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Author(s): Erin Murphy-Graham and Graciela Leal

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Child Marriage, Agency, and Schooling in Rural Honduras

ERIN MURPHY-GRAHAM AND GRACIELA LEAL

This article examines the relationships between child marriage,¹ agency, and schooling in rural Honduras. Through an in-depth qualitative case study, we address the following questions: (1) In what ways, if any, do girls exercise agency in their decision to marry? (2) How might education enhance girls' agency, expanding their choice sets and delaying the age of marriage? We argue that a lack of understanding of the decision-making processes of young girls impedes the design and implementation of interventions to address child marriage. Our in-depth, qualitative case study allows us to document how the agency that girls exercise is simultaneously thin, opportunistic, accommodating, and oppositional. Returning to Ahearn's notion of agency as the socioculturally mediated capacity to act (2001a, 112), our findings suggest that for education to enhance adolescent girls' agency it must transform the sociocultural conditions that constrain their actions, targeting individual girls, families, and communities.

Introduction

In 2009, Griselda² was 13 years old and living with her grandparents in a rural, coffee-growing community in the western part of Honduras. She attended the seventh grade in Aldea Soraya, an agricultural village that lacked basic services including electricity and water. Griselda enjoyed going to school and was very active there. As her grandfather explained, "At first she was shy, but by interacting with her classmates she started to wake up. She became a girl who had some participation." Griselda said that she had close friendships with her classmates and that she wanted to "become someone and move forward in life." But by August 2011, at the age of 15, Griselda had dropped out of school and gotten married.

Griselda is among the estimated 14.2 million girls worldwide who marry each year (Greene 2014). Research on child marriage suggests that it can

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¹ The term "child marriage" is defined as formal marriage or informal union before the age of 18 (see ICRW 2013; Greene 2014).

² All names (including locations) are pseudonyms.

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undermine a girl's opportunities for education, sexual and reproductive health, employment, livelihood skills, and decision-making power within the household (UNICEF 2001, 2005, 2009; Mathur et al. 2003; Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi 2003). Women who marry young tend to have lower levels of social status in their husbands' families and to have higher rates of fertility, maternal mortality, and domestic violence than those who marry later in life (UNICEF 2001, 2005, 2009; Mathur et al. 2003; Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi 2003). Globally, rates of child marriage are highest in South Asia, where over 48 percent of 15–24 year-olds are married before they reach 18. In Africa this figure is 42 percent, and in Latin America and the Caribbean it is 29 percent (UNICEF 2005; IPPF 2006).

In this longitudinal qualitative study, we examine the cases of Griselda and another girl, Melisa, both of whom dropped out of school and were married by the age of 15. The in-depth examination of the circumstances surrounding their decisions provided by this study allows for a richer understanding of the role that agency plays in the context of child marriage. Existing research suggests that premature school leaving may be due less to marriage and pregnancy than to other factors such as poverty and the perceived value of schooling (Lloyd and Mensch 2008). In this study, one of our goals was to gain an understanding of the decision-making processes of adolescent girls who decided to marry and how this choice intersects with school leaving. At the heart of this study is a question posed by Griselda's grandmother: "*Pero por qué se fue?*" (But why did she leave?)

To date, not enough research on child marriage in Central America has focused on the experiences of girls who marry early and the process by which this occurs. Instead, many studies of child marriage in Honduras and other developing countries tend to focus on its causes and consequences, giving less attention to the agency of rural youth and the decision-making processes that inform their actions.³ Consequently, this article explores the actions of two early school leavers who chose marriage over education; it attempts to identify the ways in which schooling might strengthen girls' agency and enable them to consider a broader range of future life options.

Ultimately, a lack of understanding of the decision-making processes of young girls will impede the design and implementation of interventions to delay marriage. Thus, our research was guided by the questions: (1) In what ways, if any, do girls exercise agency in their decision to marry? (2) How might education enhance girls' agency, expanding their choice sets and delaying the age of marriage? Our in-depth, qualitative cases allow us to document how the agency that girls exercise is simultaneously thin, opportunistic, accommodating, and oppositional.

³ UNICEF (2001, 2005, 2009); Mathur et al. (2003); Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2003); Myers and Rowan (2011).

