyond basic needs

The plantation Tamils lag behind other communities in Sri Lanka on every significant socio-economic measure, including educational enrolment and retention, literacy rates, and health and nutrition. This is despite the efforts of the government to meet the basic needs of plantation Tamils through the Plantation Housing and Social Welfare Trust (PHSWT), and the activities of local and international NGOs.

Until recently, development programmes in the plantations have focused largely on meeting the ‘basic needs’ of workers, and not on addressing the issue of gender inequality among them. The assumption of many in development organisations appears to be that if the basic needs of the plantation communities are addressed, gender equality will automatically follow. There is also an uncritical inertia regarding challenging cultural norms and practices, even when these are manifestly oppressive to women. Yet feminist anthropologists have long noted that gender inequalities are embedded in ‘culture’ (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995).
The centrality of culture in defining women’s experiences of work and marriage needs to be made clear to all working in development, and the task of questioning cultural ideologies and practices should be a key component of development policies and programmes.

Currently, some programmes actually reinforce cultural stereotypes of Tamil plantation women as passive, poor, ignorant, and easier to persuade and coerce compared to men. A notorious example of this approach is the family planning programmes, which are narrowly focused on population control through limiting fertility. Health-care providers seldom target men, partly because of androcentric cultural beliefs on the part of the plantation communities that sterilisation will weaken a man, sap his energy and prevent him from performing hard labour (interviews with women and estate medical staff). My discussions with women about family planning revealed that women are not sufficiently educated about methods of contraception, and are not given the proper information about the permanent nature of invasive sterilisation. Some of the women who had been sterilised informed me that they were thinking of adopting a child, as they had been permanently disabled from having children (interviews, July 2000). The language of persuasion used by midwives and other health-care providers infantalises and disempowers women workers, and disregards women’s right to determine their own reproductive functions. Referring to the harassment of women by estate midwives, one woman noted, ‘What do they care about how many children we have since we are the ones who are responsible for them?’ (interview, March 2000).

Even if they do aim to address women’s gender-specific needs, development programmes often do not allow women from the plantations themselves to define their priorities, resulting in activities which may actually be at odds with women’s daily needs and longer-term interests. For example, some NGOs have insisted on women’s participation in home garden or fish cultivation projects, as a condition of receiving assistance for building housing and toilets. In my experience, women seldom show interest in NGO projects, hardly having the time to participate in development activities that are unrelated to their daily routines.

However, things are changing. There is now a greater acknowledgement of the centrality of the question of gender inequality in addressing the development needs of workers on the plantations. Changing the negative aspects of culture which perpetuate gender inequality cannot be done from outside. Yet women themselves can hardly be expected to be interested in challenging their unequal status in society, when their basic needs arising from this unequal status are not being addressed. This can be solved by introducing programmes which specifically aim to advance women’s strategic gender needs, separately from the mainstream development programmes intended to address the so-called basic needs of communities. Components which address women’s strategic needs should also be included in all basic needs programmes. In addition, the language of gender transformation is absent or peripheral to most programmes on the plantations. Using the language of transformation would inevitably challenge gender inequality in marriage and beyond, and its ideological underpinnings. Most importantly, development programmes which promote gender equality should also target men, and should be long-term, sustained and gradual.

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Notes

1 The material for this article is drawn from field research conducted in six Sri Lankan tea estates between December 1999 and July 2000.

References


Negotiating violence and non-violence in Cambodian marriages

Rebecca Surtees

Domestic violence is a pressing issue in Cambodia. Combating it requires an understanding of the social meanings behind it. As such, policy makers and planners need to start from a careful picture of the cultural terrain upon which this violence is played out. This will equip them to recognise potential points of entry for interventions. This article begins by exploring the relationship between social structures, culture and domestic violence in Cambodia. It then turns to the work of two Cambodian NGOs – Cambodian Women’s Crisis Centre (CWCC) and Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV). Their work is founded on both the cultural terrain of Cambodia, and international human rights standards.

Domestic violence has been increasingly recognised as both a social problem and an issue of human rights in recent decades. In Cambodia, development discourse and programmes have increasingly acknowledged the existence and widespread impact of domestic violence in both advocacy and applied interventions. Coming to terms with, and addressing, this violence is urgent. This in turn necessitates a finely tuned understanding of the interplay of social structures, culture and domestic violence. By locating the elements that promote and perpetrate domestic violence, we are better able to understand why and how this violence occurs, as well as how it can be targeted through interventions. In considering the work of two Cambodian NGOs – Cambodian Women’s Crisis Centre (CWCC) and Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV) – we can identify key elements of successful domestic violence interventions in Cambodia. The success of these approaches is in their skill at acknowledging and accommodating the cultural terrain upon which domestic violence is played out, while simultaneously challenging and re-conceptualising the degree to which domestic violence is considered acceptable and permissible.

Qualitative data indicates that between 15–25 per cent of Cambodian women are beaten by their husbands (WGWRC 1994), and 73.9 per cent of women in a national household survey were aware of at least one family which suffers domestic violence (Nelson and Zimmerman 1996). Research also indicates that domestic violence is an issue in families across the socio-economic spectrum; education, age and income have no correlative effect on the use of violence by intimate partners (ibid.). As one Cambodian woman observed to me, ‘It happens a lot, to my friends, to my family… Many women in Cambodia are hurt by husbands’ (interview, July 1998).

Not only is the violence widespread: it is also severe. Over half of abused women in the national household study sustained
injuries; more than 50 per cent of women were struck with an object, and 9.1 per cent of injured women had been tied up and hit. Equally disturbingly, 36.4 per cent of women reported having been threatened with a knife or gun, and 5.5 per cent of women reported being stabbed or shot at by their abusive spouse (Nelson and Zimmerman 1996). One woman told of being attacked by her husband with an axe. Another woman spoke of being beaten with whatever was at hand, explaining, ‘he beats me with the lock and chain from his cyclo, he whips me with a plastic rope, he slaps my face, he pushes me down and kicks me. He punches me with all his might. He beats me with a bamboo rod... He grabs whatever is near him’ (Zimmerman 1994, 81).

But uncovering a glaring social problem is one thing. Accounting for it and addressing it in appropriate ways is another. To understand and redress domestic violence, it is critical that we analyse and understand the cultural terrain upon which this violence occurs. Our starting point must necessarily be a contextual understanding of marriage in Cambodian society, and the meanings this holds for Cambodian women themselves. As critical is an understanding of social attitudes to domestic violence and how these contribute to and mitigate domestic violence. As Kleinman argues, ‘everyday practices [are] the appropriate site to understand how larger orders of social force come together with micro-contexts of local power, to shape human problems in ways that are resistant to the standard approaches of policies and interventions programs’ (2000, 227).

**Women as wives and mothers – status within Cambodian marriages**

Cambodian society is centred around the family and household, in which ‘the bonds between husband and wife, siblings, and especially parents and children, are the strongest and most enduring relations found in village social organisation’ (Ebihara 1974). While the conflict and turmoil of recent years have done much to disrupt social structures, this observation remains salient.

Women’s role within this template is primarily as wife and mother; marriage and parenthood are important signifiers of status within Cambodian society (Ledgerwood 1990). Women are tasked with the care of the children, responsibility for the household and household economy, and ultimately with ensuring the success of their husbands. Buddhism – to which 95 per cent of the population adheres – also privileges the status of wife and mother, in that the growth and survival of the Buddhist monastic order (sangha) is dependent on women’s donations of sons, food and money (Keyes 1984; Ledgerwood 1990).

In Cambodia, as is the case throughout Southeast Asia, women gain an important public value through domesticity. They gain prestige as mothers, and official status as elders, worthy of respect. Women are able to exploit this status in their economic ventures and for financial gain (Wazir 1995). As Wazir argues, ‘motherhood diffuses boundaries between the public and domestic spheres and gives women the legitimacy to explore other forms of personal or social activity outside the family’ (1995, 19).

Compelling evidence abounds of the privilege attached to the roles of wife and mother. For example, Ledgerwood (1990) recounts instances of Cambodian women who no longer lived with their abusive husbands, but nevertheless displayed photos of their husbands in their homes, in places of respect. Further evidence is found in the increased prevalence of polygamy in Cambodian society, a practice which was not traditionally widespread. The dearth of men caused by the war (1970–1975) and the ensuing civil turbulence, which endured until 1998, forced many women to choose between being a second wife or remaining unmarried. While the status of second wife is
less valued, given the primacy of family and women’s role within it in the Cambodian social order, some researchers argue that many women prefer to be second and third wives, rather than to remain unmarried (Ledgerwood 1996; Baldwin et al. 2000).

Social acceptance of domestic violence

Social acceptance of domestic violence is also a factor in its perniciousness. In Cambodia, many men feel it is their right to beat their wives for ‘legitimate’ reasons, which generally centre on a wife’s failure to fulfil her familial responsibilities. Beating is a legitimate punishment for preparing unappetising food, being sexually unreceptive, or ineffective child-rearing techniques. In situations of domestic violence, the question is thus always what the woman has done to deserve it (Ledgerwood 1990).

Acceptance of domestic abuse is reinforced in literary texts and proverbs. For example, the chhapi srey (the woman’s code)¹ advises women to: ‘Follow the command of the husband like a slave; dread your husband’s heart for fear of otherwise being insulted or beaten; cook well and never dare to eat until your husband returns home; suppress your emotions to avoid the risk of having your husband insult you; even if your husband has a terrible temper, you must never dare to reply’ (quoted in Zimmerman 1994, 26; Pou 1988).

Social acceptance also leads in some cases to institutional acceptance. One research study found that 48 per cent of police surveyed did not consider domestic violence a crime, and only 17 per cent of police officers who witnessed a man whipping his wife would arrest the man (WRC no date). Even in the NGO community, increasingly oriented towards human rights, women and men workers betray varying degrees of acceptance of this violence. For example, one Cambodian female human rights worker strongly disagreed with her agency’s interference in an instance of domestic violence, arguing that the woman might have done something to merit the assault (interview, May 1998).

However, while domestic violence is socially accepted, it is important to emphasise that it is not encouraged. There are social mechanisms to discourage violence. For example, there is a view that, by resorting to physical violence, one lowers oneself in the eyes of the community (Ledgerwood 1990; McLellan 1996). But this needs to be read in context. If a man beats his wife for no reason, shame might play a role. However, if he beats her for socially acceptable reasons (i.e. lax household responsibilities, infidelity), shame is not likely to be an issue (Ledgerwood 1990). Family intervention may also discourage domestic violence, with research indicating that ‘more than twice as many women whose parents are dead are abused as women who live with their parents’ (Nelson and Zimmerman 1996, 29). However, while families may intervene to stop the violence, they may also subsequently encourage women to return to their husbands. As one mother advised her abused daughter, ‘Please go back home. Don’t be afraid of your husband, he won’t beat you until you are dead. At most he will just hit you until you are unconscious. If he beats you to death, I will bury your bones’ (Zimmerman 1994, 26).

Another factor which makes domestic violence so pernicious in Cambodia is that it is seen as a private, family issue rather than as a public and social problem. However, to read and understand domestic violence as a public issue means that it appears in its true light, as one of many manifestations of social violence, rather than as a form of violence which is outside the domain of public awareness and significance. To promote this understanding of domestic violence is neither a simple nor an insignificant undertaking. Indeed, one of the major obstacles in combating domestic violence everywhere in the world is that it is commonly
conceptualised as a private issue rather than a public concern. This is dangerous for a number of reasons. First, it suggests domestic violence can be understood in isolation, outside of the social and political context in which it is perpetrated. As Marcus argues, 'all too often, it is distinguished from other forms of punishable violence in a society; this distinction confines it to the category of “discipline”, or response to “provocation”; it is minimised or denied, or viewed as individual and aberrant, rather than a culturally justified and endorsed systemic practice designed to silence and to coerce a clearly identifiable population' (1994, 17). It permits a focus on the individual as a sufferer of violence, and an ignorance of the fact that such violence is systemic (Surtees 2000).

Second, seeing domestic violence as a private affair permits society to ignore the specific, gendered nature of domestic violence. Women suffer domestic violence because they are women, and they suffer it at the hands of their intimate partners. The punishment (or lack thereof) for perpetrators of domestic violence further supports this assertion. As one aid worker in Cambodia explained to me, ‘When a man is killed by a woman, the woman will go to jail. When a man kills a man, the man will go to jail. When a man kills a woman, the husband pays off the family, or nothing at all happens. It is the difference between women and men’ (interview, June 1998). Of course, domestic violence is not simply an issue of sanctioning men’s violence against women. Were a man to beat or kill his neighbour’s wife, there would be repercussions. Domestic violence is violence within marriage and the family, which has everything to do with the sexual nature of the relationship between (abusing) man and (abused) woman. Sexual relations, sanctioned as taking place within marriage, and hence the private domain, introduce a different set of social dynamics and allowances in terms of violence (Surtees 2000).

Third, seeing domestic violence as ‘private’ implies that the state has no duty or ability to intervene. Yet the dichotomy of public/private in the contemporary state is an overstatement. There are numerous examples of the selective intrusion of the state into the private sphere, including taxation, social security, immigration laws and marriage and family law, established religion and military service (Carrillo 1992). As Marcus has put it, ‘family and state are not unrelated institutions’ (1994, 26) and it is disingenuous to suggest that family issues are beyond the state’s control (Surtees 2000).

If domestic violence is seen as an issue of public concern, it can be understood in terms of what it seeks to achieve and promote, which moves the focus beyond the act itself or the context in which it occurs. If we accept that violence in general is ‘a strategy for asserting control and domination and creating terror’, we must accept that domestic violence seeks the same objectives (Marcus 1994, 26). The fact that it is perpetrated within an intimate personal relationship does not modify, or in any way change, the objective of the violence. It cannot be understood as a ‘lovers’ quarrel’ or trivialised as a ‘spat’. Further, women’s experiences as victims of domestic violence must be reconsidered. While victims of ‘public’ violence elicit social sympathy and support, abused women are often dismissed as provoking the assault, or because it is judged by outsiders to be ‘none of our business’. As a result, abused women and their experiences are ‘disconnected from the social, cultural, economic and political context of domination and subordination’ (Marcus 1994, 33).

From understanding to intervention

The above discussion has sketched out the social terrain upon which domestic violence is played out. Understanding this is critical in the designing of policy interventions.
which fit the Cambodian social context. As Kleinman observes, ‘the problem may be global, but the intervention needs to be oriented to a local world’ (2000, 235). Focus must be placed ‘on the interpersonal space of suffering, the local, ethnographic context of action. This requires not only engagement with what is at stake for participants in those local worlds, but bringing those local participants (not merely national experts) into the process of developing and assessing programs’ (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996, 18). This means that concern for human rights must always be central, but development programmes must also accommodate local cultures, to ensure that these facilitate and change, rather than form an obstacle to it (Hobart 1993).

Thus, anti-violence interventions which are feasible elsewhere may be inappropriate in Cambodia. Take, for example, the ‘solution’ of suggesting that a woman divorces an abusive husband. Even in situations of domestic violence, Cambodian women are very reluctant to leave their marriages. Divorce deprives women of their privileged status as wife, closes many access routes to social power, and decreases women’s status (Ledgerwood 1996). As CWCC director Ung Chantoul commented to me, ‘abused women have an option here at the shelter to a certain extent... we can help them get a job, we can help them with counselling...but then the women are often saying “it is hard to be a widow”. We must think of what it is like to live in Cambodia without a husband’ (interview, June 1998).

Divorced women suffer social discrimination (Ovesen et al. 1996; Zimmerman 1994) and ‘censure from the community acted as an extremely strong deterrent to divorce, particularly for women... a woman is marked for life, as a disgrace to her family, as an unfit marriage partner, as “used goods” ’ (Ledgerwood 1990, 181). As former PADV director Sar Samen has noted, ‘in Cambodia, they believe that divorce is not good for women, because it hurts the future of the children, and it’s hard for the woman to live without a husband. People look down on her’ (interview, May 1998).

In addition to social stigma, there are real economic hardships for female-headed households, including labour shortages and the issue of land ownership (Baldwin et al. 2000). For example, in one study, all of the abused women were dissatisfied with their divorce settlement, as husbands were awarded property that the women had purchased themselves, or owned prior to marriage (Zimmerman 1994).

Further, leaving the relationship does not always remove the risk of violence. Abused women risk murder and ‘separation assault’ – that is, the spouse continues to hurt his wife after separation (Mahoney 1994; Teays 1998). Zimmerman documented ‘a great deal of circumstantial evidence of spousal murder. We learned of at least ten women who died as a direct result of beatings’ (1994, 78). This was vividly illustrated recently, in the case of one woman who was nearly beaten to death by her estranged husband after she refused to have sexual relations with him (Phnom Penh Post 2002). For these reasons, divorce is hardly a panacea in Cambodia.

With this in mind, we can identify key points of entry, and formulate interventions by looking at the work of Cambodian NGOs on domestic violence. While the terrain is a difficult one to negotiate, it is not impossible. Two Cambodian NGOs – the Cambodian Women’s Crisis Centre (CWCC) and the Project against Domestic Violence (PADV) – have proven successful in formulating appropriate interventions in domestic violence in Cambodia. What is most compelling about the approaches of CWCC and PADV is how their interventions mesh with social norms, while simultaneously challenging the permissibility of domestic violence. For example, CWCC attempts to reconcile marriages where possible, while forcing an acknowledgement of women’s rights, through the use of marriage
Contracts. Similarly, PADV’s awareness-raising efforts confront the understanding of domestic violence as a private, family issue, outside of the scope of human rights and public intervention. These NGO initiatives should be analysed, acclaimed, and expanded.

Cambodian Women’s Crisis Centre (CWCC)
The Cambodian Women’s Crisis Centre was established in 1997, in response to the overwhelming rate of violence perpetrated against women, and the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of this violence. The organisation is founded on concern for domestic violence as a violation of women’s human rights, and a parallel concern to ensure abused women can make their own choices. CWCC sees its role as facilitating domestic violence survivors in making choices that meet with their needs and interests. A central choice is whether or not to leave their abusive marriage.

This choice is most frequently conceptualised as that between ‘victim’ (those staying in the relationship) or ‘agent’ (those leaving the relationship). The situation, however, is significantly more complex, particularly where social prestige is associated with marital and parental status. Leaving the relationship is not the only means by which women can express choice and agency. Women who stay in their relationships exert agency, and negotiate in ways that are camouflaged if their choice is seen simply as ‘staying’. For example, in seeking to change the relationship, getting advice from friends, finding temporary shelter, having someone intervene, or setting conditions for their return, women are acting out their resistance to domestic violence within the framework of ‘staying’ (Surtees 2000). As Mahoney argues, ‘Emphasising exit defines the discussion of violence in ways that ignore the woman’s life experience and the personal and societal context of power, focusing instead on whether her responsive actions conform to societal expectations. The idea that women should leave – and that a woman acting in her own interest will always leave – is shaped by this atomistic view of agency’ (1994, 74).

There is little research anywhere in the world into how abuse is successfully overcome in a relationship. Little is known about women who stay and renegotiate their relationship, or about the batterer who stops battering. Nevertheless, even seemingly straightforward situations of victimisation and violence potentially hold within them possible negotiation. As Mahoney observes, ‘legal and social inquiry then turn to investigation of “staying” as a problem, rather than giving attention to the help and support a battered woman needs to effectuate her goals’ (1994, 76).

Significantly, it is precisely this issue of agency within ‘staying’ that has value for interventions on domestic violence in Cambodia. Agency as manifested in the West – divorce, separation, criminal charges, restraining orders – appears neither desirable, nor particularly plausible, from a legal, economic or social perspective. But this does not mean that Cambodian women are simply passive. For example, Cambodian women agreeing to be interviewed for research on domestic violence are expressing their voice. Likewise, women negotiate when they seek temporary refuge with family or neighbours, or file a complaint with the village chief, or confront their husbands and demand change. Once expressions of women’s actions are identified, they can be further developed, and other possibilities identified to support and enhance not only women’s agency, but also their options.