Research Context: Poverty and Child Marriage in Rural Honduras

Roughly 66.2 percent of the Honduran population lives in poverty, placing this country among the poorest in Latin America (INE 2010). In the last 20 years, some gains have been made in improving educational attainment and school participation. However, in spite of substantial improvements in female educational attainment at the secondary level (Demographic Health Surveys 2006), the number of women who marry by the age of 18 (and are no longer in school) is still large and has changed little in the last two decades, especially among the poorest segments of the population (Remez et al. 2009). Child marriage remains a common practice in Honduras, especially in rural areas. According to DHS surveys (2006), among women between the ages of 20 and 49, approximately 60 percent had formed a union before the age of 20, 40 percent before turning 18, and 10 percent before they reached 15 (see table 1).

As table 1 also illustrates, these rates have changed relatively little over the past three decades (see breakdown by age category). An assessment of the extent to which adolescent union formation and childbearing have changed over time in four Central American countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras) found that even though these unions decreased, the absolute percentage-point decline was lower in Honduras than in the other

TABLE 1
PERCENTAGE OF HONDURAN WOMEN AGE 15–49 BY RURAL/URBAN RESIDENCY
AND AGE AT FIRST UNION/MARRIAGE

Age Cohort	Percentage of Women Who Entered Union/Married Prior to Age:					Never Married	Weighted Number of Respondents
	14	15	16	17	18		
Urban							
15–19	1.6	5.2	NA	NA	NA	79.8	2,470
20–24	2.6	8.2	15.2	23.5	32.4	41.2	1,974
25–29	2.6	7.4	16	24.8	33.7	16.4	1,767
30–34	3.7	8.7	17.5	26.7	35.3	6.8	1,386
35–39	4	9.6	17	25.8	35.1	7.2	1,257
40–44	3.6	9.3	15.3	25.4	34.5	4.7	1,032
45–49	3	9.7	16	23.1	33.5	3.5	848
15–49	3	8.3	16.2	24.9	34	31.1	10,734
Rural							
15–19	3.5	9.2	NA	NA	NA	69.4	2,041
20–24	5.5	13.6	23.3	34.9	45.7	26.3	1,756
25–29	4.9	12.9	24.7	37.1	49.1	10.8	1,527
30–34	5.1	12.1	23.7	36.1	47.7	5.5	1,270
35–39	4.5	11	19.2	33.6	45.5	4.8	1,032
40–44	6.5	13.2	24.5	36.4	49.5	4.2	855
45–49	4.7	11.9	22.9	33.9	48.7	2.4	736
15–49	5	12	23	35.3	48	24.1	9,217

SOURCE.—Demographic Health Surveys 2006.

NOTE.—The age at first marriage is defined as the percentage of women who first married or lived with a man before attaining the specified ages. NA, not applicable.

three countries (6 vs. 10–15 percentage points; Remez et al. 2009). These statistics suggest that child marriage in Honduras remains a widespread practice that merits further investigation.

Here we use the term “marriage,” although we recognize that the majority of couples in rural areas are not legally married. In some countries of Central America, including Honduras, 69–79 percent of couples are in a consensual union, and only 22–31 percent are legally married (Remez et al. 2008). In Honduras, just 10 percent of adolescent unions are formal marriages (Remez et al. 2009). According to a report on child marriage commissioned by UNICEF (2005), consensual unions (i.e., cohabitation) raise human rights concerns due to the informality of such relationships, which may prevent women from exercising their legal rights (e.g., inheritance, land ownership, etc.). The results of a study on gender relations and reproductive decision making in Honduras noted that being in a consensual union was associated with “higher levels of male-centered attitudes” related to family size and family planning (i.e., men tend to want larger families than women and to not want to use birth control) and with weaker bargaining power than those in formal unions (Speizer et al. 2005).