A valuable illustration of encouraging women’s agency (and alternatives) in cases of domestic violence comes from CWCC, in its critique of the state-administered process of marriage reconciliation (psapsaah). Conventional marriage reconciliation consists of a number of stages, and, while not uniform, follows a general pattern. The woman files a divorce complaint. The couple are then required to attend a reconciliation meeting.
with a Commune official. They each voice their complaints. The woman complains of abuse. The husband likely explains (and excuses) his behaviour by accusing the wife of infidelity or, more commonly, of domestic violations, like burning the rice or not disciplining the children. The reconciler then suggests how the situation might be remedied, and the husband pledges to end the abuse, if the wife drops her complaint. Generally, there are three reconciliation meetings before the court will entertain the possibility of divorce (Zimmerman 1994).6

The practice of Cambodian marriage reconciliation is ultimately dangerous for the abused woman. First, the mandatory nature of this form of ‘reconciliation’ does not address the specific risks of an abusive relationship. Second, while the law stipulates that reconciliation should not be pursued when the court finds that the complaint is based upon very serious circumstances, domestic violence researchers found no occasion where this exception clause was used (Zimmerman 1994). As such, the process violates a woman’s right to live free from violence. Third, officials are inadequately trained in reconciliation, and consistently misquote and misrepresent the marriage law. Even among the informed, legal decisions do not always reflect legal parameters (Zimmerman 1994). Fourth, the process seeks a pre-determined outcome of reconciliation, and as such is a violation of a woman’s right to autonomy. Fifth, the reconciliation process, as a ‘no-fault’ system, ultimately places at least some blame with the woman, failing to address the issue of domestic violence as a criminal assault and human rights violation.

CWCC has developed an alternative to the above process. In its alternative intervention, CWCC oversees a legal contract between the married couple, in which the husband pledges to cease abuse if the wife returns to the marriage. However, the contract goes beyond that of mainstream reconciliation pledges, which are not binding or enforced.7 The CWCC contract is a legal document, which includes conditions of return, and provides for legal and financial settlements for the wife, should the abuse continue and the couple separate. Provisions might include the husband’s relinquishment of the family home; financial support; custody of the children; or a pledge of uncontested divorce. As Acting Director of CWCC Sun Sothy explained to me, this means that in the event that the husband violates the CWCC agreement, the victim has a legally binding document which will be of assistance when filing a complaint for divorce in court (personal communication 2003). As such, the wife is able to return home, while making her own conditions for return. CWCC provides women with negotiation tools, signalling an awareness that women’s decision-making power represents a critical point of intervention for domestic violence programmes. That being said, Sun Sothy stressed that ‘after signing, it does not mean that the domestic violence case is finished... CWCC gives one chance for the couple to reconcile and live together without filing a complaint in court’ (ibid.). In 2002, 28 domestic violence victims were staying at the CWCC shelter, of whom 12 opted eventually for divorce, while 16 opted to return to their families (ibid.).

The CWCC approach avoids divorce, at least initially, while still guaranteeing the rights and safety of the abused woman, and allowing her to make choices with which she is comfortable. In contexts in which divorce is not only legally possible, but socially sanctioned and economically viable, such measures are not vital. In Cambodia, however, given the problematic nature of divorce there, such measures are important: they facilitate women’s agency while protecting their rights and safety, in a culturally sensitive manner.

Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV)
The Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV) was established in 1995, as a resource, information and training agency.
PADV tackles domestic violence in large part through its awareness-raising campaigns, and profiles it as a public, rather than private, issue. That is, PADV is reconceptualising the terrain upon which this issue should be addressed. This is critical, given that current ways of categorising violence - '... public versus domestic, ordinary as against extreme political violence - are inadequate to understand either the uses of violence in the social world, or the multiplicity of its effects in experiences of suffering, collective and individual' (Kleinman 2000, 227).

In its efforts to force recognition of domestic violence as a public issue, and ensure it is tackled as such, PADV produces information materials on domestic violence. These include a video enacting a survivor's story, a television drama, radio announcement, and the first Cambodian poster against domestic violence. Perhaps the most striking example of PADV's awareness-raising efforts was its 1998 national theatre tour. This was undertaken in collaboration with the Women's Media Centre (WMC) and the Prom Mahn theatre troupe. The play adopted the ayai style - a Cambodian improvisational theatre form using song and comedy - to convey its message in a culturally appropriate way. The play contrasted the lives and fortunes of two neighbouring families. One family enjoyed a happy and good life, due in large part to the loving relationship between the husband and wife, while, by contrast, their neighbouring family suffered much misfortune and pain, due to domestic violence in their home. The drama suggested non-violent ways of settling domestic discord within families. The play raised and explored domestic violence as a public issue and a criminal act, but it did so subtly and in such a way that it did not overtly attack men and husbands. It permitted men and women to take a vantage point on domestic violence, and demonstrated the means to ameliorate this violence, without loss of face or dignity (Frieson 1998; Baldwin 2000).

For the vast majority of the audience, a drama which discussed domestic violence at all, let alone as a public issue, was novel. PADV staff also took advantage of the forum offered by performances of the drama to disseminate information about domestic violence, and the means to effect change. This information included printed matter about the law, referral agencies, and other NGOs working on domestic violence. Prior to performances, PADV staff also met with government and community leaders to provide information on the existing laws, and appropriate responses. This ensured that the issue was framed in a way in which the community and community leadership had a role to play and could assume responsibility.

The travelling drama and its associated advocacy activities generated extensive attention in the media, as well as stimulating public dialogue on the issue of domestic violence (Mapleston 1998). This is a significant development. As one former PADV technical adviser observed, 'more organisations are talking about domestic violence as a category of violence... People have started to talk about domestic violence as a human rights issue' (interview, May 1998). As such, PADV's theatre tour represents a valuable means of profiling this assumed private issue, and situating it firmly and correctly in the public domain.

As Marcus argues, 'Often the recasting takes what is designated as a "personal situation" and identifies it as a social and political issue. Often, recasting provides a foundation for a re-viewing of an issue in new ways. In turn, this re-viewing may result in the emergence of new and different assessments and evaluations of a problem. Finally, this re-viewing may lead to the development of innovative strategies for the future' (1994, 25).

Through this 'recasting', PADV has pushed the parameters of what can be discussed publicly. The play gave persuasive examples of why domestic violence could not, and should not, be seen only as an issue
of the domestic sphere. And it equipped public actors – officials, neighbours, community leaders – with the information they needed to tackle the issue in the public domain. Of course, this is not to say that this public recognition and recasting was a straightforward process which is now complete. Everywhere in the world, it has been a long and arduous battle to situate domestic violence in the public sphere. However, PADV’s work is noteworthy as an important step in this direction.10

Conclusion

In Cambodia, marriage and domestic violence are so embedded in social systems that development initiatives cannot target these issues in a cultural vacuum. Without acknowledging and exploring the presence and meaning of domestic violence in marriage, it is impossible to tackle it.

This should not be taken to mean, however, that there is no space for internationally informed and formulated interventions in Cambodia. The universality of domestic violence reveals many commonalities of experience and, thus, potential for programmes which incorporate elements which have proven successful in other contexts. Nor is this an argument in the vein of cultural relativism where traditional resolutions are ‘ideal’ because they are ‘cultural’. Too often women suffer violence precisely in the playing out of traditional features of a culture. Rather, what I argue is that space must be provided for Cambodian women (and men) to design and implement domestic violence interventions which are grounded in local cultural perspectives (Surtees 2000). As Desjarlais argues, ‘perhaps it is precisely in the clash between worldviews, in the tension between symbolic systems (how reality is defined, the body held or experience articulated) that some... insights emerge’ (1992, 18).

Significantly, by combining international standards and an understanding of cultural and social structures, one can formulate interventions which respect human rights, while simultaneously maintaining or evolving desirable elements of the social order. Both CWCC and PADV have done precisely this, in their efforts to combat domestic violence in Cambodia. These interventions mesh with cultural norms and the established social order, while simultaneously seeking to redress the prevalence and permissibility of domestic violence. Such interventions and perspectives must be further acclaimed and expanded.

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Notes

1 The chbaps are prescriptions for proper behaviour and comportment. There are chbaps for all human relationships – chhap srey (woman’s code), chhap proh (man’s code), the chhap kun cau (grandchildren’s chhap), chhap baky cas (chhap of ancient advice), chhap keru (inheritance chhap) (Ang 1986).

2 In one instance, I recall a neighbour intervened in a situation of domestic violence and was injured by the abusive husband. Charges were brought against the husband for his assault on the neighbour. No charges were laid for the assault of the wife.

3 The significance of this understanding cannot be overstated. As Dworkin
argues, 'It is easy to say that men beat women in order to express domination, to exercise control, these are easy sentences to say. But I need you to think about what they really mean... When we talk about battery, we have to remember that we are talking about every aspect of a human life, every single day, all the time. The problem of human freedom has never been considered from the point of view of a woman's life' (1997, 157–8).

4 A domestic violence law is currently being debated in the Cambodian National Assembly (Ball and Nren 2002). The law was formulated by the Ministry of Women's and Veteran's Affairs in 2001 with inputs from civil society. NGO efforts to advocate for, articulate and pass domestic violence legislation has been on-going since 1996.

5 One study found that 27 per cent of women who reunited with their abusive spouse experienced violence within six weeks and 57 per cent experienced violence within six months. That is, more than 40 per cent of women reported no violence for six months after returning to the relationship. In another study, more than 50 per cent of abusive husbands arrested their abuse out of fear of divorce or the desire to rebuild their marriages (Mahoney 1994).

6 Divorce generally involves at least three stages of reconciliation; months of waiting in between; extensive cost; travel to the court; court delays; social pressure from family, neighbours and officials; and continued abuse from the husband. Further, it is not uncommon that the judge simply refuses to grant a divorce. As one survivor explained, 'I went to the local authorities for help, but they would only arrange reconciliation' (Oxfam website 1999).

7 Only one of the 28 women who attended reconciliation meetings said it was successful. Some women reported that the reconciliation process did more harm than good. Several were beaten immediately afterwards (Zimmerman 1994).

8 Women's Media Centre (WMC) was established in 1993 to produce media material on a range of gender issues, as well as to monitor and analyse the representation of women in the Cambodian media.

9 The play was performed in 39 rural communities in five provinces, reaching more than 250,000 people in total (Baldwin et al. 2000).

10 Such 'recasting' efforts continue in the present. Most recently, in January 2003, PADV, as a member of the Cambodian Committee of Women (CAMBOW) was involved in implementing public hearings on domestic violence at which victims shared their stories and experiences of domestic abuse with government representatives. As PADV director Hor Phally explained, this initiative seeks 'to give the problem a human face and provide a comprehensive picture of the effect of domestic violence on society as a whole' (CAMBOW 2003).

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Early marriage and poverty: exploring links and key policy issues

Naana Otoo-Oyortey and Sonita Pobi

This article explores the connections between poverty and the early marriage of girls. These links are rarely acknowledged in development research, policy and practice, despite the fact that in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where women form the majority of the poor, it is estimated that over 60 per cent of girls under 19 are married (UN 2000). Poverty is characterised by both economic and social factors; in this paper, social factors are the primary focus because of the gender disparities in these social indicators. Early marriage perpetuates the feminisation of poverty, preventing girls from attaining their full potential in terms of developing their social capabilities. Hence, it violates girls’ human rights, especially their right to sexual and reproductive choice and health care. The article ends by proposing an agenda for change.

Sitting on the floor of her dishevelled home, the size of a broom cupboard, in Old Delhi, Bano recounts her precocious achievements. She was married at the age of 10 and had her first child when she was 11. Her daughter was 12 when she married and 13 when she had her own child, making Bano a grandmother at 24. Bano’s granddaughter also married at puberty and gave birth when she was 14, thus Bano became a great-grandmother at 38.

(Amrit Dhillon, The Times, 28 August 2002)

This graphic illustration of the impact of early marriage on the life of one woman and her descendants is representative of the negative and far-reaching effects that early marriage can have on the lives of women. How does early marriage add to the well-documented vulnerability of women in resource-poor settings? At the beginning of the new millennium, heads of governments committed themselves to a new strategy to reduce global poverty and make the right to development a ‘reality for everyone’ (UN 2002, 8). Since women represent two-thirds of those who live on less than a dollar a day, we need to understand what it means to be poor and female, and the social factors that reinforce this situation. Why are women disproportionately poor? Part of the answer lies in marriage practices which deny women choice, hamper them from realising their capabilities, and compromise their human rights.

For a majority of women in developing countries, marriage is not negotiable. For many, it occurs when they are still children. If this is the case, it can entrench and deepen poverty. Early marriage violates a girl’s right to a future, and by doing so perpetuates the ‘feminisation of poverty’ (this is the current global trend whereby women increasingly and disproportionately are numbered among those living in poverty). It does this by denying girls opportunities, and compromising their development in areas such as education, livelihood skills and personal growth. The young bride is put under great pressure to become a woman and a mother at a time when she is ill-prepared for these
roles, lacking decision-making and negotiating skills, and other assets and capabilities which would help her to develop, let alone ensure the development and well-being of her offspring.

This paper explores the web of social issues around early marriage and poverty. First, it highlights gender inequality and issues of women’s human rights within early marriage, and explores how these create environments which perpetuate women’s poverty. Second, it examines the issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights within early marriage. The final section suggests a framework for development planners and policy makers who are working on breaking this cycle of early marriage and poverty.

Early marriages and the human rights of women and girls

Alemtsehai was 10 when her parents arranged her marriage. It was planned as a party, but, in reality, ‘it was a wedding, and they sent me away. My mother never told me I was going to be married. They came and took me by force. I cried, but it didn’t make a difference.’ (Aleksander 1998, cited in Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls 2001)

When the fundamental human rights of people are violated and not protected, this not only represents an attack on human dignity, but is likely to result in conflict, poverty and injustice (UN 2001). Early marriage of girls breaches a number of human rights agreements, and presents a number of challenges and concerns.

Any marriage that takes place before a child has reached 18 years of age can be considered as early marriage. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the most comprehensive international bill of rights for women, states that any betrothal or marriage of a child should not have any legal status. The Committee that monitors CEDAW states further that the minimum age for marriage for both male and female should be 18 years – the age when ‘they have attained full maturity and capacity to act’ (UN 2000, General Recommendation 21, Article 16.2). However, in a large number of countries, there is a discrepancy between the national legal minimum age of marriage, and the actual age of marriage of many young girls. This discrepancy is because most early marriages are conducted under customary and religious laws, which often do not specify a minimum age of marriage. For example, a survey in 1998, in Madhya Pradesh, India, found that almost 14 per cent of girls between the ages of 10 and 14 were already married (UNICEF 2001: 4). Most such marriages will not be registered, as is required by international law, and are celebrated through customary or religious ceremonies only.

Other human rights clauses on marriage, such as Article 16 of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights, are violated in early marriage. This clause states that marriage should be entered into ‘only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses’. However, free and full consent cannot be offered by legal minors. Often social norms require girls to respect decisions made on their behalf by their parents, and in particular their fathers. Most early marriages are instigated not by the spouses, but by their two families, with the objective of ensuring family security, welfare and well-being (Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls 2001). The exchange of gifts, money and assets gives an economic dimension to most such marriages. Poverty is the primary factor underpinning most early marriages (ibid.). In marriages which have these motivations, the consent of the girl is immaterial.

The magnitude of the problem of early marriage

Early marriage is more prevalent in developing countries, and in particular in
poorer communities. Current estimates show that by the age of 18, about 82 million girls in developing countries (excluding China) who are presently aged between 10 and 17 will be married, while 163 million of the 331 million girls who are presently aged between 10 and 19 will be married before they are 20 (Bruce 2002, 1). Early marriage is predominantly a female problem; although some boys may be forced to marry early, the overwhelming burden of this problem falls on girls. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, only about five per cent of young men marry under the age of 19 (see Table 1).

There is ample evidence of the links between gender inequality and poverty, and these are still under review. There are over one billion families worldwide who depend on an income below $1 per person per day. The majority of individuals living in such poverty are women and girls in developing countries. As suggested earlier, poverty has social as well as economic elements. In particular, women’s poverty differs from that of men because of disparities in social capital, such as livelihood skills, education, lack of good health due to avoidable reasons (including sexual and reproductive health and well-being), and lack of social assets and networks (World Bank 2001). Recent studies show that women have less access to health care, education and skills training and other opportunities, which enable them to develop their full human capabilities. It is also more difficult for most women to transform their capabilities into income or increased well-being, because women seldom fully control decisions on the use of their labour (Cagatay 1998, 8).

A close review of the evidence of links between poverty and early marriage reveals that, in wealthier countries where girls have equitable access to education and further training, and other employment opportunities, early marriages are rare. In the USA only 4 per cent of girls marry before 19 years; in Canada this is 1 per cent, while in the UK this is 2 per cent. In Europe, the number of boys who marry under the age of 19 is less than 1 per cent (See Table 1). This shows that wealthy nations benefit from later marriages more than poorer countries: girls are more likely to have acquired assets, such as skills and employment opportunities, before they marry.

Examining the poverty dimension of early marriages

As highlighted above, the relationship between poverty and early marriage is complex. Our focus in this section is on the vulnerabilities and risks associated with early marriage for girls. In particular, we look at those that are caused by the inability of early brides to develop their full social capabilities. We also look at the ways in which the sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls are violated by early marriage. Young married girls are a unique group, in that they are under more pressure on a number of fronts: to show evidence of their fertility, to be responsible for the welfare of their children, and to do a disproportionate share of domestic chores. However, how prepared are young brides to perform these roles and what are the risk factors they face?

Younger brides lack the necessary decision-making powers and skills to be mothers and wives

Early marriage is almost by definition associated with low educational levels, since girls are still of school age when they marry. It is also often associated with poor health, low self-esteem and social isolation.

Early marriage means that girls and women experience disempowerment as an effect of gender-based inequality intersecting with age-based inequality. Globally, men tend to marry at a later age than women, but the age difference between spouses is almost always greater if the bride is very young. Studies from least-developed
countries show that among couples where the wife is aged between 15 and 19, 35 per cent of husbands are about ten years older. In parts of West Africa, this figure is 54 per cent, while a further 25 per cent of couples have an age gap of over 15 years (Population Council 2002).

The age difference between the spouses may potentially have serious consequences on the power dynamics, resulting in unequal partnerships between the spouses which leave the wife with little power in decision-making. Wives are also more likely to become isolated from society: married adolescent girls are known to become quieter, and to lose the close friendships they had formed in their parental home (Diop et al. 2002), as well as social networks that they can rely on in times of hardship. The greater age gap between spouses often also leads to many child brides becoming widows at a very early age. There is growing evidence of the socio-economic and psychological vulnerability of widows (UN 2001). Estimates made in the mid-1990s show that over 50 per cent of women over 65 years in Asia and Africa were widowed, compared to only 10–20 per cent of men in the same age category (UNFPA, 2002).

The marriage of young girls to older boys or men is made more traumatic when they lack access to information on sex, are forced into their first sexual activity ill-prepared, and carry the memory of sexual trauma throughout their lives. Article 24 of the Child Rights Convention recognises that early marriages are ‘prejudicial to the health of children’. Because sexuality continues to be mystified and shrouded in secrecy in many cultural contexts, young brides are often less prepared than older brides for their future reproductive roles as mothers and wives. ‘There is a culture of silence that surrounds sex that dictates that “good” women are expected to be ignorant about sex and passive in sexual relations’ (Gupta 2000, 2).

A 36-year-old woman’s account in a study in Bangladesh confirms this dilemma of young brides. ‘When I got married, I was very young. Even my menstruation had not started. It started seven to eight months after my marriage. At this age, how am I supposed to know about married life? Just before my departure to my in-laws’ house, my Bhabi (sister-in-law) told me about sex life, and advised me to “go close to my husband when he pulls you towards him, and whatever he says you should follow. Never say no to him”’ (Khan 2000, 9).

Because early marriages mean a much longer period of sexual activity, women who have no access to contraception are almost

Table 1: Married adolescents: percentage of 15–19 year-olds ever married

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/Region</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Africa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>15.9</td>
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Source: UN Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2000)
always likely to have larger numbers of children, which tends ‘to have profound social and economic consequences for society as a whole’ (UNICEF 2001, 11). This further reinforces the vicious cycle of deprivation and the lifelong poverty trap. A study in Indonesia on married and unmarried girls aged 15 to 19 revealed that 13 per cent versus 31 per cent respectively knew about condoms, and 59 per cent versus 86 per cent had heard of HIV/AIDS (East-West Centre 1999, cited in Haberland 2002). This could possibly be due to exposure to these issues in schools. Contraceptive use by married women aged 15 to 19 in sub-Saharan Africa is below 10 per cent (McDevitt 1996, cited in Focus 1999), in comparison with an overall usage of 25 per cent of married women aged 15 to 59 in Africa (UN Chronicle Online Edition 2001).

**Maternal and child mortality and morbidity**

Globally, pregnancy-related deaths are known to be the leading cause of mortality for both married and unmarried girls between 15 and 19 (Zabin and Kigaru 1998). In Nigeria, Cameroon, and Ethiopia, maternal mortality among women under 16 was found to be six times higher than among those aged 20–24 (ibid.). Maternal morbidity rates tend to increase as the age of the mother decreases, and for ‘...every woman who dies in childbirth, 30 more suffer injuries, infections and disabilities, which usually go untreated and some of which are lifelong’ (UNICEF 2001, 11).

There is a strong correlation between early marriage and early childbearing. Most brides in developing countries are often under more pressure from the extended family to start having children soon after their marriage. It is estimated that globally about 15 million young women aged 15–19 who give birth each year account for over 10 per cent of all babies born (UNICEF 2001). In Asia and the Pacific region alone, this amounts to 6 million babies born to adolescent mothers annually (UNESCO 2002).

The majority of births to adolescent girls, especially married ones, are unattended by health professionals (Rao 1998, cited in UNICEF 2001). When infections develop, these tend to go untreated because of poor knowledge of health complications, low decision-making powers, and absence of health facilities, especially in rural areas. Poverty may also directly deny women access to medical care, and other procedures necessary to reduce morbidity and mortality. A number of studies have shown that a mother’s education in particular affects her chances of seeking antenatal care and delivery with trained medical personnel.

Physiologically, the bodies of young mothers are not fully mature for childbirth. In addition, nutritional taboos and biases in food allocation in poor households and communities result in girls not obtaining sufficient nutrients to develop fully. These effects are further exacerbated by the macro-economic policies of governments and international financial institutions. The effects of economic structural adjustment policies (SAPS) by the IMF are often most damaging to the most vulnerable in society. Unemployment and a crisis in livelihoods have led to decreases in household food consumption. Users of state services, including health-care, now have to pay user fees in many contexts. This policy has disproportionately affected the poorest in society, including rural communities and socially marginalised groups.

As economic poverty increases across many developing countries, food consumption and access to health services is reduced, a greater number of girls are becoming malnourished, anaemic, and under-weight, and their physical growth is impaired. Early malnourishment leads to complications in pregnancy and childbirth, especially when the first birth occurs soon after menstruation (Zabin and Kigaru 1998). If a mother is malnourished, her body will be weakened even further as a result of pregnancy itself, as her body and that of her baby will be in direct
competition for the few nutrients available (Assani et al. 2000).

Obstetric complications, common in young mothers due to lack of physical maturity, are often compounded when they have undergone infibulation. This is the most severe form of female genital mutilation (FGM), in which the vaginal opening is cut and sewn up. Both physical immaturity and FGM are factors which make it more likely that a mother will experience a prolonged labour, which often results in the development of obstetric fistulas. Commonly, young women suffering from fistulas face not only chronic health problems, but social isolation, divorce or abandonment.

The health and well-being of children born of adolescent mothers is often compromised. Apart from the evidence that children born to adolescent mothers tend to be of lower birth weight, there is also evidence that they have an increased risk of dying in early childhood (Population Action International, 2001) – a risk which is sometimes twice as high as that for the children of older mothers. There is evidence that the immaturity and lack of education of young mothers undermines their ability to nurture their children (UNICEF 2001). Educated women are also more likely to immunise their children, and seek prompt treatment when they are ill (Kabeer 2003).

Gender-based violence/abuse

In some contexts, abduction remains an acceptable form of finding a bride. This is defined as the ‘...unlawful kidnapping or carrying away of a girl for marriage’ (Segni, 2002). Although Ethiopia has a constitution which bans both early and forced marriages, these still occur in some rural contexts. A survey conducted in Ethiopia with 227 female spouses showed that 60 per cent of the wives were abducted before the age of 15, and 93 per cent before the age of 20. Tradition demands that men pay bride price, and poverty pushes many men to abduct young girls as they are unable to afford this. These girls are usually subjected to rape, causing vaginal tears, infection, suffocation and psychological trauma (ibid.). The bride-price in such cases is often waived, as the girls are no longer virgins; and since most societies value virginity of girls before marriage, these marriages are accepted to safeguard the family’s honour.

The unequal power relations that exist between a young bride and her relatively older and more experienced husband mean that men often have total control over how, when, and where sexual intercourse takes place. The adolescent bride is socially conditioned ‘right from childhood, that women are inferior to men, they are expected to serve their husbands, obey their orders, satisfy their sexual needs and that men have the right to beat them if they fail to perform these expected duties properly’ (Khan 2000). If the young wife voices her discontentment about sexual activities, she may face further violence. In about 80 per cent of such cases, the raping continues (Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls 2001).

Although many girls are afraid to leave their abusive marriages because of financial constraints and social pressures, young brides sometimes run away, only to end up on city streets. Alternatively, poverty pushes many young girls into short-term marriages where men marry young women sometimes only for a few hours, for the purpose of sexual gratification (Tilgay and Sarhan 2001, cited in Mikhail 2002). Sometimes girls who are abandoned or run away from such marriages are socially and economically vulnerable, and often end up in commercial sex work in urban areas.

Early marriage, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted infections

A global analysis of the epidemic shows that ‘the prevalence of HIV infection is highest in women aged 15–24 and peaks in men between five to ten years later’ (Tallis 2002).
In some of the worst-affected African countries, teenage girls are being infected at rates five to six times greater than are young men. This higher rate can be explained by the fact that girls are more susceptible to contracting HIV because they are married to older men while still in adolescence.

A combination of biological, socio-economic, cultural, and political factors puts young people – particularly young women – at greater risk of HIV infection. Adolescent girls are more prone to contract HIV, as their vaginas are not well lined with protective cells, and the cervix may be more easily eroded, thus increasing their vulnerability to infection. Beyond biological factors, gender inequality and poverty fuel the spread of HIV/AIDS. Dr Pascoal Mocumbi, the former Minister of Health of Mozambique, confirms that the HIV infection rate is higher in girls, 'because nearly three out of five are married by the age of 18, 40 per cent of them to much older, sexually experienced men, who may expose their wives to HIV and sexually transmitted diseases [...] Abstinence is not an option for these child brides. Those who try to negotiate condom use commonly face violence or rejection' (cited in Tallis 2002, 6).

The problem of young girls having sex with older men is fuelling this epidemic, and marriage does not offer any protection either, since wives often have no power to negotiate safe sex. Young girls are often targeted for early marriage because they are virgins, and this route often makes them more vulnerable, due to the physiological and social factors outlined above. A study conducted in southern India of 451 married young women revealed high levels of reproductive health problems: 48 per cent were found with reproductive tract infections, and 7 per cent had urinary tract infections (Population Council 2002).

Typically, the power to decide whether or not to use HIV/AIDS health services varies considerably according to sex. This is due to the gendered power dynamics between spouses. A study in Tanzania revealed that whereas men are more likely to seek voluntary counselling and testing independent of discussion with their female partners, women felt compelled to discuss this with their partners. There is also an unequal gender balance of power between dependent married girls and their partners regarding access to and control of finances needed to obtain health services. Access to HIV/AIDS services is often restricted for most married adolescent girls (Maman et al., 1999, cited in Gupta, 2000; UNFPA, 2002). Apart from the high cost of HIV/AIDS treatment, women living with HIV, like men, face increased stigma, taboos, and social discrimination, in addition to bearing the burden of increased care and support of others in the family. This situation is also creating time-poverty for a number of women affected and infected by AIDS (Tallis 2002).

**Towards transformation:**
**ending early marriage by promoting a gender and rights agenda**

In order to ensure that women can find a way out of economic want, the social dimensions of poverty must be addressed. Specifically, this means enhancing their capabilities so that they can acquire the relevant social and livelihood skills to make a difference to their lives. The strategy as advocated by governments in the Millennium Development Goals to improve girls’ education, gender equality, and empowerment of women should include a two-pronged approach to early marriage. It needs to protect girls who are at risk of early marriage, and to address the concerns of girls and women who are already married. The guiding principle in such a strategy should be based on promoting gender equity and women’s human rights. The diverse needs of women of all ages, living in rural and urban societies, illiterate and literate in such programmes should be...
recognised. In particular, however, pro-
grammes and policies should create an
enabling environment through which young
adolescent girls, especially adolescent
wives, can claim their entitlements and their
human rights, and develop skills which will
enhance their ability to make a livelihood.
Active participation is crucial: gender
equality can be achieved only through active
and organised community constituencies
(Kabeer 2003), where safe spaces for
organising vulnerable groups can be created.

To sum up, there are three areas in which
work is needed if the vicious cycle of poverty
and early marriage is to be broken. This
work will require joint action from
governments, civil society, and young
women themselves.

The first area of work focuses on the right
of girls and women to have a full education
and training in life skills to ensure that they
can earn a livelihood. Innovative and
gender-sensitive programmes should provide
tailored education and vocational training
for both unmarried and married girls.
Creating employment opportunities for
women in ‘non-servile occupations’, i.e.
non-domestic work, can help to promote
girls’ education (UNICEF, 2001). Social
activism should be incorporated into these
programmes, to ensure that girls are
supported in acquiring critical life-skills in
decision-making and negotiation, and their
confidence is built up.

Second, work must focus on meeting the
sexual and reproductive-health needs and
concerns of young people, and young girls in
particular, through youth-friendly health
services. This requires implementing the
Programme of Action from the 1994
International Conference on Population and
Development, held in Cairo. The Cairo
agenda calls for the involvement and active
participation of women in planning and
implementation of reproductive pro-
grammes and services. It is important to
identify ways of encouraging young girls,
married and unmarried, to participate in
programmes. This will require looking
critically at organisational and community
structures and decision-making processes,
and supporting communities to make
changes to ensure that young people’s
voices are heard (Faulkner and Nott 2002).

The third area of work involves creating
an environment where the rights of young
girls are respected. This needs to happen at
all levels of society. It will require
awareness-raising and public education to
ensure that the legal minimum age of
marriage of 18 as set in international
agreements is widely known, and to address
the discrepancies between customary,
national, and international laws. In a
number of countries the national minimum
age is often lower than 18 years. Attitudes
need to be changed among the public at large
regarding the girl child, and gender biases
addressed, in areas that include early
marriage, girls’ education, inheritance rights,
and employment. Research is needed, in
order further to highlight the links between
poverty and early marriage, especially the
correlations between age of marriage and
first pregnancy, and maternal mortality and
morbidity, and the incidence of HIV/ AIDs.

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Notes

1 'An obstetric fistula is a hole that develops between a woman’s vagina and her bladder or rectum, or both, usually as a result of trauma during pregnancy' (UNFPA, 2002). They occur exclusively in poor girls who are illiterate, malnourished, anaemic, and still have some physical development to go through. In Africa, a number of studies have shown that 50–80 per cent of women below the age of 20 developed a fistula, with the youngest patients being 12 or 13 years old (ibid.). In Niger, in 1995, it was estimated that 80 per cent of fistula cases were seen in girls between 13 and 17 (Assani et al., 2000).

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Marriage, development, and the status of women in Kerala, India

Elizabeth Chacko

This article explores the linkages between women's status and marriage in the southern Indian state of Kerala. Widely known as a progressive region, with high levels of social development despite poor economic growth, Kerala also fares exceptionally well in terms of standard indicators of female position. However, closer scrutiny of prevailing cultural mores, particularly in relation to marriage practices and family structure, reveals a less promising picture of entrenched inequality in relationships between women and men. Discriminatory inheritance rights, the widespread practice of dowry, and increasing violence against women all undermine women's status in Kerala.

In development literature and university courses on development, the state of Kerala in southern India is commonly presented as a model of social development in the absence of a strong economic base. Kerala leads India on gender-specific development indicators, including female life expectancy, fertility reduction, and education (Jeffrey 1992). These indicators are often quoted as evidence of the high status of Kerala's women, and this is widely held to be a symptom of, and a reason for, the region's remarkable advances. However, the indicators that are quoted to support the idea that Kerala's women have an advantaged position do not reveal the whole truth.

This article presents a more nuanced analysis of the status of women in Kerala. First, it provides an overview of women's position, using standard indicators, and then examines the connection between marriage and female status. It describes some of the causes and consequences of changes in the structure of families, and practices associated with marriage among the three major religious groups (Hindus, Christians, and Muslims), evaluating their implications for gender relations. The article also assesses the efforts of women's organisations, activist groups, and the state to address the issue of discrimination against women as reflected in marriage practices and domestic violence.

Indicators associated with high female status

In 1997, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) listed Kerala as having both the highest position on the Human Development Index (HDI),¹ and the highest position on the Gender-related Development Index (GDI),² among Indian states. Basic demographic indicators in the state, such as life expectancy, are almost on par with those of the developed world.

Life expectancy and literacy

Life expectancies for both men and women have more than doubled since the 1951 census, with advances in female life
expectancy surpassing those for males. In 1991, female life expectancy was over 72 years, compared with 67 years for males (GOK 2003).

Kerala also boasts high literacy rates, especially when compared with the national average. Approximately 88 per cent of its female population was literate in 2001, and more than 90 per cent of girls aged 6–17 years attended school, making Kerala one of the top-ranking Indian states for female educational achievement (Census 2001; IIPS and ORC Macro 2000).

Women have played a significant role in Kerala’s push towards high literacy levels. A 1990 campaign to eliminate illiteracy was successful in part due to the massive mobilisation of educated but unemployed women, who made up two-thirds of the volunteer teachers involved in the literacy drive. The literacy gap between males and females, which is highest in northern Indian states, is least pronounced in Kerala, where female literacy lags behind that of males by only 6 per cent (Census 2001). Improved educational facilities, and the fact that there are better prospects for educated women acquiring a job, have led many women to stay in school for a longer period of time, postponing marriage. Especially among middle- and upper-class families, the acquisition of a bachelor’s degree by young women is seen as an essential step in acquiring a husband who is an educated professional.

Marriage and fertility
Female education is an important predictor of women’s age at first marriage and first birth. Higher educational levels result in delayed age for marriage and first birth, and in a woman having a lower number of children. Social scientists and feminists consider early and child marriage to be emblematic of low female status, while marriage at later ages is associated with greater female autonomy and considered indicative of society placing a higher value on women. Throughout the twentieth century, the average age of women at first marriage in Kerala has been much higher than the national average in India. Today, on average, women marry when they are a little over 20 years of age, in contrast to the median age at marriage of 16 years in India (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000). However, the overall high age at marriage in Kerala is not found uniformly across the state. A recent state-wide study found that child marriage was on the increase in four of the state’s northern districts, where more than one third of the brides were under the legal age of 18 years (Deshabhimani 2002a).

Since 1988, the total fertility rate in Kerala has been below 2.1 children per woman, the number required to maintain population size. The figure has dropped further, from 1.78 children per woman in 1993, to 1.51 in 1999. In all of India, the state also has the highest median interval (38 months) between the most recent birth and the one preceding it. The ages at which women start and stop childbearing are indicators of how many children they bear in total; these ages are also considered indicative of the ability of women to control their period of childbearing and rearing. Childbearing in Kerala is concentrated during a median period of seven years. A short period of childbearing, coupled with small family size and an ideal average time between births of at least three years, bodes well for the reproductive health of women in the state (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000).

Sex ratios
A striking and often-quoted statistic for Kerala is its sex ratio. Although the sex ratio (proportion of males to females in a population) at birth favours females, this advantage is neutralised and even reversed in some countries, including India, by the age of 20 years. According to the 2001 Census, India has an overall ratio of 107 males per 100 females (GOK 2003). Kerala is a prominent exception within the country: each census since 1881 has shown that it has more females than males in the population.
The state's sex ratio currently stands at 94.5 males for every 100 females, compared with a ratio of 96.5 males to every 100 females in the last decade. However, there is evidence that this increasing 'feminisation' of Kerala's population is due to its ageing population, and the relative rise in the proportion of women over 50 years of age (GOK 2003).

Kerala's sex ratio is seen by some as an indicator that women enjoy good physical health in the region. However, this is questioned by researchers who focus on levels of morbidity (sickness) instead of mortality. Critics also identify increases in mental-health problems as evidence of poor health status among the state's women. Kerala's suicide rate, three times the national average, is one of the highest in India. The state's rate of completed suicides is greater for men, although women are more likely to attempt to kill themselves. Suicide is also more prevalent among the unemployed and less well-educated (Eapen 2002). Paradoxically, the region's achievements in literacy and educational attainment may contribute to its high incidence of suicides. The labour-force participation rate among Kerala's women is less than half that of men, while female unemployment rates are high, particularly among educated women in rural areas, where economic opportunities are few. Halliburton (1998) posits that the gap between the career aspirations of an educated population, and the means to fulfil these expectations, could be a precipitating factor in suicide. This resonates strongly for women in Kerala, who not only have one of the lowest labour-force participation rates in India, but are also poorly represented in the political leadership of the state at all levels (Eapen and Kodoth 2002).

**Marriage and its links to women’s status in Kerala**

Examining women's experience of marriage is a critical step in assessing gender relations and women's equality in Kerala. Marriage is considered *de rigueur* for both sexes in India, and the state of Kerala is no exception. Most nuptials are arranged by family members, who carefully match attributes such as religion, caste, age, education and socio-economic standing in their quest for good partners for their relatives. Although Hindus are in the majority in the state, at 57 per cent of the population, Muslims and Christians form substantial minority populations at 23 per cent and 19 per cent respectively. Each religious group, and its various denominations and sub-groups, has traditionally had distinct family structures and different marriage customs. Personal law related to marriage, divorce, and inheritance also varies according to religious affiliation in India.

**Succession and inheritance**

Kerala has a long tradition of matriarchy among more than half its Hindu population. The matrilineal system is widely credited for the high social position that women supposedly enjoy in Kerala. Early census reports underscore the importance given to the girl child in matrilineal societies. The Travancore Census Report of 1875 goes as far as to say that ‘...a female child is prized more highly than a male one’ (cited in Jeffrey, 1989). Although absent among high-caste Brahmins, matriarchy was present in other numerically strong Hindu caste groups, such as the Nairs and the Ezhavas. However, since the 1920s, the matrilineal system has gradually declined throughout the state. The Travancore Nayar Regulation Act of 1925, initiated by the British, began the transition from a matrilineal joint family system, in which property was inherited collectively through the female line, to a system of inheritance by individuals. 'Classical' Hindu customs, which are patrilineal and patriarchal in nature, also were increasingly adopted by all caste groups. As the matrilineal joint system fragmented, women's rights to property were considerably reduced.
In contrast, the Christian succession laws of the early twentieth century in Kerala were blatantly biased against women. These laws gave a widow a right to maintenance from her late husband's estate only if her husband died without making a will. Her claim also ended if she remarried. Unmarried daughters could claim only between a third and a quarter of each son's share of paternal property, or 5,000 rupees, whichever was less, if the father died intestate. In all other instances, a daughter's right to her father's property and wealth was restricted to the sthreedhanam or dowry, paid at the time of her marriage. These laws were not challenged until 1983, when Mary Roy, a Syrian Christian woman who had married outside the community and had therefore not received a dowry, demanded her share of the family property. After a three-year-long battle, which was carried to the Supreme Court of India, Mary Roy won her case. However, the new succession law, which now reflects the right of daughters to their fathers' property, is effective only when the male head of the household dies intestate. Willing the property to sons still prevents daughters from laying claims to it (Roy 1999).

Muslim women in Kerala are governed by Islamic law, which, with a few exceptions, is uniform all over the country. These laws permit a man legally to marry four wives, and also give the husband the right to divorce his wife unilaterally, without consultation or agreement. Increasingly, the Muslim practice of the groom giving the bride a mehr (similar to a bride price) at marriage is being replaced or supplemented by transfers of wealth from her natal to her conjugal household in the form of dowry. The Mappilas, a Muslim community with a high concentration in northern Kerala, used to have a matrilineal system. But, as in the case of Hindu matrilineal communities, matriarchy has all but disappeared among the Mappilas.

The practice of dowry
The giving of dowry is an ancient custom in India, most often associated with the higher castes in Hindu society. Traditionally, it denoted a woman's share of the family wealth, transferred to her at the time of marriage. The practice was both socially and religiously sanctioned. A properly dowered daughter reflected well on her father and his social standing. In modern India, the practice of giving and taking dowry is no longer confined to the upper castes. Since India achieved independence, the dowry system was increasingly embraced by all religious and ethnic groups through a process called Sanskritisation – that is, the adoption of the cultural values of upper castes by groups from the lower echelons of the caste hierarchy. With socio-economic class supplanting caste as the touchstone of status, dowry is one of the ways in which families that were upwardly mobile could display their affluence (Srinivas 1983).