Theoretical Context

Adolescent Girls and Agency

Extensive scholarship has addressed issues of agency in order to examine how individual actions either transform or reproduce the very social structures that shape them.⁴ Here we adopt the definition of agency proposed by Laura Ahearn (2001a, 112) as the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act”. Ahearn emphasizes that it is not useful to talk of having “more,” “less,” or even “no” agency, since agency is not a quantity that can be measured (2001a). This understanding of agency captures the idea that the capacity to act will differ at different times and in different places. Referencing Arlene MacLeod (1992), Ahearn points to the need to conduct research that provides a more thorough understanding of the “complex and ambiguous” nature of agency. She also suggests that research should begin to distinguish among different types of agency, including oppositional agency, complicit agency, agency of power, and so on (2001a). In this article we aim to characterize more comprehensively adolescent girls’ agency in the context of child marriage in rural Honduras in order to better understand how education can strengthen girls’ agency.

In addition to Ahearn’s contributions, our conceptualization of agency is also informed by Natascha Klocker’s (2007) study of how female adolescent domestic workers in Tanzania exercised agency in the context of ap-

⁴ Bourdieu (1977); Giddens (1979); Sahlins (1981); Sewell (1992); Ahearn (2001a).

palling employment situations. Klocker acknowledges that the girls in her study understood and actively negotiated the expectations and power relationships that surrounded them. She distinguishes between “thin” and “thick” agency, with thin agency referring to those decisions and actions that are taken in highly restrictive contexts, and thick agency pertaining to those within a broader range of options. She found that a number of factors intervened in shaping girls’ agency when choosing to become domestic workers, including poverty, lack of educational opportunity, and limited employment options.

We also draw upon the notion of “judicious opportunism” developed by Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2005) in her study of young Beti women in Cameroon. Johnson-Hanks conducted in-depth interviews of women about how they planned for their future, particularly with regards to marriage and fertility. She found that, in a context characterized by high levels of poverty and extreme uncertainty, “what works is not the best strategy but the most flexible one—one that takes every present in the subjective, that keeps every alternative open as long as possible, and that permits the actor to act rapidly and flexibly to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise” (2005, 377). This judicious opportunism means that rather than choosing to develop a “good plan and follow it,” young women take advantage of the “sudden and surprising offers that life can make” (376). This concept is particularly helpful in explaining why the adolescent girls in our study decided to elope even though they had previously expressed a desire to continue their studies—their actions were opportunistic, seizing offers that presented themselves because of uncertainty about other options that would be available to them in the future.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected during three trips to Honduras between 2009 and 2012, as part of a related research study on the impact of secondary school on the lives of rural youth (see McEwan et al. 2014). Both Melisa and Griselda, the two cases of focus here, were interviewed, along with their grandparents and teachers.⁵ When we returned to interview them in 2011, we learned that they had married and dropped out of school. Because of our long-standing relationship, we purposefully selected them as “revealing” cases in this study on child marriage in rural Honduras. As Joseph Maxwell (2013) explains, one goal of purposeful sample selection in qualitative research is to “select groups or participants with whom you can es-

⁵ With the exception of the interviews with Melisa and Griselda in 2009, which were conducted by Murphy-Graham’s research assistants Rebecca Tarlau and D. Brent Edwards, Murphy-Graham and Leal conducted all of the interviews for this study during our joint visits in 2011 and 2012. We worked collaboratively to design the study and analyze data. Murphy-Graham took the lead in authoring this article, in close communication with Leal.

establish the most productive relationships, ones that will best enable you to answer your research questions” (99). As Robert Yin (2003, 43) explains, another rationale in case-study research for sample selection is that “the investigator has access to a situation previously inaccessible to scientific observation. The case study is therefore worth conducting because the descriptive information alone will be revelatory.” Indeed, we consider the cases of Griselda and Melisa to be “revelatory” cases because of the qualitative information they provide, from pre- to post-marriage. While we recognize that one of the shortcomings of this sampling strategy is that it does not allow us to make any claims about how “typical” or “representative” these cases are, it is unlikely that *any* number of in-depth case studies on child marriage would ever satisfy this critique (Yin 2003). Furthermore, our goal is not to generalize to other girls in Honduras but to generalize to theory about how girls exercise agency in child marriage, and from this to identify the ways in which education might thicken agency (see Yin [2003], 38, for “how case studies can be generalized to theory”).

Furthermore, we have intentionally refrained from comparing these girls with girls in their communities (and more specifically to those in our related study cited above) who did *not* marry. While it is possible that Griselda and Melisa possess certain “risk factors” that played an important role in their decision making, our goal here was not to focus on the differences between girls who marry and girls who do not marry. An emphasis of this nature could skew our study to focus on variance (Maxwell 2013, 99). We engaged qualitative methods for their strengths including elucidating local processes, meanings, and contextual influences in this setting (Creswell 2013; Maxwell 2013).

While we focus on the revelatory cases of Melisa and Griselda and their families and teachers, we also used a snowball technique to identify other cases of child marriage in their communities. In total, we identified six additional cases and conducted interviews with these girls/women and at least one family member. Because we had less rapport with these individuals (and did not have a relationship with them prior to their marriage), the data collected through these interviews were less rich but nonetheless provided key insights and confirmed patterns that emerged in the cases of Melisa and Griselda. We also draw upon these cases in our findings and analysis below, albeit to a lesser extent. Finally, we conducted 10 interviews with teachers in local secondary schools in order to gain a better understanding of their perspectives on the subject of child marriage.

The majority of interviews (approximately 70 percent) were digitally recorded and transcribed. In some situations, we chose not to record the interview due to the nervousness that the recording device caused; in those instances we took careful field notes, making sure to jot down key utterances and phrases verbatim.

To analyze the data, we first created “interim case summaries” (Miles and Huberman 1994, 78), documenting the case of each girl by drawing upon excerpts from our interview transcripts and field notes. These memos were largely descriptive, documenting the course of events and the perspectives of the actors involved. With these memos in mind, we returned to the literature on adolescent girls’ agency and applied theoretical codes (e.g., oppositional agency, judiciously opportunistic agency, accommodating agency; Miles and Huberman 1994) to the interviews and field notes. In parallel, we developed a set of codes to identify the strategies identified in teacher interviews of the ways that school personnel and the curriculum might thicken girls’ agency (e.g., relevancy, lack of space for courtship, etc.). From these codes we identified the key findings of this study.

We approach this research as “interpretivists,” and in doing so we highlight that our findings here are our interpretations and that no theory or account of events can capture the full complexity of reality (Maxwell 2011, 2013). Our understanding of how adolescent girls exercise agency in the process of marriage has been constructed through our observations, our conversations, and our own life experiences, which serve as a lens through which we filter and interpret the girls’ stories. We began this project with our own preconceptions about child marriage, shaped by our experiences growing up in Catholic, middle-class families in the United States (Murphy-Graham) and Mexico (Leal). To address this “researcher bias” (Maxwell 2013, 124), we have engaged in extensive reflection and discussion about how our experiences with marriage and teenage courtship may have shaped the interpretation of the data that we have arrived at here.

Findings: Two “Revelatory” Cases of Child Marriage—Griselda and Melisa

Griselda

When Griselda was in the eighth grade, she started seeing a boy from a nearby community, so her grandparents sent her to live with her aunt on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula. According to her grandfather, they did this in order “to prevent them from continuing to see each other.” A mutual friend had also told her that he was not a good person and only wanted to take advantage of her. Eventually Griselda lost contact with that boy. Six months later, Griselda decided to move back to her grandparents’ house. She didn’t like the school in the city and found it hard to make friends in the urban environment. She explained that her “classmates were very arrogant; they looked down on people.” After her return to her village, she did not resume her studies. Her grandparents and teachers told us that she did not want to continue studying even though they tried to convince her.

A few months after her return, she went off with a new boyfriend, Herber. Her grandparents explained that it happened when she was with her

uncle on a trip. Her uncle left her outside when he went into a bank, and when he came out she was gone. In her grandfather's words, "You see, she came with her godfather, and while he stepped into the bank, she had already planned to meet the boy. When he came back out [of the bank], she was gone."

Griselda and Herber had met at the town's *campo*, the soccer field. Her aunt, who is two years older, was dating a friend of Herber's. Herber asked for Griselda's cell phone number, via the friend and the aunt. She didn't have a cell phone at the time because her grandparents believed that "she was just a little girl who couldn't defend herself" and was too young to have a cell phone (and too young to have a boyfriend). Griselda gave Herber her aunt's number instead. Despite the grandparents' disapproval, Griselda's father bought her a cell phone shortly thereafter.