A Dowry Prohibition Act has existed in India since 1961. With the institution of the Act, taking or giving dowry became a crime punishable by fines and possible imprisonment. In 1984, the Act was amended to increase its effectiveness by raising the upper limits of the fine, as well as the period of imprisonment. However, the Dowry Prohibition Act has had little impact in quelling the system. Only a minuscule proportion of Indian society refuses to be associated with dowry in any of its manifestations. A 2002 survey on the prevalence of dowry, conducted by the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) in 18 states in India, demonstrated clearly that, far from diminishing in strength, this marriage transaction was rampant in every segment of Indian society. The system cuts across lines of caste, class, and religion. It is widespread in even the more literate states, such as Kerala, and among populations that have no long-standing tradition of dowry (AIDWA 2002).
Until the early twentieth century, only patrilineal Brahmin communities and Syrian Christians, who were allegedly converted from the upper castes, followed the custom of dowry in Kerala. Among Syrian Christians, before the 1961 ban, a mandated portion of the dowry was given to the Church. This contribution, known as \textit{pasaram}, varied from 4 to 10 per cent of the dowry. The Church still expects a large donation at the time of marriage. Denominations suggest amounts or percentages based on family income, or the amount of the ‘unofficial’ dowry. Today, all religious and caste groups engage in dowry-giving. Even in the Muslim-dominated northern districts of Kerala, clergy have been demanding a percentage of the dowry as payment for conducting wedding ceremonies, following traditional practice in Christian communities.

Communities which traditionally engaged in dowry-giving rationalise the practice as the appropriate transfer to a woman of her share of family wealth. But there is evidence that the money does not remain with the bride. In many cases, the \textit{sthreedhanam} is appropriated by the husband or his family and used to pay off loans, start a new business, or even help pay the dowries of unmarried women in the groom’s immediate family. Thus, instead of empowering women by providing them with assets that would assure a measure of financial independence, the giving of the \textit{sthreedhanam} can further disenfranchise women.

Dowry payments have soared in Kerala in recent years. Even young men with uncertain incomes and limited prospects command dowries of several thousand rupees. Rates for professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and officers in the prestigious Indian Administrative Services, are usually hundreds of thousands of rupees. The escalation in dowry payments has been fuelled in part by Kerala’s rapid incorporation into the global economy, through its international migrant workers. Remittances by these expatriates from the oil-rich countries of the Middle East accounted for almost a quarter of the state’s revenues during the 1990s (Kannan and Hari 2002). Migrant workers of all skill levels also report that the need to save enough money to properly dower their daughters is a reason for migration to find work in Middle Eastern countries.

As income disparities in Kerala increase, many families find it impossible to meet expectations of high dowries. Some face economic insolvency due to the large sums of money they have to transfer to the groom’s family. Among young women, the economic burden that they represent to their parents at marriage can cause high levels of anxiety. An extreme outcome of such stress is suicide. In a highly publicised case in the mid-1990s, three sisters in Kerala hanged themselves to spare their parents the ignominy of not having sufficient funds for dowries and wedding expenses. Even after marriage, disputes over dowry can precipitate suicides. While the percentage of female suicides in Kerala that can be attributed to dowry disputes is still relatively small, between 1994 and 2000 the number tripled (GOK 2003).

\textbf{Gender-based violence in the family}

Widespread violence against women in Kerala also contradicts claims of high social development, gender equality, and high female status. Unequal power relationships between men and women lay the foundation for violence against women. Domestic and sexual violence are among the most common and universal forms of abuse of women. Violence in the domestic realm is particularly insidious, as it is more likely to be hidden from public view and thus invites less outside intervention.

Malayalam, the language of Kerala, has no definition of domestic violence, and no term for this form of abuse. Although data on domestic violence are not collected systematically, there is evidence that
domestic violence is prevalent in the state and possibly is on the increase. Incidences of reported physical crimes against women quadrupled between 1991 and 1997 in the state (Jacob 2002).

As in many societies, domestic violence in Kerala is seen as a personal and private matter. The latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2) reports that Kerala has one of the lowest reported incidences of beatings or physical mistreatment of married, divorced, and widowed women (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000). But this finding is challenged. In a community-based study conducted in five cities in India, 69 per cent of women sampled in Trivandrum, Kerala's capital, reported that they had been subjected to some form of violence. According to the study, Trivandrum had the highest overall prevalence of violence against women among the five cities (Sakhi/UNIFEM 2002). Even NFHS-2 data, which at first glance appear to support low prevalence of violence, show that Kerala is similar to other regions in India, in that a large share of the abuse (greater than 75 per cent) is perpetrated by husbands on their wives (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000).

Domestic violence and financial transactions related to marriage are intimately linked. Physical violence, emotional trauma among women, and even death can be often traced to disputes over monetary transfers related to the now entrenched tradition of dowry, discussed in detail earlier. Dowry deaths are allegedly triggered by unsatisfied demands for the transfer of cash or goods to the husband and his family. These murders are often the culmination of abuse of young married women in the marital household. Although not as prevalent as in the northern Indian states, dowry-related deaths in Kerala are on the increase. It is a telling fact that the deaths of women within seven years of marriage which were attributed to dowry problems more than doubled between 1990 and 1999 (Sakhi/UNIFEM 2002). The prosecution of persons responsible for dowry murders is a long and arduous process. In 2001, the Kerala High Court had 35 pending cases of dowry death, and the state's subordinate courts had 152 pending cases.

The declining value of girls and women in the state is linked to violence against them both before and after birth. A key indicator of this is the increasing number of males in the sex ratio of children aged less than six years. In this age category, the last two censuses indicate that there were 104 boys for every 100 girls (GOK 2003). A survey conducted by the state's Social Welfare Department estimated that approximately 100,000 abortions take place in Kerala, most of them in response to the discovery that the foetus is female. The districts of Aluva and Trivandrum are said to be on par with northern Indian states noted for sex-selective abortions (Deshabhimani 2002b).

**Support services promoting change**

Few, if any, organisations in Kerala work to eliminate the root causes of unequal gender relations, especially with regard to marriage and dowry transactions. Although a number of groups provide legal assistance and counselling to women on a one-to-one basis, little is being done to prevent such abuse. The lack of organised campaigning by women in Kerala to end the dowry system and its concomitants may seem incongruous, given the high levels of education of the state's female population. But most women seeking legal help and support in the case of disputes over dowry or domestic abuse consider it a personal problem, and wish to remain anonymous to avoid bringing shame on the natal family.

In 1996, the Kerala Women's Commission (KWC) was created by an act of the Kerala Legislative Assembly. The Commission's activities include raising awareness of women's rights, facilitating the social and economic empowerment of women through policies and programmes, and documenting and investigating atrocities against women.
From its inception until 2001, over 31,000 cases were registered with the Commission, more than 75 per cent of which related to sexual and family violence. Although the KWC provides a forum for women to enable them to call public attention to issues such as violence in the home and in the workplace, and to initiate action on these, it does not have the authority to prosecute the perpetrators of the crimes.

Kerala Sthreevedi, a network of women’s organisations, engages in sustained campaigns against all forms of violence against women. Every district in Kerala has a Sthreevedi unit, administered by a convener. The coalition organises political action against perpetrators of violence, provides legal support to women who wish to take their complaints to court, makes available support services such as counselling, and also helps abused women to find shelter (Sakhi/UNIFEM 2002). Most cases taken up by Kerala Sthreevedi deal with issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment, rather than dowry disputes. However, local level anti-dowry movements have been initiated by organisations including the Muslim Service Society (MSS). A campaign by the Youth Wing of the MSS called on Kerala’s Muslims to renounce dowry and ostentatious weddings, and urged students to declare their abhorrence of the practice by signing anti-dowry oath cards.

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Notes
1 The HDI is a composite index which incorporates life expectancy, educational attainment, and standard of living.
2 The GDI uses the same indicators as the HDI, adjusted to capture inequalities between males and females.
3 The average number of children that a woman is expected to have during her childbearing years.

Conclusions
Superior physical health indicators, and high levels of education, among Kerala’s women are not accompanied by commensurately high levels of social development in other areas. The persistence of social practices such as dowry – indeed, its diffusion and escalation in recent years – have been accompanied by decreasing property rights and employment opportunities for women. The concomitant increase in abuses associated with inheritance systems are most keenly felt within marriage, where women’s lack of empowerment works against their physical, psychological, and financial well-being. If women are to be incorporated in development on equal terms with men, it is important that the structural and cultural barriers that prevent this are removed. Greater attention needs to be given to providing women with easily accessible and affordable support services, to help them to deal with issues such as domestic violence and abuses related to dowry, and to raise public awareness of the toll taken by such atrocities.

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Child support as a strategic interest: 
la Asociación de Madres Demandantes of El Salvador

Kelley Ready

Among certain social sectors in El Salvador, couples have not necessarily engaged in formal marriages. But with the economic and political crisis of the 1980s, many poor Salvador women were left with the sole financial responsibility for their children. With the ‘modernisation’ of the state in the post-war period, more of those women began to seek the assistance of the state in securing child support. This paper looks at the process that women had to go through to access that support and explores how Mujeres por La Dignidad y La Vida (Women for Dignity and Life), a feminist organisation created out of the Salvadoran civil war, mobilised women to challenge institutionalised gender roles reflected in that process. The conflicts that arose within the new organisation they formed, the Asociación de Madres Demandantes (Association of Mothers Seeking Child Support), highlight the different interests of the women being organised and those organising them. These conflicts were intensified by the policies of donor organisations that supported the work of the Association.

Despite the pervasive influence of Catholicism, marriage is not a particularly strong social institution in El Salvador, particularly among the poor, rural population. This fact has been attributed to the inability of the majority of Salvadoran families to acquire property (White 1973). The economic and political conditions that created the barriers to property acquisition also led to the civil war that took place between 1979 and 1992. The war, and the migration which accompanied it, undermined the extended family structure which was common, and provided an alternative to the nuclear family. After the war, increasing numbers of Salvadoran women found themselves looking to their children’s biological fathers for support, and appealing to the state to help them obtain that support.

Another consequence of the war was the emergence of a Salvadoran women’s movement which challenged established gender roles. One of the organisations that was part of that movement, Mujeres Por La Dignidad y La Vida (Women for Dignity and Life, or The Dignas for short), sought to organise women seeking child support to advocate for their rights, and to challenge prevailing attitudes towards mothers suing for child support. This paper describes this effort, and critically assesses the impact that international funding had on that movement.1

From informal marriages to Madres Demandantes

Since the 1960s, at least, the number of domestic partnerships in El Salvador in which the couple is not legally married (uniones de hecho) has been equal to the number of formal marriages (Baires et al. 1996). While the 2000 census shows that this ratio is still found in rural areas, in urban areas the proportion of formal marriages is
now somewhat higher, at 55 per cent (Ministerio de Economía, Dirección General de Estadística y Censos, 2000). Marriages in El Salvador have also been increasingly impermanent. In 1975, one out of every 13 marriages was said to end in divorce. By 1984, it was one out of every ten (García y Gomáriz 1989, 108–9). The average marriage in El Salvador now lasts between three and five years (Baires et al. 1996). Factors that have contributed to infrequent, unstable marriages are the Salvadoran civil war and the migration that accompanied it, as well as high levels of teenage pregnancy and male desertion. As a result, many children are born without the protections that marriage may provide.

The PGR and its role

The institution responsible for ensuring that children receive the parental support to which they are entitled is the Procuraduría General de la República (Attorney General of the Republic, or PGR). The PGR was established in the early 1950s, to provide relief to elderly people, infirm people, and abandoned children. It took on an additional role during the civil war, when the government persecuted any signs of popular support for the guerrilla opposition. Because trade unions were one of the government’s main targets, workers were forced to seek the assistance of the PGR to represent them in disputes with their employers. Because trade unions were one of the government’s main targets, workers were forced to seek the assistance of the PGR to represent them in disputes with their employers.

With the passage of the Family Code in 1994,2 the increased mobility of the population during the war, and the signing of the Peace Accords, attending to la cuota alimenticia (child support) has become a major function of the PGR. The PGR’s constitutional mandate calls for it ‘to watch over the defence of the family and of persons, and the interests of minors and others incapable of taking care of themselves’ (interview with Miguel Angel Cardoza Ayala, 7 January 1997). This function is to be fulfilled by ‘giving legal assistance to persons with few resources and representing them in court in the defence of their individual liberty and labour rights’ (ibid.).3 Poor women, mostly those who have had uniones de hechos, or who have been raped, come to the PGR when the fathers of their children refuse or cease to support the children. In the process, if they are even initially successful, they have to meet face-to-face with the fathers of their children to negotiate an amount that the men will contribute to the children’s upkeep. But if the PGR has created the stage for these negotiations to take place, the women’s movement has been an unexpected actor – sometimes welcome, sometimes not – whose improvisations have rapidly changed the script.

As a feminist organisation which emerged from the opposition to the government during the civil war, Las Dignas saw the PGR very differently, as ‘the largest stage in the country, where men and women each day face off over the fulfilment of their respective roles in caring for children’ (Vázquez and Murgualday 1996, 13). This description vividly captures the drama of the process that women go through in order to solicit the aid of the state in convincing the fathers of their children to support their offspring financially.

Putting in a claim

Many of the women who come to file a claim against the fathers of their children (una demanda) at the PGR have not been legally married to the fathers. The first step is to legally establish the paternity of their children. The alleged fathers, or demandados, often initially deny paternity, even when they know it to be true. In rare cases, the existence of a prior relationship can be documented in a way that will establish paternity. But the majority of the cases are much more complex, such as those where women have become pregnant as a result of a rape by their employer (not an uncommon occurrence, especially for domestic workers). Recognition of paternity can be voluntary, or
it can be forced through a legal procedure in which the woman has to submit evidence to a judge. Since DNA testing was not available until recently, and still remains out of reach for the vast majority of women who appeal to the PGR, the process of securing recognition of paternity is often unsuccessful, generally prolonged, and almost always extremely painful and humiliating for the women involved.

If paternity is established, the cuota (payment) is set through the Department of Family Relations (DFR) of PGR. The DFR worker summons the demandado to a comparendo (appearance) by sending a notice to his workplace or home. The first appointment can be anywhere from two to three weeks from the date after paternity is established, but if the demandado does not appear for the first appointment, he will be summoned again. Legally, the bachilleres (workers in the DFR) are supposed to send out an arrest warrant if he does not show up after the second time he is summoned. However, fewer than half show up the first time, and more than a third appear only after being called three or more times (Baires et al. 1996, 129). While an arrest warrant will be issued if the demandado does not show up, the warrants are often ignored. Returning for these appointments can represent a significant hardship for women who have few resources, who must sacrifice earnings to attend, who are responsible for small children, and who must travel into San Salvador from inaccessible areas. Many women give up in the process.

If and when the demandado does appear, he and the demandante sit down with one of the bachilleres, who acts as a negotiator. The head of the DFR is officially supposed to preside over the meeting, but the heavy caseloads long ago made that impossible. The demandante details the child’s needs, while the demandado documents the limits of his ability to contribute to the child’s upkeep. If they arrive at a mutually acceptable amount, the child support payment, or cuota, is set. In cases where an agreement cannot be reached and the demandado has a regular salary, a preliminary cuota is set, until more evidence can be provided. If the demandado works in the informal market or for himself, a socio-economic study is done by staff of the Department of Social Work of the PGR, and they impose a cuota based on their findings.

Once established, the demandado’s employer is mandated to deduct the cuota from the demandado’s pay, and send it to the PGR. Until the late 1990s, women had to go to the Accounting Department (Control de Depósitos) of the PGR to pick up their payment. But the money often did not arrive, in which case the demandado went into default. When this happened, women were required to go back to the DFR to initiate the process of investigating the reason. Women also often had to return to the DFR to appeal for the cuota to be increased when they found it to be inadequate.

From practical needs to strategic interests: challenging machismo through the cuota

In soliciting a cuota, Salvadoran women were confronting what is regarded by most Salvadorans as a cultural trait of Salvadoran men: la paternidad irresponsable (irresponsible fatherhood). Increasingly recognised as a problem, it is, however, also generally seen as an innate component of traditional Salvadoran masculinity, or machismo. The Salvadoran women’s movement rejects the belief that gender roles are natural, and has promoted a feminist perspective which reframes machismo as sexism, supportive of male power and female subordination. The Dignas recognised the issue of paternidad irresponsable as an issue that they could use as a means of challenging inequality between men and women.

Originally, the Dignas had focused on generating income for poor and rural women, specifically those in villages that
had been repopulated by refugees from the war. The organisation had emerged in 1990 from one of the branches of the Salvadoran guerrilla opposition, Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or FMLN). The leadership of the Dignas consisted largely of ex-guerrillas who had returned to San Salvador at the end of the war. They combined a commitment to social and economic justice, which had evolved out of their experiences in the war, with a gender perspective, which had developed in the context of a growing global feminist movement. Their earliest projects aimed to satisfy women’s ‘practical needs’ (Moser 1989), that is, women’s needs arising from their day-to-day efforts to fulfil their traditional gender roles. Later, the Dignas attempted to introduce the participants to a feminist analysis of their situation as women. The theory was that the women would then recognise their ‘strategic needs’ (ibid.), i.e. those needs arising out of women’s subordination. This would create a new understanding of their condition, which would compel them to organise and challenge not only the material conditions, but the cultural structures which maintained their secondary status.

While this model of understanding women’s subordination was widely used in Central America, projects based on it often did not operate according to the theory. Few of the efforts became economically or logistically self-supporting. The leadership of the Dignas was frustrated with seemingly dependent relationships between them and the primarily poor, rural women with whom they worked. They wanted to avoid asencialismo, the practice of maintaining a cliental dependency by doing things for people instead of enabling them to help themselves. However, the type of project that they were running fostered just such a relationship. At the annual Dignas’ assembly in 1993, the organisation decided to alter focus, to organise women to act in response to feminist issues.

At that time, several of the women in the Dignas’ leadership were going through the process of suing the fathers of their children for child support. In the process of filing their suits, they were experiencing the humiliation and frustration that was common to women going through the process. But more importantly, they were becoming aware of the large number of women who were congregating every day outside the offices of the PGR. As they talked about the situation, a Mexican feminist working with the Dignas proposed that they do an investigation of the situation of the demandantes. They quickly found funding for this. As part of the study (Baires et al. 1996), several members of the project began to hold meetings with the demandantes. They soon found themselves advising the women of their rights and providing psychological counselling for women, on issues such as incest, powerlessness, motherhood, child abuse, and domestic violence.

The introduction to their first investigation of the issue states that ‘in the opinion of the Dignas, applying for child support (demanda de cuota de alimenticia) articulates the practical necessities of thousands of women with the conception that they, along with the rest of society, have about motherhood, fatherhood, and the family’ (Baires et al. 1996, 8).

The Dignas sought to use demandantes’ struggle to obtain child support – a practical necessity – to raise women’s consciousness about their rights as women, and to challenge the cultural patterns that encouraged paternidad irresponsable. The tactic of organising demandantes was intended not only to reshape women’s conception of gender roles, specifically the rights and obligations of motherhood and fatherhood, but also to pressure the state to make institutional changes that would actively combat paternidad irresponsable.

The Dignas recognised that, with the processes of ‘democratisation’ and ‘modernisation’ through which El Salvador was going after the war and the implementation
of the Peace Accords, the state was playing an increasing role in shaping gender and family relations. In their perspective, the response of the state to paternidad irresponsable was insufficient, because it was simply ‘translat[ing] the interests of women (that the fathers contribute to the sustenance of the children) into a legal issue (the right to receive child support) and into an administrative issue (the collection of the payment)’ (Baires et al. 1996, 16). However, the state was potentially able to do more than this: through institutions like the PGR, it could adopt policies to promote the restructuring of Salvadoran gender relations.

By 1994, the Dignas was providing both counselling and legal services to demandantes. But providing services obviously was not, in itself, going to satisfy the Dignas’ new mission of organising women to challenge oppressive gender roles. They wanted to make their work with the demandantes change the way in which women, and Salvadoran society, thought about women’s roles and gender-based inequality. They set out to do this by combining the provision of services with activities intended to encourage women coming to the PGR to see themselves collectively, as madres demandantes, a new identity which would enable them to challenge how they were treated, not only by the fathers of their children but by the state.

A key element in developing this identity were ‘grupos de atención organizativa’ (group therapy sessions which also encourage the participants to join the organisation). After receiving counselling from the Dignas’ psychologists and lawyers, the women were encouraged to attend these groups, in which prevailing notions about what it meant to be a madre demandante were challenged. As women shared their success stories, their fears, and their frustrations, the Dignas used a feminist perspective to analyse the roots of their problems, to help them to develop a more positive identity as madres demandantes, and to get them to recognise that the way to achieve change was by organising themselves. The idea of child support as a handout was disputed: women were told that it was their children’s right to receive support from their fathers. Asking for support did not mean, either, that women had to give in to men’s demands for sexual relations.