Griselda and Herber's relationship was largely limited to cell phone conversations and texting. They saw each other just four times. When we asked Griselda, "so how did you become his girlfriend if you couldn't see each other?" She answered that every day they "talked at least two hours on the phone . . . about love, that he loved me, then we'd joke around and be silly with each other."

Griselda and Herber's cellphone courtship lasted for eight months. During the four occasions they saw each other, it was always in the presence of Griselda's grandmother. Four months into the relationship, she explained, "*me ofreció viaje*" (he offered me a trip), meaning that he invited her to live with him at his parents' house. She waited another four months before accepting his invitation. She did not tell anyone about it, not even her aunt or her best friend. Herber and Griselda planned the details through the cell phone: he was going to wait for her in the nearby city she would pass through while coming back from a visit with her mother in San Pedro Sula. While her godfather went to the bank, she called Herber, and he picked her up in his father's car. Griselda told us that her decision to elope was not coerced nor was it driven by economic necessity; she had chosen to do so.

Griselda and Herber now live in a small, tidy house that belongs to his older brother. She does household chores while he works in the fields harvesting coffee, corn, and other crops. She likes living there and the way his family treats her. They are waiting to have children until they construct their own house. She commented that she wasn't using birth control but "*se estaba cuidando*" (she was being careful). When we asked how, she said "with nothing . . . just with this 15 days after my period," indicating that she was using the rhythm method. Her sister-in-law (Herber's brother's wife) had explained the method to her shortly after she arrived.

According to her grandmother, Griselda did not want to continue studying because she fell in love. "So, why didn't she want to continue with her studies?" we asked her. "Well I would say because of that, that she was

in love.” When we asked Griselda if she would be interested in completing her studies, Griselda said that she simply did not like going to school anymore—that it was “boring.”

Griselda’s grandmother worried that she would get tired of her new life as a housewife, and both grandparents emphasized to us that if Griselda wanted to, she could return to their home at any time. However, our impression was that Griselda seemed happy, albeit occasionally bored because she spent a great deal of time alone in the house while Herber was out working. She passed the time by cleaning (the kitchen was immaculate the days we visited) and cooking.

Melisa

We first met Melisa when she was 12 and living in a village a short distance from the highway that links two cities, Tela and La Ceiba. When she was 14, she began living with Aldo and his family. Her decision to go off with Aldo was spontaneous and opportunistic. While attempting to meet up with a previous boyfriend, she met Aldo, who is the son of her grandmother’s friend. She moved into the small home he shared with his parents and siblings shortly after meeting him.

Like Griselda, prior to moving in with Aldo, Melisa lived with her grandmother, although Melisa’s mother lived in the same community but in a different home. Melissa’s mother started a relationship with her current husband when Melisa was still a baby, after Melisa’s father abandoned them and eventually left for the United States. Melisa’s mother felt that she couldn’t bring a child from a previous relationship into her husband’s household. Thus while her mother lived nearby and was a presence in Melisa’s life, her grandmother provided day-to-day care.

When Melisa began the ninth grade, her grandmother suspected that she had a boyfriend and told the teacher to keep a close eye on her. Her teacher, Rosario, explained: “Her grandmother told me that she was in love, and so we tried to give Melisa advice since the beginning of the year. Her grandmother didn’t want to put her in school because she was in love and ‘they’ll steal her away.’ But I said to her, ‘No, I’ll talk to her.’ So we talked to her every day.”

Rosario attempted to make sure that Melisa was under her watch at all times. If she had forgotten her homework, Rosario would tell her that she could have it sent to her in the afternoon after she got home. Allowing Melisa to walk home alone was a risk that Rosario did not want to take, because presumably she could arrange a secret meeting with her boyfriend while her grandmother thought she was in class. Despite these precautions, according to Rosario, Melisa still found ways to see her boyfriend: “But she would escape at night—even if they had locked the door. She would go dance in San Juan (a nearby town) with her boyfriend. Sometimes she’d say

that she was coming over here, to school, and she'd go out. I'd talk to her and tell her not to do this, and she'd say, 'Ok, *profe*,⁶ I'm going to do as you say.'