The Dignas also began to push the issue of paternidad irresponsable higher on the country’s social and political agenda. As part of the Peace Accords, the National Police had been dismantled in November 1994. The Dignas mounted a campaign to obtain a share of the severance pay for the demandantes who had spouses who were being laid off. While they did not succeed in this, their campaign gave the issue increased visibility. That new visibility was recognised in July 1995, when the Dignas received an award from UNICEF for their work with the madres demandantes.

These successes led to the establishment of la Asociación de Madres Demandantes, or AMD, in August 1995. It became a separate group, semi-autonomous from the Dignas, with its own office around the corner from the PGR. Soon afterwards, then-president Adolfo Cristiani offered a voluntary retirement package to public employees as part of his moves to privatise state services. This time, the women’s movement was prepared. The AMD, with the support of the Dignas and other women’s groups, successfully lobbied to get 30 per cent of the severance pay awarded to demandos deducted and handed over to the demandantes.

The clash of feminist and participatory perspectives

Despite its success, the AMD soon found itself faced by similar dynamics to those experienced by the Dignas in their earlier productive projects. The strategies that had brought the AMD its recognition had been primarily orchestrated by its founders and leaders. In contrast, the women who made up the rank and file of the membership were
simply concerned to obtain child support. The activity intended to bridge this gap was the Thursday morning sensibilización: a weekly open meeting, facilitated by psychologists from the Dignas.

While the primary goal of the meeting was to provide emotional support, these meetings also aimed to raise the demandantes' consciousness about their roles as women, and to challenge their attitude toward motherhood. Many of the women in the leadership of the Dignas saw it as essential to challenge the idea that sexuality and motherhood are always connected. Breaking the link between motherhood and sexuality was a critical issue. According to Vilma Vásquez, one of the founders of both the Dignas and the AMD, men see sex and fatherhood as totally distinct. But for women, sexuality does not exist apart from motherhood; sexuality implies reproduction. Feminism, Vásquez concluded, could expand the potential for women to experience sexuality in terms of their own pleasure, by separating it from reproduction.\(^5\)

But, rather than welcoming this message, the women whom the AMD was organising stressed the pleasure to be had from motherhood. This difference in perspective was quite evident at the Thursday morning meetings that I attended in October 1996. The women described the satisfaction that they derived from being mothers, while the facilitators challenged the demandantes' idealisation of motherhood. The dynamics in the Thursday meetings highlighted the contradictions between the goal of organising the demandantes to speak for themselves, and the promotion of a feminist perspective from above. Ultimately, the AMD leadership failed to develop an effective analysis of the appeal of motherhood as a strategy for survival and affirmation for poor Salvadoran women. The failure adequately to address these differences in perspective eventually created contradictions which have since torn the organisation apart.

A study of the AMD (Vázquez and Murguialday 1996) noted another critical difference between the founders of the group and the afiliadas, those madres demandantes who participated actively in the AMD on a voluntary basis. Vázquez and Murguialday pointed out that while the afiliadas were encouraged to develop pride in their identity as madres demandantes, the organisers' sense of identity came from their perception of themselves as 'political figures with important tasks to fulfill' (ibid. 61). For the most part, they had made a political decision to become involved, and had been able to convert that decision into a full-time job. As a result, it was easier for them to assume a detached, critical attitude towards motherhood, as an institution that should be challenged. Over 25 years ago, Mina Caulfield warned the North American women's movement of the danger of seeing motherhood and the family in this narrow way, and of failing to recognise 'the resourcefulness and creativity of women in their domestic strategies of survival', which have made the family a source of resistance to oppression (Caulfield 1974, 84).

More recently, Patricia Hill Collins has addressed similar issues from the perspective of black feminism. Collins characterises motherhood as 'a fundamentally contradictory institution' (1990, 133) for African-American women, noting that they continue to have children despite the oppression (based on race, class, and gender) that they face. According to Collins, this is because 'motherhood remains a symbol of hope for many of even the poorest Black women' (ibid. 136). She argues that it is important to recognise 'how Black children affirm their mothers and how important that affirmation can be in a society that denigrates Blackness and womanhood' (ibid. 137). Collins's argument can be used to explain the attitudes of the afiliadas. For many of them, motherhood was the ultimate achievement of their womanhood and their life.

Collin's comments are echoed in the title of an often-quoted article by the late Martín-
Baró (1990), which describes the conflict and ambiguity that surround Salvadoran women’s experience in the family. Martín-Baró points out that despite the fact that the structure of the family incarcerates women in many ways, it also provides them with a safe harbour: a harbour partly built, he acknowledged, on ‘the mythical image of the mother, object of song and poetry’ (ibid. 272). Despite the hardships that they had to overcome to provide for their children, and the rapidly changing conditions confronting Salvadoran women in the 1980s and 1990s, motherhood was a role that they continued to embrace.

To the organisers of the AMD, in contrast, the idealisation of motherhood by the afiliadas was preventing them from recognising the real nature of women’s roles in the family and society. When they found determined resistance on the part of the demandantes to adopt this perspective, they failed to question the source of that resistance. Like the North American feminists whom Caulfield was cautioning, they saw the hesitation as evidence of the all-embracing nature of the ideology of motherhood, rather than as an indication that their analysis was flawed.

The fact that the AMD’s methods of organising were strongly influenced by feminist principles of empowerment intensified the problems between leaders and afiliadas. The women who joined the rapidly growing organisation did not necessarily share the paid workers’ critique of the institution of motherhood, but they were encouraged to think of the organisation as their own. Despite claims that ‘they were all demandantes’, the paid staff did not participate in the meeting with the other demandantes on equal terms. The paid staff of the AMD participated in the Thursday meetings exclusively in the role of facilitators. In addition, when there was an upcoming event for which they wanted the presence of the women, one of the staff would make an announcement. While the paid staff did not participate in the sensibilizaciones, the demandantes had very little input into the management of the organisation or the development of any of its strategies. When the demandantes were recruited to participate in activities, their participation often seemed to me to be little more than window-dressing.

In addition, the stakes were raised by the organisation’s access to international funding. As the afiliadas became increasingly involved in the AMD, they did not gain equivalent access to the resources. This became problematic during my fieldwork after several of the most active afiliadas began working as promotoras, or outreach workers, receiving a financial stipend. After working full-time for four months, the promotoras were suddenly told that the organisation had financial problems and that their hours were being cut back. The promotoras were extremely disgruntled, and several of them took me aside to explain their frustrations. They told me that their resentment had been heightened when they discovered that the paid staff were considering the possibility of hiring men to organise the demandados, the deadbeat dads. When I asked the paid staff about it, they told me that they had found a foundation that was interested in funding a project to combat paternidad irresponsable by working with demandados. They had begun to discuss the idea before presenting it to the afiliadas, but rumours had circulated among the promotoras. Explanations that the funds for starting such a project were coming from a separate source did nothing to assuage the anger of the promotoras.

The afiliadas did not have access to any of the organisation’s financial information, nor would they have known how to interpret it if they did. According to what they told me, they did not know where the financial information was kept, who the funders were, or how to contact them. The afiliadas had not complained about the failure of the organisation’s paid staff to consult with them in the past. But I believe that their resentment at not being consulted in this case resulted both from the differences
between the *afiliada*'s views about men's roles in parenting and the views of the paid staff, and from the fact that the promoters felt that they were being replaced by men.

Over the next few couple of weeks, I watched as tensions between the *afiliadas* and the paid staff grew. Unexpectedly, the *afiliadas* played a trump card. They had been signing blank receipts for their stipends. Somehow, they learned that the paid staff had been filling in the forms with a higher figure than they were being paid, in order to justify receiving additional funds from their donors. The *afiliadas* threatened to go public with this information, an act which was likely severely to damage the AMD's credibility. This strategy enabled them to negotiate a settlement. Had the *afiliadas* not had this document, it seemed to me that the women's complaints would have probably been ignored.

While the divisions between the paid staff and the *afiliadas* were not strictly based on class differences, increased international funding for NGOs is generating problems between leaders and participants in development organisations, not only in the AMD but in other organisations in the Salvadoran women's movement. I have argued elsewhere (Ready 1999) that the requirements of international funding agencies may marginalise women who do not have access to certain kinds of training. Having someone with the ability to read and write, to speak and write English, with computer literacy or ownership, and the ability to use e-mail and the Internet may determine whether an organisation can find, apply for and qualify for funds. To maintain funding, someone in the organisation must be able to write and develop plans. Without these skills and resources, it is increasingly difficult for a woman to play a leadership role in the movement.

Finally, in my interviews for my dissertation with women in the Salvadoran women's organisations (ibid.), the interviewees also complained that many funders fail to provide money for transportation or food for women who are participating in organisations' activities. Many funding agencies are hesitant to provide funds for non-capital expenses, but these costs are integral to ensuring that poor and rural women can participate in workshops and events. The income of many potential participants is so low that without these costs being covered, they cannot afford to attend. In the AMD, the paid staff falsified the receipts for the stipends of the *afiliadas* in order to pay for these expenses. They filled in the receipts with figures higher than they actually paid out, and diverted the excess funds to pay women's expenses. With the power they had to control both financial and social resources, the paid staff were able to control the organisation's goals and strategies, and the tactics through which these would be realised, with little input from the *afiliadas*. (Social resources for AMD included support from the Dignas, other women's groups, and the FMLN; access to funders and the media; and contacts in the PGR.)

The differences generated tensions which came to a head in July 1999. Three of the paid staff – the three founders of the organisation – were accused of embezzlement by members of the *junta directiva* (board of directors), which, by this point, included five of the *afiliadas*. They were charged, eventually convicted, ultimately jailed, and ordered to pay back the funds. A once-vital organisation was left in a shambles, and the women's movement was torn in half.

**Conclusion**

In El Salvador, an emphasis on developing 'strategic interests' by both local feminists and international funding agencies undermined the process through which grassroots women could contribute to the development of the Salvadoran feminist movement. The AMD was able to secure funding because the professional staff articulated a critical feminist analysis of child support, an
institution which deeply shaped the lives of a large number of poor women. But the *madres demandantes* did not necessarily share their analysis. In order to ensure that the Association continued organising around the strategic interests of the *madres demandantes*, the professional staff had to limit the participation of the *madres demandantes*.

For the Salvadoran women's movement to avoid the fragmentation that has afflicted the feminist movement in the United States, leaders need to listen better to women who are not the founders or organisers of organisations, and have not had the same privileged access to resources. This access determines who has the power to shape organisations and their agenda. In turn, international funding agencies must pay more careful attention to the effect of their funding decisions on the women's movement in different countries. In particular, the reluctance of funders to finance expenses such as stipends and transportation for women who cannot afford these costs makes it extremely difficult for them to participate. The work of the AMD was attractive to funders, because their analysis reflected an understanding of strategic gender interests. But to ensure that such organisations do empower grassroots women, it is critical that the costs of their participation are supported with funding, as well as policies that incorporate their perspective into the organisation's strategies and goals.

**Notes**

1. Fieldwork for this paper was done with the support of the Fulbright Scholars Program and the Institute for the Study of World Politics. I am also indebted to the Dignas and the AMD for letting me share their struggles and accomplishments.

2. Until 1994 Salvadoran family law had been based in the 1860 Civil Code. With the adoption of the new law, women were given more rights, were made more aware of those rights and began to access them in greater numbers. As a result, the work of the Department of Family Relations assumed a more prominent role in the PGR.

3. According to Miguel Angel Cardoza Ayala, the former *Procurador General de la República* (the Attorney General) this is a very different role from that of similar institutions in other countries. While in El Salvador, the PGR was established to provide legal and social services to those with few resources, in other countries the Attorney General's office generally represents the state and those accused of crimes.

4. Interview with Miguel Angel Cardoza Ayala conducted in the office of the *Procurador General de la República*, San Salvador, 7 January 1997.

5. Interview, 20 February 1997 in San Salvador. Vilma is also one of the women who was later convicted with embezzling funds from the organisation, although she maintained her innocence throughout the ordeal.

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Early marriage in eastern Nigeria and the health consequences of vesico-vaginal fistulae (VVF) among young mothers

Eno-Obong Akpan

This paper deals with the problem of early marriage and childbirth in eastern Nigeria, particularly among the Ibibio ethnic group. I intend this paper to be a tool to help both human-rights activists and policy makers to effect positive change for girl children affected by early marriage. First, the paper examines the challenges posed to early marriage by the Nigerian Constitution, and human rights law. The article then focuses on the health risks involved in early pregnancies and, specifically, the fate of young women who are affected by vesico-vaginal fistulae (VVF). The author visited a VVF Centre in Mbarit Itam, Akwa Ibom State, and shares some of the experiences of the interviewees. The paper concludes with some suggestions for reform to address the interests and needs of women.

Early marriage still poses a problem in most parts of Nigeria, as in many other countries in Africa and beyond. It is practised and justified in the name of tradition, culture, and religion. Especially vulnerable are young girls in rural, poor, and deprived communities. This situation reflects the relatively strong adherence to tradition, and the relative lack of opportunities, affecting women in rural areas. In eastern Nigeria in general, and among the Ibibios in particular, early marriage dates back to the formation of the society itself. In this part of Nigeria, it is not uncommon for girls below the age of 13 to get married, but this is no longer very widespread. The National Baseline Survey of Positive and Harmful Traditional Practices affecting Women and Girls in Nigeria reveals that the aggregate mean age at marriage for female children is 16.7 years. In the north-east, the age is 15.2 years and in the north-west, 14.2 years. This is an indicator of the prevalence of early marriage.1

The rights of girl children are protected by a legal framework, including national laws and international and regional conventions which Nigeria has ratified. The applicable international conventions and charters are the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, and the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.2

Defining the ‘child’

Under Nigerian law, the concept of the ‘child’ is based exclusively on calendar age (Effah 1996). In the Children and Young Persons Law of the States of the Federation, a
distinction is clearly made between a child and a young person. Whereas a child means a person under the age of 14 years, a young person is a person who has attained the age of 14 years and is under the age of 18 years. In contrast, Article 1 of the CRC defines a child as 'every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.' Furthermore, for the purpose of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, a child has been defined by Article 2 as 'every human being below the age of 18 years.'

Early marriage

Implicit in the available national constitution and international conventions is the inherent right to choose marriage partners freely. These laws are meant to protect the rights of women and girl children. Article 16 of CEDAW requires states to ensure that men and women have the same rights to enter into marriage and to freely choose a spouse, and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent. Article 21(2) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child states that 'child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be 18 years and make registration of all marriages in an official registry compulsory.'

While tradition and culture endorse the concept of early marriage, the 1999 Nigerian Constitution is silent on the issue, although it could be implied from the provisions of Section 29 that parties to a marriage must be of full age. Under Section 29(4)(b), 'any woman who is married shall be deemed to be of full age'. On the other hand, subsection (4)(a) states that 'full age means the age of eighteen years and above'.

The fact that early marriage is still widespread in Nigeria despite the existence of international and national laws indicates that there is still a prevailing need for the government of Nigeria to ensure that human rights laws affecting girl children are upheld at all levels, in principle and in practice.

Cultural practices on early marriage among the Ibibios

To a large extent, early marriage is a direct product of culture and tradition. The Nigerian society is predominantly characterised by a patriarchal and patrilineal social system, with beliefs and norms legitimising and perpetuating unequal treatment towards women. There are indications that the society’s expectation for every woman to be married is a product of patriarchy, which determines the role that females should play in society; that of marriage, childbearing, and ‘home keeping’.

In typical traditional societies such as ours, the link between marriage and childbirth cannot be overlooked. In such societies, marriage is mainly for procreation rather than for companionship. Indeed, in most African societies, motherhood is an essential goal of marriage. In the Ibibio society, much emphasis is placed on a woman’s ability to bear many children (both male and female). Motherhood brings status, prestige, and new authority within the home and society. Soon after marriage, a woman is expected to start bearing children for her husband and his family. A barren woman is thus seen as a great disappointment and ‘bad news’, not only to her husband and in-laws but to her family as well. Marrying early necessarily means having children early.

There are many reasons advanced by Ibibio society for the practice of early marriage. From the perspective of culture, marriage is almost compulsory. Every female is expected to marry and should do so within a certain age bracket. The centrality of marriage within the Ibibio cultural context is so dominant that it is felt that women have no choice but to be married. Unmarried women are usually not considered relevant in the society’s scheme of things, and there-
fore may not be accorded their due respect — for the simple reason that they are not married.

The age when a woman is deemed to have been too old to marry (or to have ‘missed the bus’ — that is, to have missed the opportunity to find a husband) varies from one community to another and also between families. For uneducated women, marriage in their early teens would be favoured by many — at worst, before the end of the teens. Although the age bracket for educated women is somewhat more liberal, a woman above the age of 25 years may still be considered too old to remain single.

**Reasons for early marriage**

The reasons given by most interviewees in support of early marriage were varied, but ultimately, it became clear that those reasons were, and still are, based on age-old customs and traditions.

Conformity with tradition is one of the major reasons why young girls are married off early or forced into unacceptable marriage relationships. Some parents, especially in the village circle, do not wish to violate the traditions and customs of the elders that favour early marriage.

Girls, like their mothers, are seen as the property of male members of the family. They have an exchange value, disguised as ‘bride price’, fixed on every bride by her family. Bride price has, quite often, been perceived by some parents as a source of wealth to the family, and this tends to make the idea of early marriage attractive. Therefore, especially among rural communities, poverty is a factor in perpetrating early marriage. In Ibibio culture, bride price is paid by the groom (or his family) to the bride’s family. Usually, there is a fixed bride price with an accompanying bridal list, depending on the culture and custom of the given area. Traditionally, the bridal list includes cash, household goods, drinks, gifts for the bride’s parents — ranging from clothes to walking sticks, umbrellas, palm-wine tapping ropes and accompanying accessories, to bicycles and even cattle. Most parents have calculated the gains and privileges to be derived from their daughters’ marriages, long before the girls have matured.

Family honour and dignity also play an important part in the decision to marry off young daughters. This is related to the need to control female sexual behaviour in a male-dominated society. Many rural families are constantly fearful that their young daughters may engage in premarital sex, and possibly get pregnant before marriage.

Early marriage is attractive to parents who wish to reap the benefits of their daughters’ marital alliances as soon as possible. Some parents wish to strengthen family and ethnic bonds. They do so by ensuring that their offspring marry among their own group. For the core traditionalists, it is also meant to encourage and promote marriages between members of the same tribe. Some parents feel that it is necessary to marry off their daughters early as a security for the children’s future. Parents, in doing this, often wish to see and carry their grandchildren and even great-grandchildren before they die. Again, they believe that this wish can be fulfilled in their lifetime only if the young girls in the family marry early.

A final reason for early marriage is the fact that youthful beauty stimulates some men to want to marry a very young woman.

**Consequences of early marriage/early pregnancy**

In poor countries and families, the act of becoming a mother — especially at an early age — continues to jeopardise the health and progress of women and young girls. Apart from the health consequences associated with early sexual activity and childbearing, there are serious implications for the wider society, and for the economic and social development of the nation.

**Health consequences**

VVF (vesico-vaginal fistulae) remains a serious reproductive health problem for women of childbearing age in the developing
world, although it has been practically eliminated in developed countries. It is one of the most appalling misfortunes that a woman can face as a result of pregnancy and childbirth. Presently, it is estimated that there are 150,000 cases of VVF in Nigeria. Vesico-vaginal fistula is an opening between the uterus and the bladder or rectum. A fistula is ‘an abnormal tube-like passage from a normal cavity or tube to a free surface or to another cavity. It may result from congenital incomplete closure of parts or from abscesses, injuries, or inflammatory processes’ (Taber 1997, 730). A VVF condition occurs when a hole is sustained in the bladder or rectum during unrelieved obstructed childbirth. This condition consequently renders the patient incontinent of urine and/or faeces.

The large majority of VVF sufferers are young (usually between 12 and 20 years of age), poor, uneducated, rural women whose access to medical facilities is limited. In Nigeria, about 65 per cent of the population live in rural areas and only 6.5 per cent of the population have access to health-care services (Shehu 2002). Typically, the sufferer experiences the damage during prolonged labour, often caused by a lack of physical maturity on the part of the mother.