Melisa carried on her secret relationship with this boyfriend, Lino, for eight months. They found ways to see each other despite her grandmother's opposition.

One afternoon, Melisa and Lino planned to meet up at a nearby village and go together to the carnival in La Ceiba. Melisa went to meet Lino and his friend, but they never showed up; apparently, they were killed because of their involvement in narco-trafficking. That night while she waited for Lino, she met Aldo, the boy with whom she now lives. Aldo's mother was a friend of Melisa's grandmother, so when she found out that Melisa was alone waiting for Lino, she sent her daughter Marisela, who is the same age as Melisa, to bring her to their house. Since that day, Melisa has stayed with them: "I was 14 and he was 20, and I stayed," Melisa explained. Aldo's mother used the term "*se casaron*" (they got married) to refer to their relationship, even though she is too young to marry legally. It was at this time that Melisa stopped going to school.

Aldo and Melisa lived in San Pedro Sula for a few months with one of Aldo's sisters. He worked in a factory, and she babysat Aldo's 2-year-old nephew. When we talked to Melisa's mother about why Melisa went off with Aldo, she said, "Everything was good, but she fell in love!" Her mother summarized the chain of events that led to Melisa and Aldo's relationship: "She didn't get together with him . . . the first boy was a junkie and now he's gone missing. They haven't found him, and some say that he was killed. I don't know. But now she is with this other boy, and he's a good worker . . . He's from a good, humble family. They don't have vices. She's not studying, but she says she'll start studying again. I don't know."

At first, the family had a very negative reaction to Melisa's decision to go off with a boy. However, they liked the second boy better than the first and seemed relieved that she was now with a "good, humble" person, rather than a "junkie." Now Melisa and Aldo visit her grandmother almost every weekend. Her grandmother told us that he is a nice boy who sometimes sends her money with Melisa, which is why she advises her to "be good to him" and not "make him mad."

We believe that one of the factors that influenced Melisa's decision to leave was that she and her grandmother were not getting along. Melisa's friend told us that she had been fighting with her grandmother, who was very strict and would not give her permission to do many of the things Melisa enjoyed. These included wearing short skirts and tight clothes. Melisa also loved to go swimming in the river. In 2009, Erin Murphy-Graham⁷ took a

⁶ *Profe*, an abbreviation of the Spanish *professor(a)*, a term of endearment meaning teacher.

⁷ Accompanied by her research assistant Rebecca Tarlau.

group of girls to the village swimming hole, and Melisa fondly remembered that trip and treasured the pictures we took of her with her girlfriends. When we visited in 2011, Melisa missed our outing to the river because she was no longer living in the village. In 2012, we brought Melisa and her friends to the swimming hole in the village where Aldo and Melisa now live. Melisa was delighted to show us this place and mentioned that she goes swimming all the time now because she isn't restricted like she was when she lived with her grandmother. Likewise, we noticed that Melisa changed out of her short skirt and tight tank top prior to our visit with her grandmother. While she now takes care of Aldo—making his food, cleaning his clothes, ironing, and so forth—he did not prevent her from swimming or dressing the way she wanted to; according to Melisa, this made her happy. Melisa's teacher Rosario remarked, "she felt very boxed-in, you know? She wanted freedom."

Melisa and Aldo have their own room in his parents' house. Melisa and her sister-in-law Marisela divide the daily household chores such as making tortillas, cleaning, and washing clothes. Melisa says that Aldo is thinking about going "*mojado*" (illegally) to the United States with other people in the community. However, when we asked him about it, he said he was not sure about his plans. Melisa's teacher, Rosario, encouraged her to return to school, and Melisa said she was thinking about doing so.

Agency in the Practice of Child Marriage

In characterizing the agency of rural Honduran adolescent girls in the practice of marriage, our analysis of these cases allows us to describe their "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001a, 112)—their agency—as thin, opportunistic, accommodating, and oppositional.