The trauma of prolonged labour and the death of a baby is a devastating experience. Following this, the VVF sufferer is often abandoned by her husband, and friends or family, because of the offensive smell that she emits. The social consequences of VVF are severe: the sufferer becomes an outcast from society – homeless, and unable to fend for herself adequately. VVF is regarded as a shameful and degrading condition. Quite often, the woman feels unfortunate, thinks she is the only one with the condition, and wishes she had died during labour. Meanwhile, many husbands and the community may think it is a sign of an unconfessed infidelity, a sexually transmitted disease, fate, or bewitchment.

During research for this article, I visited Pope John Paul II Family Life Centre and Maternal Birth Injury Hospital, Mbribit Itam, in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. VVF patients need reconstructive surgery, followed by a long convalescence. The centre treats cases as quickly as possible and provides hostel accommodation for the patients and their relations (referred to as ‘attendants’) who come to cater for them while recuperating. The case studies below are taken from interviews conducted to reveal the experiences of some patients at the centre. I have changed women’s names to ensure their privacy.

Glory, now 24 years old, was once married. She was 19 when she developed a fistula, but had been married much earlier in her life. She was in labour for four to five days at the traditional birth attendant’s house, before she was taken to the hospital, which was located many miles away from her remote village. Her husband abandoned her as soon as he got to the centre and found out he had to make a down payment of 6,000 Naira (approximately $42). She feels sad that she had to go through all that pain only to lose the baby at the end of it all. Her surgery at the WF Centre was successful, but she is yet to return to her village. She is currently undergoing a rehabilitation programme in the centre, where she is learning how to sew. Because she had to marry early, she never really had the opportunity to complete her secondary education.

Edidiong, an orphan, is now 16 years old, but was only 14 when she became pregnant. The young man responsible for the pregnancy denied responsibility and disappeared as soon as he heard about her condition, having previously promised marriage. She was in labour for three days. She is presently being taken care of by her family and hopes to return to stay with her elder sister when she is discharged from the centre. In the meantime, she is also in the rehabilitation programme learning how to sew. Her greatest regret in life is the fact that she had to abandon school, in her words, ‘to follow a man’ (sic).

Emem’s case demonstrates the point made earlier about beliefs that VVF is
evidence of bewitchment. She is now 22 years old, but had the first VVF problem in 1999. Because she had lost consciousness after her obstructed and prolonged labour, she still cannot remember how many days she actually spent in labour. Since 1999, she has undergone four unsuccessful operations. Her most recent surgery to repair the damage was in February 2003, but she still feels unwell and continues to leak urine. Emem was engaged to be married before the present events, and continues to see her condition as an impediment to her progress. Her ex-fiancé has accused her family of exercising witchcraft powers over her, and has since abandoned her to fate.

Socio-economic consequences of early marriage
All over the world, there is a growing realisation that education makes an individual become receptive to change, increases employment opportunities, is a tool for empowerment, increases knowledge, helps an individual to develop his or her skills, increases life choices, and increases awareness of issues related to health, politics, and other matters. Higher education also influences women's propensity to seek employment and become economically independent. But because girls married early are never really given full educational opportunities, they may never have the chance of reaping the benefits of advancement from the fruits of education.

Survivors of early marriage are a particularly disadvantaged group, in relation to both their socio-economic status and level of education. When girls marry at an early age, their opportunities for personal development through education are drastically curtailed. Education equips children with fundamental life skills – literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. Education is perhaps the most important investment that a society can make in its young ones (Udombana 1998). Early marriage has a long-lasting impact on women. With little or no form of education, no vocational training, no gainful employment or visible means of livelihood, women are condemned to travel a long road of mediocrity, subject to the whims and caprices of their husbands, and remaining an economic liability.

However, there are grounds for optimism in that, since the late 1960s, noticeable changes have begun in parents' attitudes to educating girls. Parents are increasingly pushing for their daughters' education, for a number of reasons. One is that women are likely to invest more in the care of their aged parents (Nzegwu 1995).

Conclusion: suggestions for reform
The discussion in this article so far has revealed some key facts about early marriage in Nigeria, and its consequences. Human rights laws seeking to protect girl-children from early marriage are in place. The problem is the seeming inability on the part of the government to reduce the incidences of early marriage, and hence curb the injuries associated with pregnancy at a young age. We need implementation and enforcement of existing laws, rather than new laws. The challenge is for women's rights activists to use the available human rights instruments and the national laws, to contest interpretations of customary laws which are contrary to the Constitution, and to advance interpretations that promote justice.

In addition, due attention ought to be paid to the provisions of Section 18(1) of the 1999 Constitution, Article 28 of the CRC, and Article 11 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, all of which guarantee every child a right to free and compulsory basic education. In view of this, government policies must be geared towards adopting and implementing positive steps to promote and guarantee girls' access to education. Standards and policies need to be evolved and properly implemented, to
ensure that the child’s right to education is not jeopardised by the need to marry early.

However, in cases where the girls cannot benefit from formal education, they must be trained in different skills, according to their choice, and the state of the market. There is an urgent need to re-orient development strategies to ensure that health services reach the vulnerable rural women. There must be a concerted effort on the part of the government to make available free health care, especially in the antenatal clinics, for young women, and to increase the scope and improve the quality of maternal health services. This will ultimately reduce the risk associated with prolonged and obstructed labour. Reproductive health rights are an integral part of basic human rights and guaranteed in the Nigerian Constitution. In particular, Article 24(1) of the CRC, Article 14(2)(b) of CEDAW, Article 16 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, and Article 14(1) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child recognise the right of children and women to enjoy access to adequate health facilities. These provisions are endorsed under Section 17(3)(d & f) of the 1999 Constitution.

Finally, NGOs should campaign aggressively and raise awareness about early marriage. Eradicating it would increase women’s status and power within the family and community. In other words, social attitudes must be changed.

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Notes
2 Ratification status in relation to these conventions and charters: Nigeria signed the CRC on 26 January 1990 and subsequently ratified it on 19 April 1991; CEDAW was signed on 23 April 1984 and ratified on 13 June 1985; the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights was signed on 31 August 1982 and ratified on 22 June 1983. Nigeria is yet to ratify the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. To date, Nigeria has only signed the Charter (on 30 May 2001).
6 Patriarchy is a social system in which the father is the head of the family and men have authority over women and children; or it could be described as a family, community, or society based on this system or governed by men.
7 Among the Uruan people who share a cultural heritage with the Efik ethnic group, the fixed bride price in cash currently translates to approximately 45 cents.

8 Information on VVF cases can be found at www.forward.dircon.co.uk/vesico.htm (last checked by the author April 2003).

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Marriage, well-being, and agency among women

Meenakshi Thapan

In a slum in Delhi, married women's sense of well-being is based on their everyday experience of sexuality, motherhood, and work. While they may not be deliriously happy or content in their lives as married women, they attain respectability and status through marriage and childbearing, and exercise agency in speaking out against the oppressive conditions or abuse they may experience in their marriage. Marriage is essential to their sense of self-worth, and having a fully functioning body is essential to their role as wife and mother. Although women take control over their reproductive and related health, often against the advice of their husbands, they are unable to challenge patriarchal control over their sexuality. Woman's embodiment is rarely experienced for pleasure or joy; the body is an instrument for survival. Women's bodies are weapons used to survive a harsh everyday life in a world that is ordered by relations of gender inequality and economic necessity.

In this article, I present and analyse the stories of women in a slum in Delhi, with regard to their work as wives and mothers in ensuring the survival and well-being of their families. In 2001–2, I conducted intensive, in-depth interviews with 30 adolescent and adult women of varied castes, belonging to several regional and linguistic backgrounds and living in different blocks. I have used pseudonyms for the women whose narratives have been included.

In the family, woman is often treated 'as an adjunct, or instrument, of the needs of others, as a mere reproducer, cook, cleaner, sexual outlet, caretaker, rather than as a source of agency and worth in her own right' (Nussbaum 2000, 243). Everyday tasks require women to use their bodies in work of different kinds, ranging from performing domestic tasks, through sexual activity and childbearing, to paid work, and finally to maintaining and developing social networks. Examining everyday life practices shows us how women engage with social power structures in different ways (Bourdieu 1977).

Every day, women use their bodies to express resistance to unequal power relations. While providing security, fulfilment, and identity to women, marriage is also a context within which many of them find their opportunities and options limited. I found that women engage in a twin-track process of compliance and resistance, submission and rebellion, silence and speech, to question their oppression in the family, community, and society. Resistance can be overt and vocal, or muted, expressed in everyday life, in 'gestures, habits, desires – that are grounded in the body ... as the sources of resistance and protest' (Kielmann 1998, 129). I found that the way in which a woman stands and speaks, and the gestures and facial expressions that she uses to communicate her life experience – a particular tone of voice, silences, absences of speech, a hushed voice – are critical markers of how power is exercised over the speaker, and how she resists this.
Women to whom I spoke were adept at finding ways and means through which they could show their agency, circumvent impositions and controls on them, and exercise choice, to enhance their sense of well-being. Many factors shape individual married women’s experience of poverty and determine the extent to which, despite their poverty, they have a sense of well-being. Well-being is a multidimensional concept, including material and psychological well-being, physical well-being, social well-being, security, and freedom of choice and action (Narayan et al. 2000). Whether a woman experiences a sense of well-being depends on a range of factors, including her educational level, the sex and number of children to whom she has given birth, relations with members of the extended family, economic deprivation and its physical and social consequences, and other social and cultural factors. Well-being thus depends not only a woman’s sense of herself as an individual, but on her relationship with others in her extended family and community.

Motherhood, childbearing, and contraception

The imprint of gender inequality is unmistakable in the way in which women construct their stories of their individual experiences of poverty. Having a female body means not only that you must perform heavy work for money outside the household, but you must also take on responsibility for the work that your body performs in childbearing.

Bearing a son

Childbearing is central to married women’s sense of well-being and personhood. Women who cannot bear children at all, or who do not bear a family that includes boys, feel incomplete and unfulfilled. In this sense, a woman’s body has failed her and becomes a source of shame, loss of face, and mental agony, as well as family dishonour. Sumati, in her late forties, said that she had given birth to seven daughters before a son was born. She said, with a deep sense of achievement, ‘Then, I received respect.’ However, the discrimination or oppression experienced after the repeated birth of girls does not always make women weak and voiceless. On the contrary, Sumati appeared tough and resilient, and recounted with pride how she caught a burglar in her neighbour’s hutment, made him admit his guilt, beat him, and recovered the stolen goods. Her sense of achievement is shaped not only by her ability to produce a male child in appropriate time, but also by the burglar episode, which established her position in the community. She derives respect and stature from both of these events.

It is not uncommon to experience childlessness as a condition which has to be tolerated, but not without resistance. When I spoke to her, Sangeeta was 31 years old, and expecting her first child after twelve years of marriage. Sangeeta had been assumed to be unable to bear children, and suffered the taunts and venom of her husband’s family, as well as poor material conditions, every day. Yet when I spoke to her, she found the strength to articulate her life experience in powerful words. Constantly smiling, she recounted all her husband’s and in-laws’ atrocities in a quick, rushed manner, as if to say it all quickly before she changed her mind. A lot of the discussion took place in front of her mother-in-law and husband, but she seemed hardly aware of this.

Sangeeta had a positive outlook, suggesting that women can learn ways and means with which to deal with the conflicts and struggles in life. She said, ‘If God gives pain, he also gives the strength to bear it. One who does not have parents realises their importance. My mother told me to never come back, no matter what I went through after marriage.’ But Sangeeta’s parents have also taught her to fight back, or refuse to accept difficult or oppressive conditions:
Sangeeta reported her mother also saying of her marital home, ‘...there is no one of your own there.’ She asked me not to get burnt either, but to go to my cousin sister’s home.

Sangeeta defined her relationship with her husband by a single statement: she said he ‘did not do a single thing’, expecting her to lift a loaded bucket and other heavy items, despite her pregnancy. When I spoke to her, she had already washed and ironed all her husband’s clothes, just in case she went into labour unexpectedly. She reported that her husband was completely dependent on her: when she made her rare visits to her parents in Ahmedabad, he would phone her to tell her to come back immediately. She said, ‘I do not want to trouble him; he will remember me proudly after my death as a wife who never used to even answer him back.’ Even at this stage of heavy pregnancy, she was continuing her paid work as a domestic help. She said, with resignation, that ‘Men are hungry for a woman’s body.’ In this statement, Sangeeta was attacking not only men’s sexual desires, but also their desire to dominate women through using women’s bodies for work, primarily in the household which is the most acceptable form of labour.

The male desire to torment women through work is well-known in the slum. Sangeeta said she tolerated a lot of oppression; her husband’s brother used to hit her and asked her to work constantly. If she refused, he slapped her. I thought she seemed to be doing everything at home, in a mechanical way, appearing accustomed to a pattern of work, since what she has to do is both regular and familiar. Her methodical working was clearly a source of immense satisfaction to her. Her close identification and commitment to her work resulted in approval and support from both her natal family and her husband’s family. This suggests that if women give in to the harsh and endless world of domestic work, the results can be simultaneously oppressive and liberating in different ways.

Women are conscious of their agency, and celebrate their achievement in their very articulation of it. Sangeeta was proud of the fact that she had paid for infertility treatment from her own earnings, and dismissed her husband as having been of no help in this effort. She had saved around 80,000 rupees to use for the treatment (approximately $1,600). She said: ‘The money used was mine; however, my husband took the credit. Often, he did not even accompany me to the hospital. He does not care about me at all.’ Her mother-in-law never helped her either by giving her any money.2

A few days after I spoke to her, Sangeeta had a healthy baby boy by Caesarian section. When I visited her in hospital, she appeared proud of the fact that she had been busy with hard physical work right up to the birth of the baby. Having given birth to a boy against all odds, Sangeeta was subsequently well cared for by her in-laws. She was enjoying a better status than she ever had in her life. Her mother-in-law called the new baby ‘my lotus flower’, and was clearly delighted with her daughter-in-law for having produced him. Despite feeling physically weak, however, she could not help speaking strongly to me about her in-laws, and their past behaviour and attitude toward her. She had often been mistreated for her inability to conceive a child. She reflected on how she had been seen as unlucky, and in particular recalled that her mother-in-law never used to accept food from her, while her father-in-law did not allow her to wear her sister-in-law’s sari for fear of bringing her bad luck or making her barren as well. Now, she felt, God had finally settled all accounts on her behalf.

Controlling fertility
Sterilisation (tubectomy) is a critical event in the lives of married women. The decision whether or not to have the operation is seen as crucial, affecting the health and well-being of mothers and their children, and their economic condition. They are either strongly opposed to having the operation, or have taken a firm decision to have it, against the wishes of their husbands and other family members.
Vineeta had her sterilisation done twelve years ago, in a large, well-known hospital, without telling her husband. She stated that she went on her own and had it done: 'I came back home and worked in the evening.' Next day, she walked seven kilometres: 'I have lot of strength in my body.' Both her children are from her earlier marriage, and her husband, who now knows about the sterilisation, often tells her, 'Get your operation undone, I want a son.' Vineeta says that she does not listen to him, nor does she care what members of the community may have to say. Instead, she tells her husband that if he starts earning, she will have her operation undone. She believes that a woman’s hard work and self-respect are the only things that pay, and does not want to give birth to a child and abandon it. ‘Children need everything; one has to see everything before one decides to have a child,’ she added.

Premwati’s husband kept on postponing her tubectomy operation. She finally got it done by herself during the monsoon season in her husband’s home town. Premwati’s strong emphasis on her own initiative and action in taking a decision relating to her body suggests her autonomy and strength in doing something for which she knew her husband could later punish her. However, she just went ahead, and added to me that she had not stopped working after the operation.

Anila has two daughters and plans to be sterilised as soon as she has a third child, even if it is also a girl. She tells us that, in the village, the desire for a male child and the happiness associated with it far exceeds the drudgery associated with having too many children, and the sadness of having girls. The old women in her village chide her, ‘You are already feeling exhausted after having only two children; there is no need to have an operation yet!’ Anila says that she has definitely got to take another chance and have a third child. It is significant, however, that concern for the well-being of others in the family outweighs all other considerations in her decision-making about having the tubectomy.

Women are protective of their husbands’ bodies, which are perceived as being relatively weak and in need of protection; they require ‘healthy’ bodies for ‘heavy’ work. Jeena decided to stop having children; she had an abortion and then a sterilisation. She was clear that men don’t like to be sterilised themselves, and justifies this in these terms: ‘Men will not have the surgery. Their work is heavy.’ Sita Devi has three daughters and a son, and does not want any more children. She was scared of having a tubectomy, but she was clear that she was not going to ask her husband to have the surgery, because she, too, considered his work heavy, and also did not want him to suffer in any way. Sita Devi firmly believed that surgery suits some people and not others, and did not want to take any risks. In justifying and rationalising men’s apparent weakness, based on their perceived capacity for hard and heavy work, as compared with themselves, women simultaneously assert their ability to take a decision regarding their own bodies and reproductive health, but conform to an essentially patriarchal way of managing female sexuality and fertility.

**Work, marriage, and everyday life**

Work is the main strategy for survival for women in the slum. Such work includes household tasks, but more significantly involves wage labour or work for additional income outside the home. Work takes on different meanings for women, depending on the level of economic deprivation, number of children, husband’s income, nature of the household (nuclear or extended), and so on. Women do not necessarily see it as their right to work, or to get work of their choice. Women controlled their working lives as far as possible, but
often expressed a desire for different kinds of work. They were discontented with the kind of work they did, but nevertheless extracted a tremendous sense of self-worth from the fact that they aspired to work, they liked to work, and had found work of one kind or another. Hence, they contributed to family income, to the education, health, and nutrition of their children, and were aware of this as a major achievement. Generally speaking, they did not wallow in self-pity or feel worthless. Any sense of well-being they had came, to a large extent, from their engagement with, and commitment to, their work.

Savita is from Uttar Pradesh. She was married when she was between ten and twelve years old and has five children, three boys and two girls. She has worked off and on as a domestic help. Her husband worked as a motor mechanic in the vegetable market, and she did not even know how much he earned. She said that she understood well that husband and wife both have to do paid work, because only then will the expenses be met. It is difficult, she said, but one has to do it in order to have a better life. Her vision of a better life included educating her children to a higher standard than she herself had reached. Three out of her five children went to school. She had aspirations to get a better job and, through that, a better life. To her, a better job meant one in a factory or a semi-skilled job. She was quite certain that she was not interested in employment as a construction worker. She added with regret, ‘If I was educated, I would stand on my feet.’ She was educated only up to Grade 3, but was now taking adult classes.

Although Savita had aspirations for better work of any kind, she realised that she was unable to spend time outside her home, since her children were small, and so she had to manage her life within her husband’s income and the money that she made through domestic work. Savita’s husband gave her 50 rupees ($1) every two to three days for household expenditure, provided that she agreed to sexual relations once a week or every ten days. He told her not to ask for more money. That was why she had to work as a domestic help. Savita said, ‘I have to pacify him and feed him and get some money out of him for expenditure. In the last few months, he has started earning less, so the problems and fights have restarted over money. I have to get my daughter married in a few years, so we have to save for that. But he doesn’t seem to be too bothered.’ By stating her willingness to give in to her husband’s sexual demands, Savita strategically negotiated the release of money that serves her practical interests – that is, money to buy food for the children and herself. If she could ask for something, Savita said, she would ask ‘for the well-being and happiness of the home, and the children’s happiness’, which in part can be achieved through work.

The well-being of the family is deeply desired by the women to whom I spoke, and, as suggested earlier in this article, they are likely to see their own well-being emerging or resulting from this familial well-being. Work is always sought for a better life, but sometimes women pay a heavy price. They may experience insults and verbal abuse for the work they do, due to the aspersions cast on them by their partners. They refer to these comments as ‘reversed abuse’, when husbands tell them that ‘if you are going to a house to work, you are going to meet someone’. In a strategic move, exercising their autonomy, women often circumvent this control by working in the absence of the men and use the extra income for household-related expenditure.

The relationship between caste and work is well-known and internalised by the women. However, it is often affected by poverty: women may engage in all kinds of work, regardless of their caste affiliations. However, this is not always the case; there can be an acute conflict between caste and work, which results in psychological discomfort and even trauma. Sunila is 32 years old and has three children. With tears rolling down her cheeks, in a voice choked...
with anguish, she told me: 'I worry about the home.' She added, 'I go to work because of great helplessness. In my caste, I have been brought up not to touch anyone’s dirty dishes, but I am forced to wash other people's dishes. It is killing me. I have been given so much love and affection in my childhood, but now I have to do this work. So much poverty is not there in my family [either natal or in-laws’] house.'

Sunila would rather die than work in the mandi. If someone back home were to learn that she is a domestic helper, she said, they would penalise her family. Earlier, her husband ran a small restaurant, and they had reasonable earnings. She could afford to spend money on various ceremonies, including essential rites of passage for her children, including the hair tonsure and sacred thread ceremonies. ‘If my husband was OK, I would be able to have an easy life. Because of my husband, I have to suffer. Sometimes he has a job, sometimes not. This is my worry. He gives me all the money, but it is very little.’

Sunila feels shame and dishonour, due to the conflict between her caste position and the nature of the work she has to do. Her anguish and despair do not, however, absolve her of her relationship with her husband, the home and the family, and she cannot think of abandoning him. Moreover, she has children and a daughter to get married, and work is important. So there is not much she can do about her situation, and she has to work, not so much for her own survival but for that of her family and the home.

The relationship between education and work is complex. The women whom I interviewed were aware that education does not always lead to opportunity, work, or occupational choices. There was disillusionment with the opportunities that education may be able to provide them: young adolescent women expressed an understanding that they were fated to do the housework or wash dishes, and would therefore be unable to make occupational or career choices. There was also a sense of immense pride among women who were uneducated or illiterate, about their ability to function more effectively in practical terms than educated women.

**Conclusion: understanding agency and resistance**

In the slum, poverty and gender inequality are critical to married women’s experience of embodiment, selfhood, and identity in everyday life. Women nonetheless speak out, engage in acts of resistance, and, above all, recognise that they exercise agency in different contexts.

However, agency remains a problematic concept. Development workers and other agents of social change may be eager to recognise and discuss women’s agency and identify forms of action that they take, because agency is indeed a rather enabling concept, conjuring up visions of empowerment and positive social change. However, even if women do exercise agency, it is not always possible to be sure of the extent to which this will obtain the results they want. Also, although woman’s agency often facilitates change which challenges male power, women can also choose to take decisions which reinforce traditional power relations. Finally, women may opt not to exercise agency, as they do not want to be seen doing things which may challenge family honour, or compromise their identities as married women. It should be re-emphasised that marriage is a critical component of women’s identities as embodied, gendered selves.

Whether resistance is covert or overt, acts of resistance by individual women in their everyday lives are critical in terms of giving women a feeling of self-worth. This is especially true if women are able to recognise these acts for what they are, and articulate this. It has been argued that conscious ‘intention’ in an act of resistance is crucial to the recognition of that act as resistance (Lock and Kaufert, 1998).
However, while there may not be a conscious intention to resist, there may indeed be a consciousness of the act after it has taken place, which is also significant for the contestation of power relations in everyday life.

A consideration of individual women's acts of agency and resistance is a challenge to some development thinking, policy and practice, which emphasises the importance and effectiveness of collective action. Often, in a development context, resistance by groups is emphasised as if it is of more importance, and has more validity, than resistance by individuals. But resistance is effective not only when it is a group-based or collective activity, or when it is organised into a social movement. Individuals engage in acts of resistance, recognisable through the voices and practices of everyday life, and these are important to ensure their well-being. Individual women perceive, develop, and use strategies for ensuring their well-being and survival through such acts in everyday life.

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Notes

1 A longer version of this paper was presented at the Townsville International Women's Conference at James Cook University, Townsville, Australia, 3–7 July, 2002. An earlier version was presented at the Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformations Studies (CAPTRANS), University of Wollongong, Australia in September 2001. I thank the organisers for inviting me, and participants for their very useful suggestions and feedback. I especially thank TNM for reading a draft and offering friendly advice, and Niraja Gopal Jayal for her detailed and meticulous comments on the paper. I am indebted to the Institute of Advanced Studies in Education at the Department of Education, University of Delhi, which provided me with the funds and facilities to conduct fieldwork in a slum in north-western Delhi during 2001–2. I am very grateful to Rachna Singh who helped me conduct fieldwork in the initial stages of the project, and to Malini Mittal, a reflective research assistant, sensitive fieldworker, and excellent sounding-board for incomplete thoughts and ideas, who provided me with assistance and support for a very short period but whose input into this project is invaluable. Above all, I remain indebted to all the women who agreed to be interviewed and spent several hours of their time talking to us in their homes.

2 Jeffery and Jeffery (1996) point to the fact that women's experiences alter during their life-cycle, and women's different interests, status, and position (for example, as mothers-in-law or daughters-in-law) affect their experience of subordination as well as the exercise of power.

3 Saavala's work on fertility practices in rural South India leads her to conclude that 'it is considered virtuous for a woman to make a sacrifice and to save her husband from the need to have a sterilisation' (2001, 89).

4 In a village in rural Maharashtra, Kemp discovered that women view themselves as hard workers in their everyday lives. 'We work like bullocks,' they tell Kemp, who concludes that bullocks provide a model of women's work activities because they are major work animals in dry farm areas (1998, 217–8).

5 Such a relationship implies that an upper-caste woman would normally not take on paid work which would lower her caste position in the eyes of other members of her caste community. Such work might include the washing of dirty dishes, sweeping, cleaning, scavenging, and so on.
Jeffery and Jeffery have pointed out that rural women are somewhat frightened of what might be considered ‘agency’ and therefore do not necessarily experience it as such (1997, 162).

References


Rethinking marriage and gender relations using evidence from the Pacific

Nancy J. Pollock

Marriage as a basic social institution has many different meanings and implications for women and men, depending on their location. The aspects of human life shaped by marriage range from legal and economic responsibilities to childbearing. Research shows that the Western model of marriage is not helpful in enabling understanding of marriage-like relationships in non-Western societies. This article starts by discussing eight key elements of the Western marriage, which have widely been assumed to be present when any two individuals or two families come together in a new relationship. It questions the nature of marriage in the context of Namu atoll, Marshall Islands, in the Pacific, and considers the degree to which this reality 'fits' with Western ideas. Such rethinking is critical in research, planning and implementation of development and social policy initiatives.

Rethinking the meaning and significance of marriage in different societies is a natural correlate of rethinking gender relations. Western discourses on marriage are reflected in social science and gender studies literature. In this literature, studies of relations between women and men focus on marriage as the central institution of society, and the basis of family stability. It has been claimed that marriage is universal, based on the perception that stable, mated relationships are necessary in human society (for example, see Pasternak, Ember, and Ember 1997). Non-marital relationships have traditionally taken second place in the literature. Women’s relationship as wives to husbands has overshadowed the other relationships they have with men, such as sisters to brothers (Pollock 2000).

This vision of marriage as the core institution in family and domestic structures is now being challenged from many angles (Moore 1988). Closer attention is being paid to the importance of learning from societies’ own templates of their social system, and the imposition of ‘outsider templates’ is increasingly questioned. This new approach reveals a complex range of relationships between women and men, which differs from society to society. Power, for example, may be exerted overtly or latently (for example, Goodale 1980), and the labour relations established within marriage vary considerably, and have been extensively debated (Mies 1986).

This article draws on examples from the Pacific, to show how the assumptions of Western researchers about marriage need to be revised. This has major implications for policy makers, both in development in the global South, and in Northern states where social welfare policies and benefits are disbursed.

Marriage: Western understandings

Marriage was introduced to the Pacific by Western missionaries, as a religious
institution which reflected their desire to ensure family stability through the 'legitimate' procreation of children, and hence ensure inheritance down a male line. Missionaries had no other way of conceptualising family stability. In promoting this ideology, they were calling into question the very foundations of the society into which they had come. Anthropologists and other social scientists have reinforced this view of the central importance of marriage, by emphasising the Western model of the family as universal, and kinship as a blood relationship between children and parents, which comes from the union of the reproductive pair. Kinship diagrams have traditionally started with a man married to a woman. From those symbols have been derived many associated ideals of family and domestic structure.

Marriage is assumed in Western minds to involve the following features:

- a legal union of a man and a woman, possibly extended to include 'alliances' between the man's family and that of the woman;
- approved sexual cohabitation of one man with one woman, with specified prohibitions against cohabitation between those closely related 'by blood', through incest regulations;
- legitimate parenting – that is, the purpose of marriage is for the procreation of children;
- production of heirs, with control of children and other property assumed;
- commencement of a new residence unit, comprising two parents and their legitimate offspring;
- labour, divided according to age and gender, to support the new household;
- male dominance, with the husband in control of his wife, and the pre-eminence of this new unit over all previous relationships, particularly brother/sister relations.

It is assumed that this type of social unit is evolutionarily superior to alternative forms, including female-headed units. Finally, marriage is seen as a rite that is pre-eminent in the life-cycle of all individuals, surpassed only by birth and death.

Looking for marriage in Pacific societies

In my fieldwork for my PhD in the Marshall Islands, I followed my training as an anthropologist, which was based on the conventional understanding of marriage as the starting point for tracing all social relationships. I therefore started by trying to 'find' marriage. But my dutiful intention was thwarted early in my fieldwork, and this generated much questioning on my part about these assumptions. (I should add that my questioning had started earlier when I did research in Jamaica, and was faced with explaining female-headed households there in the light of the above precepts; why were their households labelled dysfunctional because they lacked a male?).

At the start of my research, once I had retrieved my notebook and sheets for interview records from my luggage on the atoll of Namu in the Marshalls, I journeyed from house to house, introducing myself, writing down the names of those present in the household, and their relationships to one another. I had asked each adult if he or she was married, and received the answer 'emuij' ('finished'). Initially, I translated this in my mind into divorce - the marriage was finished. But on further questioning and observation during my 15-month stay, I discovered that 'finished' referred to a couple having been married in church - that is, having gone through the ceremony prescribed by the Congregational church, which was predominant in the Marshall Islands. But only about half the adults in the community had done this. The Namu people used the term marie, which was obviously taken from the English word to describe people who had been through the ceremony.
Yet others were nevertheless living in relationships that they considered to be marriage.

I sought to explain to myself what I was hearing by fitting my respondents' experience into the template that I had been taught to use for analysis. I found that what Westerners call 'marriage' can be related to four stages of my respondents' lives (although my respondents did not see it that way).

**Stage 1**
A relationship formed between a young girl and a young boy was referred to as *koba bajjik* ('together a little'). The young girl might not yet have started menstruation. It usually involved sexual intercourse, as I learned by the nightly sounds of one such couple on the veranda outside my door. It might not occur at night, or every night, or in one particular place. It was a passing relationship, with few social obligations. If meetings occurred near the young girl's house, her male companion must not be seen to be with her, or on leaving her, so he had to disappear before dawn. This relationship was a common experience for both young women and young men. Such relationships became common gossip, as all household members sleep in one or two large open areas of the house.

**Stage 2**
If a couple stayed together (*koba*), and the young man was seen getting up at dawn from beside his companion, then they had demonstrated to the community that they had entered a partnership. He was then expected to undertake tasks to help her household work, such as contributing fish, making *copra* (dried coconut meat), and picking breadfruit. He acknowledged responsibility to the head of her household by staying in the house from time to time, but was not a permanent resident. He still had major provisioning responsibilities for his mother and sisters. He came and went, sleeping in the different houses. If the young girl conceived during this time, the child automatically became a member of the mother's matrilineage. There might be the odd comment of disapproval by some of the older aunties (perhaps as a result of outsiders' values, or for my benefit), but the child was welcomed and much loved by all the matrilineal relatives. The father was often proud and emotionally attached to the child. However, his status was marginal, as that child of his would inherit all his or her rights from the mother.

**Stage 3**
Couples in an established relationship referred to themselves as *bok belen* (having 'taken a spouse'). Some of them had been together five, ten, or fifteen years, perhaps with some time spent apart, but they agreed between themselves and with others that they were a couple. They were sometimes referred to as *leollie ippam* ('that man/woman's spouse'). At this stage, they shared a sleeping place, usually in a house with the woman's sisters, and she cooked for him – in particular, any fish that he caught. He worked for her household, picking breadfruit, making *copra*, and mending things around the house. But at the same time, his obligations to his mother and sisters persisted. He had to ensure that they had provisions, a share of fish he caught, and help with any maintenance of their house site. Thus, he was likely to spend some time each day in his matrilineal household, as well as in the household of his spouse. Children born to these couples belonged to the woman's matrilineage, and thus inherited the all-important rights to land from their mother's group. But the woman's spouse was recognised as the father, using the term *papa*, as taken from the English term. *From my Western perspective, this couple seemed to be 'married'.

**Stage 4**
As stated above, the term *marie*, derived from English, was used to refer only to a couple who had been married in church, and not all couples achieved this stage. It might
occur when they already had six or seven children, and had been together for many years. Alternatively, some young couples were choosing to be married in church to indicate their status, emulating decisions taken by their American friends and relatives. The wedding ring and the wedding photo album were strong icons in these families. The Congregational church determined who underwent the fourth stage in a couple’s relationship. Pastors varied in their requirements for a couple to be married in church. Some required six months’ sexual abstinence, while others required three months’. The number of children was not a consideration. Such marriages in church were usually, but not always permanent, as Marshallese are very mobile, with one partner possibly taking up residence in the urban centres of Majuro or Ebeye. The death or long-time absence of one partner enabled the remaining partner to establish a new relationship.

Only men who had been married in church were allowed to hold office in the local church, for example as deacons. Since holding office in the church carried high status, and indicated that someone was a socially responsible member of the community, it was highly prized by both men and women. Women could not be deacons, but could, instead, be the leaders of *Rarik dron* – a women’s committee which played a prominent part in the social life of the community.

**What is marriage on Namu?**

The question that accompanied me as I left Namu was whether Stage 4 constituted marriage in the Western sense. I rejected this explanation, as it violated what I had learned about sexual relationships between women and men which had been established over time. The concept of marriage had been *added to* indigenous concepts, as a result of the church’s influence on value systems and practices of everyday life. It existed alongside the traditional practices of establishing new gender relationships, and developing and maintaining these. The concept of marriage had been imposed by outsiders, but bore little daily relevance, other than providing a new way of gaining social status. That in itself was important, but this did not mean that Stage 4 dominated over the other stages, unless an anthropologist came in and asked each adult: *Are you married?*

Stage 3 is more representative of the thinking of the people of Namu about partnership between women and men in the sense of shared responsibilities and procreation. All adults take one or more spouse (*bok belen*) during their lifetime – in what the jargon would term ‘serial monogamy’. They have had children, who have been looked after in conjoint households. A man may have left his female companion’s household to work at the US missile-testing base on Kwajalein, or elsewhere, or to live with another woman, bearing children to her lineage too. But he may well be welcomed back by his earlier partner, if either of them chooses this route, and he would then contribute to the maintenance of that household too.

If we consider the components of the Western model of marriage outlined earlier in this article, we can see that marriage in this Namu society differs in both principle and practice from the Western concept. The legality of a union between a man and a woman, or of the children born to that union, and thus the production of heirs, is not in question, as the principles of matrilineal membership and inheritance predominate. Certain rules govern appropriate male/female sexual relations – for example, rules of incest, and a recommended form of cross-cousin marriage as the preferred partnership (rarely practised today). The residence unit is also matrilineally constituted, with the division of labour following those principles. Thus, the man has dual obligations to those households in which his sisters and mother live, as well as to his chosen spouse. The woman’s obligations are to her matrilineal household, and to her
spouse’s household, if they live there temporarily. Children are fed, and sleep, in the households of their extended family members.

Thus, not only does the relationship between partners in Namu place obligations on women and men that are different from those on spouses in the West, but the relationship also has different connotations for family formation. Patriarchy – that is, rule by fathers, as it is conventionally understood (for example, Mies 1986) – is not an appropriate term to describe the basis for established sexual relationships between women and men in this society, because fathers are marginal in their responsibilities. However, men as brothers do carry a strong decision-making role in the household of their mother and sisters. Moreover, that brotherly support lasts a lifetime, from teenage years through to death, and thus differs from the shorter time-period in which husbands have power in decision-making in patriarchal systems.

Households in the rural Marshalls may consist of five, fifteen, or twenty members from time to time, in which some women have partners, and some do not. Men who are brothers are always mindful of their responsibilities to support their sisters and mother, as well as their partners. An adult male’s status in a household as a partner is much more tangential than a female’s. She stays with her mother and sisters, or may choose to move to join a sister, or sisters, living elsewhere. Her children belong to any of those households, and can work the land they jointly share by right of being born into the matrilineage. Adoption is common, usually taking place within the matrilineage, so that sisters adopt their sisters’ or brothers’ children. Children may live in any one of several houses where they have relatives.

Conclusion

Marriage as we know it in the West is an androcentric institution, whose ideology and practice have been too liberally transferred in the past, and continue to be so, via current development initiatives. Gender relations within marriage do vary in all societies, but where you have a society such as the one discussed here, with a very different experience based on a strong matrilineal ethic, the difference between the reality and the Western template means that these systems must be considered within their cultural setting; the template cannot be made to fit. For example, approved sexual cohabitation is only one component of the Western marriage contract, but its importance has been over-accentuated in much of the social science literature. Other components of the Western model of marriage, particularly childbearing, have also been ‘pulled out’ and presented as primary or key rationales for marriage. Yet key components of the Western model of marriage find parallels in various forms and combinations in other societies. In their various combinations, they contribute to the stability of families, which is so highly lauded as one goal of the development exercise.

Only certain elements of the Western institution of marriage have actually been carried through into the everyday life of societies such as the Namu people of the Marshall Islands. Yet policy makers and planners often assume marriage, and the gendered roles and obligations which go with it, to be a universal experience in all societies. Both the legal and practical operations of Western society rest on this model of gender relations. This has profound implications world-wide for societies which do not fit that norm. One example is the requirement that the people of Namu should adopt second names. Marshallese did not use second names in their own way of life. The military authorities issuing passes to enter the nuclear testing base at Kwajalein ruled that children should take their father’s name as their second name, and this has caused all sorts of confusions, both for the children and their families, as well as for authorities such as employers and educational authorities.
Records that rely on this patrinominal system are thus confused and unreliable.

Ironically, early development efforts were founded on an expectation that matri-centred societies would change to patri-centred societies, once cash became the main medium of exchange. A (patriarchal) view that only men could handle finance has subsequently been overthrown by the evidence that women can and do manage finances, especially in situations of low income and poverty, more adequately than men.

Much social development policy continues to reflect similar biases, including the assumption that households are headed by a male breadwinner who dispenses assets to his children. In Namu, it is inappropriate to expect any monetary benefits necessarily to go to a man’s own children; they are more likely to be shared between sisters’ children and spouses’ children. Reconstruction of housing after a cyclone is the responsibility of the matrilineage, not the male partner of the senior householder.

Development initiatives that aim to improve the well-being of family members need to be founded on a full understanding of family forms and accompanying social and economic arrangements. This principle should also be applied in welfare systems in post-industrialised countries, where the Western model of the family is, increasingly, myth rather than reality.

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Resources
Compiled by Ruth Evans

Book Review

ISBN 1 85649 968 5 (hardback), 10856490 969 3 (paperback)

This collection of articles brings together experiences focused on the theme of rights and sexual and reproductive health. It has a great deal to recommend it. The book is accessible and easy to read; many articles are lively and well written, drawing directly on first-hand experiences of working with these issues on the ground around the world. Case studies are predominantly from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but also from the UK. They focus especially on participatory approaches and ways of ensuring the participation of those most affected by gender violence, HIV/AIDS, the challenges of motherhood in conditions of poverty, and other reproductive health issues, in addressing their own problems. The book is about enabling those most affected to speak out and take control of finding solutions, and calls on those with power and resources to hear, and be influenced by, these voices. It is about allowing people to have choices, through increased knowledge and control over actions. The authors argue that it is only through the participation of those usually excluded from policy making, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation that commitments to human rights, and in this case especially to sexual and reproductive rights, will ever be realised in practice.

The book presents more than 20 case studies from around the world. Most of the studies are of NGO projects; fewer are those of governments. The book is divided into four sections. The first addresses the need to involve and engage people in their own development and change processes; the second focuses on the need to change the wider norms within which people experience sexual oppression and vulnerability, especially looking at the role of men in women’s sexual and reproductive lives. The third seems closely related to the first, and explores the experience and importance of engaging people in producing their own materials and messages, using media that are relevant and appropriate to them. The final one critically addresses the need to build responsiveness in those with resources and power and who may be part of the problem – including a range of development practitioners such as health workers and planners.

The authors argue that these case studies, taken from so many parts of the world and focusing on the experience of many diverse groups, provide a stark contrast to the mainstream ways of addressing sexual and reproductive well-being. The book is drawn
from many contexts, so inevitably data could not be presented on the dominant modes of addressing these issues in each country where a case study is situated. However, it would have been interesting to have some basic global facts and figures about topics such as sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and gender violence, along with some estimates of how much aid money is channelled to work on these issues. It would also have been helpful to have information on the current dominant methods of working employed by governments, the UN, and NGOs. This would have provided a backdrop against which to assess and understand the extent of innovation in the case studies, and the degree to which these approaches differ from those of bilateral donors, UNAIDS, or the World Bank. The lack of such information does not lessen the value of the cases presented, but it does mean that at times they lack a clear context. The scope of what they are doing is sometimes unclear in relation to the scale of the funding going to other interventions — some of which aim to address the same problems via a different route.

Among the articles in this collection, there are particularly exciting ones that address the problems of promoting local participation and ownership of development activities and the very particular achievements that were made. The specificity of each group and culture, and the very different norms governing gender relations, demand very varied approaches to fit the needs of each context. This is what makes all development work so challenging, but it is so often overlooked, because of bureaucratic norms, targets, and the (understandable) desire of managers to standardise approaches (that is, to develop blueprints). This often over-rides the essential search to find locally appropriate ways to enable the disempowered and marginalised to express their needs and to be part of the solution; it is this imperative that the book so clearly highlights.

Because the articles are so varied, only a few issues can be highlighted here, and only a few chapters can be mentioned by name. Chapter 1, 'Just lip service', stresses the reality that the role of external workers may be disruptive and distorting — a fact so often overlooked in development practice. The chapter raises important questions about what a community is, explores different kinds of participation, warns against equating participation with empowerment, and highlights how difficult it can be to define clearly the group with whom one is working. It stresses the power relations between different stakeholders in development — for example, doctors and sex workers — and how difficult it is to counter these: participatory methods can offer only a partial solution.

The need to involve young people in development is explored in some of the chapters; this is welcome, since it is a topic little discussed in development circles. Chapters 2, 12, and 13 especially focus on youth. Other chapters, for example chapter 14 on radio and music as media for information sharing and promoting new ideas, stress the critical importance not only of involving young people, but of promoting an active role for them, and of using their language and media for debate and finding new ways forwards.

Involving men in issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights has become more commonplace in recent years, and several articles provide examples of working with men to change cultural norms and address gender inequalities. Chapter 11 is an especially good example of this work; it considers in detail both the strengths and the challenges of trying to do this in highly conservative patriarchal societies, such as Cambodia. The challenge of modifying male domination in such contexts is huge, since ‘men generally have more power and access to resources, and make all the decisions related to sex’ (p.156). Undertaking this work is complex and difficult, and requires
high levels of training and support for project officers. The time needed to learn these skills is long, and results cannot be expected quickly. Project staff need confidence-building and encouragement when tackling seemingly intransigent issues, and the importance of promoting the role of peer groups within communities to tackle cultural beliefs and attitudes was clear in this case study. These, too, are very important lessons for anyone working on the ground in development, where issues of marginalisation, exclusion, and chronic poverty are deep-rooted and multi-faceted. Yet so little time is usually given to training project staff or to enabling them to build the skills and confidence to work with people at all levels in a community. Results are usually expected quickly to meet project-cycle plans, but, in reality, change may be painful and slow. Chapters 16 and 18 reinforce the need for good training and support, for deepening understanding and analysis, and for building the confidence and ability of front-line workers and community members to be open and responsive.

Radical shifts in approach are needed if inequality in gender relations, inequality between professional workers and local women and men, and other inequalities defined by wealth, health status, and access to education are to be changed. New ways of approaching such issues must be found, to enable people to take new steps (p. 210). At present there is a huge distance between the needs and solutions advocated by poor people, and especially women, and the solutions provided by global health-care providers (p. 295). Part of the disappointment with the current aid system lies in the fact ‘that we have not developed the skills to listen, learn from, or engage with the women we believe we are helping ... [we have created] ... a language so alien to the reality of their lives that we now find it difficult to remember how to consult, or even to engage with them’ (p. 296).

This collection highlights the need for engagement and offers examples of such engagement in different contexts, based on first-hand experience. Most of the articles address deep realities and complexities, and raise critical issues; only one or two do not delve as deeply and appear to rely on current development jargon and practice related to participatory approaches to social change. These run the risk of being mechanistic, or too shallow to address the issues of inequality and exclusion that prevent so many from gaining their rights.

The focus of the book is on sexual and reproductive rights, but many of the excellent points made and the deeply rooted examples of development practice apply more widely. They are relevant to all practitioners interested in seeing transformative social and individual change. This change needs to start from a position of listening, respecting, and learning from local people and organisations, rather than trying to shape, control, set targets, and call people to account, features that sadly characterise much development work now.

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Publications


Feminist Futures challenges established approaches to development, arguing for a new paradigm, Women, Culture, and Development (WCD), which places women and gender at the centre. Of particular interest to the theme of marriage are feminist perspectives on sexuality and the gendered body and the cultural politics of representation.

This book analyses the decline in marriages in the North, and questions whether co-habitation and family change are driven by ever-increasing individualism. The book reviews the debate surrounding the causes of family change and suggests that in some areas it can lead to increased negotiation at the household level. It draws on qualitative research to explore relationships in married and co-habiting households.

Gender Perspectives on Property and Inheritance: a Global Sourcebook (2001) Gender, Society, and Development, KIT (Royal Tropical Institute) and Oxfam, 274 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 7DZ, UK. www.oxfam.org.uk

This sourcebook highlights women's unequal position in formal and customary laws and practices, and the way in which gender relations affect women's and men's access to property through inheritance. The contributors discuss how gender relations and marriage affect women's property and inheritance, drawing on case studies from Latin America, Côte d'Ivoire, Middle East, South Africa, and India. There is an extensive annotated bibliography, plus a list of organisations and web resources concerned with this issue.

A World of Widows (1996) Margaret Owen, Zed Books, 7 Cynthia Street, London N1 9JF, UK / Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA. www.zedbooks.demon.co.uk

A World of Widows provides a global overview of women affected by widowhood. The author explores the process of becoming a widow; poverty and social security in the context of widowhood; differing laws and customs regarding widows' inheritance; the situation of widows who remarry; and related issues of sexuality and health. The book examines the situation of specific groups of widows - refugees, older widows, child widows - and widowhood in the context of AIDS. The book highlights the discrimination against widows as a human rights issue, in terms of inheritance rights, land ownership, custody of children, security of home and shelter, nutrition, and health. It concludes with an overview of widows themselves organising for change.


This book is based on a multi-country research project undertaken by the Commonwealth Secretariat which examined shifts in the values, attitudes, relationships, and gender roles of three generations of men and women. Using people-centred methodologies, the research explored what gender means to people, and how it was perceived to be changing in nine countries: St Vincent and the Grenadines, Barbados, Malaysia, Solomon Islands, Pakistan, Cyprus, New Zealand, Canada, and Zimbabwe. Each case study concludes with key recommendations for challenging gender inequalities.


This report, prepared for the United Nations Fourth Conference on Women, documents violations of the human rights of lesbians in 31 countries around the world. The reports illustrate the coercion - emotional, physical, legal, and financial - that families, communities, religious institutions, and
governments employ in violation of international human rights norms to enforce women's adherence to heterosexuality. The book also discusses the strategies that lesbian activists and other human rights advocates have employed to challenge this oppression.


This book contains several papers on marriage and intimate relationships. Contributors discuss the heterosexual institution of marriage and offer new feminist insights, combining theoretical and empirical analysis.


This book examines gender, families, marriage, family relationships, and the role of larger kin groups from a cross-cultural perspective. It draws upon ethnographic accounts and cross-cultural studies to illustrate the characteristics of different family forms and to consider the factors behind the choices made.


This book takes a comprehensive look at family structures worldwide and women's roles within them. It describes how the family affects every aspect of women's lives, their early education and socialisation, their sexuality, and the ways in which they learn their roles as wives, mothers, and carers. It assesses women's growing challenge to men's power and explores the contradictions for women that are inherent in the family. It examines the role of state support and considers the factors underlying the rising divorce rate now affecting families in both North and South.


This book explores the impacts of global migrant family networks and social organisations which connect cultures and bridge national boundaries. Case studies range from an examination of nineteenth-century transnational families emigrating from Europe, to the Ghanaian Pentecostal diaspora in Europe today. Contributors analyse gender relations and transnational ties among various groups of refugees, and reveal the complexities that immigrants and refugees have to contend with in their daily lives.


This book examines the fields of family planning and reproductive health from the perspective of gender and sexuality. Through case-study examples from across the world, authors explore the construction of sexuality and how this differs for men and women. The book looks at the ways that sexuality and power differences between men and women shape contraceptive practice and reproductive health, and the possibility of changing attitudes towards sexuality to influence reproductive health policy and services.
www.earthscan.co.uk

This book examines the contentious political issues relating to population, including population and development, feminism and family planning, family size and children's rights, and immigration. It also gives an historical overview of population policy in India, China, and Tibet.


This reader introduces and examines the international instruments that deal with the human rights of women and explores the African experience in trying to implement them. The chapters give an overview of the place of gender in modern international human rights law. They examine each of the international human rights covenants and conventions, the UN context, and humanitarian law. The book then focuses on the current African system for the protection of human rights, and specific issues such as Muslim women’s rights, polygamy, female genital mutilation, women prisoners, and the roles that NGOs and women’s movements are playing in the promotion of human rights in Africa. Aimed at human rights- and community-development workers and practitioners, students and academics.

www.oxfam.org.uk

This book makes the case for violence against women to be taken up by development organisations as an abuse of women’s human rights and a barrier to development. The book presents various definitions of violence against women and some theoretical perspectives, an accessible analysis of legal and rights-based approaches to ending violence, and case studies illustrating some strategies to counter violence against women.

Partners in Change: Working with Men to End Gender-Based Violence (2002) International Research and Training Institute for Advancement of Women, EPS A-314, P.O. Box 52-4121, Miami, FL 33152, USA.
www.un-intraw.org

The papers in this book explore various kinds of partnership for ending gender-based violence, and men’s roles and responsibilities within these. These roles and responsibilities range across the spectrum, from men changing their relationships with their intimate partners to male-dominated institutions changing the way they function in order to confront issues of gender and violence. The book discusses the individual, institutional, and structural changes that are required, and the ways in which men can become partners, with each other and with women, in making these changes.

Papers and electronic resources


This series of country profiles was submitted to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. They highlight the economic, political, social, and cultural situation of each country, focusing on issues
that are of particular importance to each country. Also included is an overview of specific aspects of the status of women in each country. These relate to particular CEDAW articles, including nationality, employment, access to health care, rural women, marriage and family law, and violence against women.


This report discusses how attacks on women's sexualities threaten women's basic human rights to bodily integrity, to expression, and to association, as well as undermining essential values of equality and dignity. The report recounts women's stories of prejudice and shows how activists have refused to be silenced.


This digest considers reasons for the continuance of early marriage, and its possible increase in populations under stress. It highlights poverty as a key factor, since early marriage is often seen as a strategy for economic survival. The paper examines the harmful impacts of the practice, such as death in pregnancy and childbirth of young wives, child wives working in slave-like conditions for in-laws, and school drop-out. The paper offers guidelines to end the practice: working to change social attitudes, extending opportunities for education, offering support to families, and advocacy to have children recognised as valuable members of society rather than economic burdens.


This paper gives an overview of the human rights of girls. It examines the socio-economic and cultural aspects of marriage and the sexual exploitation of young women. It also outlines international commitments to safeguarding the human rights of girls, and proposes recommendations at the international, national, and civil society levels.


This study uses data from recent household surveys in 43 developing countries to describe the main dimensions of household size and composition in the developing world. Key findings include the fact that the average household size varies only modestly among regions, ranging from 5.6 in the Near East/North Africa to 4.8 in Latin America. Household size was found to be positively associated with the level of fertility and the mean age at marriage, and inversely associated with the level of marital disruption. An analysis of trends and differentials in household size suggests that convergence to smaller and predominantly nuclear households is proceeding slowly in contemporary developing countries.
At What Age?... are School-children Employed, Married and Taken to Court (2002) Right to Education. Download from www.gdnet.org

This document collates information taken from the States Parties' Reports under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). It provides statistics on school-leaving age, minimum age of employment, minimum age of marriage, and minimum age for criminal responsibility for around 130 countries. This document is intended to provide the data necessary for exploring the often misunderstood notion that the CRC views the child as every human being under the age of 18.


This study, based on qualitative research, explores the impact of husbands and other family members on women's reproductive decisions in Zimbabwe, and on their ability to participate in the country's economic development process. The study also examines the impact of family size on women's participation in the work force and in community and political activities.


This report gives a historical perspective of commonalities shared by China, South Korea, and northern India in kinship systems which discriminate against female children. The authors show that discrimination was heightened by war, famine, and fertility decline from 1920 to 1990, which resulted in demographic changes and social ramifications. Taking a comparative approach, the authors analyse the effects on equality between spouses, dowry-related violence in India, abductions in China, and the implications for fertility rates.


In India, domestic violence is frequently used as a bargaining instrument to extract larger dowries from a wife's family, after the marriage has taken place. In this paper, Bloch and Rao examine the case of three villages in southern India. Drawing on qualitative and survey data and using ethnographic evidence, they develop a non-cooperative bargaining and signalling model of dowries and domestic violence, and draw conclusions from their data.


Drawing on household data from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Ethiopia and South Africa, this report presents an analysis of the correlation between individual characteristics of household members (including gender) and their relative bargaining power within the family. The authors show that attention is predominantly focused on the variables of human capital (education, age, experience) and individually controlled assets at the time of marriage. Findings suggest that, although women bring far fewer assets to marriage (except in matrilineal Sumatra), when women do control assets this positively benefits the proportion of expenditure allocated towards children’s education and clothing.

This UNIFEM publication highlights initiatives to end violence against women in seven countries. It shows how women’s organisations can work together with judicial and law-enforcement systems, community and youth groups, policy-makers, and international organisations to end gender-based violence.

Training manuals and tool kits


CEDAW was created as a powerful tool for promoting equal rights between women and men, through recognising and addressing gender discrimination and securing national governments’ commitments to equality. This handbook on the CEDAW aims to familiarise international development cooperation personnel with the human rights obligations of individual states with regard to women. The handbook contains sections explaining why there is a separate women’s convention, provides commentary and further clarification of each CEDAW article, and short profiles on implementation of international human rights treaties by all of SIDA’s 50 partner countries.


This accessible training manual provides tools for women and men to critically examine the framework of human rights. It includes information about the human rights of women in the areas of violence, health, reproduction and sexuality, education, the global economy, the workplace, and family life in relation to international women’s human rights agreements.

Non-Consensual Sex in Marriage Pack (2001) CHANGE and DFID
Download from www.genie.ids.ac.uk

This CHANGE electronic pack on non-consensual sex in marriage (NCSM) presents women’s testimonies, along with cultural support and obstacles to eradicating this form of gender-based violence.


The resource guide is a tool for community-based organisations working to prevent domestic violence. It aims to assist organisations in designing and implementing a sustained community mobilisation project to prevent domestic violence through creative and participatory efforts. The guide targets organisations interested in working systematically to effect individual and social change within their communities. Special features include rights-based programme ideas and activities; examples of learning materials such as posters, games, murals, and booklets; a comprehensive community
activism course; and, simple, ready-to-use documentation and monitoring tools.


This accessible training manual examines the nature and impact of various forms of family violence on children. It gives examples of good practice from across the world, describing a variety of approaches to tackling this sensitive issue, provides details of resources and organisations for further information, and offers a range of suggested activities for practitioners wishing to develop work in this area.


Email: unifem@undp.org. Download from: www.unifem.org. Print version also available.

This practical advocacy tool illustrates a variety of media and communications strategies and materials used around the world to end violence against women. It highlights materials and campaigns, providing descriptions of innovative communications methods for awareness-raising. It attempts to facilitate information sharing between organisations working to end violence against women, so that effective strategies can be replicated in other contexts. Themes covered include domestic violence, sexual assault and coercion, harmful traditional practices, trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, HIV/AIDS and violence, and a life free of violence.

**Organisations**

*Raising Voices* PO Box 6770, Kampala, Uganda. Tel. +256 41 531186 Fax: +256 41 531249.

www.raisingvoices.org; info@raisingvoices.org

Raising Voices works to create and promote community-based approaches to preventing violence against women and children predominantly in East and Southern Africa. The organisation also aims to influence practice by engaging policy-makers, organisations, and stakeholders in dialogue on how they conceptualise violence programming.

*Women’s Caucus for Gender Justice*

PO Box 3541, Grand Central P.O., New York 10163, USA.

www.iccwomen.org; caucus@iccwomen.org

The Caucus is a network of individuals and groups committed to strengthening advocacy on women’s human rights. The network aims to develop greater capacity among women in the use of the International Criminal Court and other mechanisms which provide women with access to different systems of justice. Website provides news, information, and resources on the International Criminal Court and gender-based violence.

*International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission*

San Francisco Office, 1375 Sutter Street, Suite 222, San Francisco, CA 94109, USA

Tel: +1 415 561 0633; Fax: +1 415 561 0619 www.iglhrc.org

A US-based NGO, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) works to secure the full enjoyment of the human rights of all people and communities subject to discrimination or abuse on the basis of sexual orientation or expression, gender identity or expression,
Resources

and/or HIV status. IGLHRC activities include advocacy, documentation, coalition-building, public education, and technical assistance. Also have offices in New York and Mexico City (Latin America and Caribbean).

International Women’s Rights Action Watch
Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, 301–19th Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA. Tel: 612-625-5557; Fax: 612-624-0068. http://iwraw.igc.org; iwraw@hhh.umn.edu

The International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAW) was founded in 1985 at the World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya to monitor implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. IWRAW is an international resource and communications centre which serves activists, scholars, and organisations that focus on the advancement of women's human rights. Produce a quarterly newsletter, Women's Watch, free to groups and individuals from developing countries.

Women Living Under Muslim Laws
Africa and Middle East Office: BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights, PO Box 73630, Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria; baobab@baobabwomen.org Asia Office: Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, PO Box 5192, Lahore, Pakistan; sgah@lhr.comsats.net.pk. International Office: P.O. Box 28445, London N19 5NZ, UK; run@gn.apc.org

Women Living Under Muslim Laws is an international network that provides information, solidarity and support for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam. Provides and disseminates information for women and women's groups in Muslim communities, supports and publicises women's struggles within Muslim countries and links them with feminist and other groups.

Isis International
 Manila PO Box 1837, Quezon City Main, Philippines. www.isiswomen.org.

Isis International is a feminist NGO dedicated to women's information and communication needs. Isis focuses on information and communication tools which advance women's rights, leadership and empowerment in Asia and the Pacific. Isis International also has independent offices in Kampala, Uganda, and Santiago, Chile.

Womankind Worldwide
Viking House, 3rd Floor, 5–11 Worship Street, London EC2A 2BH, UK. Tel. +44 (0)20 7588 6096; Fax: +44 (0)20 7588 6101 www.womankind.org.uk; info@womankind.org.uk

Womankind Worldwide is a UK-based charity dedicated to women's development and women's human rights globally. Supports local women's groups in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe and campaigns on international women's human rights. 'Body literacy', one of the four 'literacies' guiding Womankind's work, focuses on women's physical and mental well-being, violence against women, and reproductive rights.

Websites

Women’s Human Rights Resources,
www.law-lib.utoronto.ca/Diana;
whrr.law@utoronto.ca

The Women's Human Rights Resources website provides information and resources on international women's human rights. Includes information on the accepted age of marriage in international conventions.

Women’s Human Rights Net,
www.whrnet.org; comments@whrnet.org

Women’s Human Rights Net provides information and analyses on women's human rights in English, Spanish and
French. WHRnet updates readers on issues of women’s human rights and policy developments globally; it also provides information and analyses to support advocacy actions.

*WomenWatch, www.un.org/womenwatch*

*WomenWatch* is a joint United Nations project which was created in 1997 to provide internet space for global gender equality issues and to support implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The website contains resources on gender equality, UN human-rights instruments, and information on the latest UN Session of the Commission on the Status of Women held in March 2003.

**Videos**


This 24-minute film examines the cultural and religious justifications for forced early marriage in Ethiopia and Nigeria. It also reports on opposition to the practice and calls for reproductive health care and primary education for women as human rights issues.

*In the Name of Honour* (2000) Alex Gabbay, Television Trust for the Environment, USA.

This 24-minute programme explores how oppression of the minority Kurdish population in northern Iraq has resulted in increased violence directed against women, which is often linked to non-conformity with traditional marriage conventions.