Agency as Thin

Similar to the domestic workers in Klocker's (2007) Tanzania study, our data support the notion of the girls' agency as "thin." The girls made decisions and took action in a highly restrictive context. Characterizing agency as "thin" recognizes the girls' efforts to build better lives, even if those improvements are personal, subjective, short-term, and marginal. In rural Honduras, both young men and women face severe limitations in terms of the opportunities and choices that are available to them. Economic opportunities for girls and women are quite rare. A small percentage might find work as teachers or other jobs in the service sector, but the majority will end up as housewives. Melisa spoke of finding work in a factory, but she was underage.

While Melisa hinted at plans to return to school the following year, Griselda had no plans to return, saying that she "didn't like it." Other phrases

that the youth we interviewed used to describe school were “*aburrido*” (boring) and “*no me gusta*” (I don’t like it). According to a teacher in Griselda’s community, Ricardo, one of the challenges is that school simply is not relevant to students’ lives: “It’s just hours and hours in the classroom talking about topics that are totally unfamiliar to what they experience in their lives. We can talk about mathematics, Spanish, but we don’t know how they live, at what time they go to bed, what they do in the evening, when night falls, if they get together with their families, or if they go for a walk.”

While parents and students alike spoke of the importance of schooling for “moving forward” (*para seguir adelante*), school seems to have little connection to students’ daily lives. The choice to marry early and improve one’s life in the short term seems to be a better bet than staying in school and hoping for a brighter future. The low quality and relevancy of schooling in part explain the thin nature of adolescent girls’ agency—continued schooling was not perceived as beneficial in the context of limited opportunities.

We also found that girls’ agency was thin because there were severe constraints placed on their courtship possibilities. In the two communities in our study, opportunities and physical space for courtship were severely restricted. The girls’ interactions with boys were tightly controlled and supervised by parents. For the most part, girls did not have their parents’ permission to date or have a boyfriend. Their villages lacked public spaces in which they could interact with other young people, let alone engage in courtship practices such as hand-holding or other displays of physical affection. The majority of relationships seemed to begin with short encounters in the only places that were outside the boundaries of parental control: at the store (*pulperia*) while running an errand, on their way to school, or at the soccer field. These were places where young people had the opportunity to exchange cell phone numbers. Because of the lack of public space for courtship, cell phone conversations and texting became a key site for the development of their romantic relationships, for flirting, and getting to know each other (we elaborate on this below). Because Griselda and Melisa could not openly be involved in romantic relationships while under the control of their grandparents, they perceived that to elope was their best option to gain independence from their grandparents and spend more intimate time with their boyfriends. The girls seemed to internally negotiate what they believed would be the best outcome for them, given their limited choice set.

Two of the teachers we interviewed, Ricardo and Rosario, mentioned attempts to intervene so that girls would not make shortsighted decisions. Ricardo recalled a girl who was “a high achiever, very intelligent” who spoke of her love for her boyfriend and her plans to marry him. “I said to her, ‘Are you sure this is love, or is it just a passing whim to be contrary to your parents?’” He further cautioned her that the boy came from a family that didn’t seem to value women as professionals and that she’d be “making tortillas.”

He asked her, “Do you prefer to go off and burn your nails [making tortillas] or to make something of yourself because you have the potential to do so?” She thought about it and said, “You’re right, *profe*.” A few days later, she told him that she had “analyzed” the situation and ended the relationship. However, he later learned through one of her friends that they continued to text and call each other. Likewise, Rosario tried to intervene with Melisa, talking to her every day and attempting to help her think about her future. While these teachers tried to help the girls focus on their future, both made choices that reflected the sociocultural constraints of their communities.

Agency as Opportunistic

In response to their limited choices, the girls exercised judicious opportunism (Johnson-Hanks 2005). When presented with an option for a life outside their childhood home, they exercised opportunistic agency, acting quickly and deliberately to seize that chance. Several individuals we interviewed explained that a prevalent cultural norm was that girls should not wait too long to marry because if girls do not marry by the age of 20 “they’re going to miss the train.”⁸ This belief is linked with the idea that “sooner or later” girls are going to leave their homes to get married. The perception among parents and teachers was that it is inevitable that girls will get married and become housewives. Getting married young was not viewed as model behavior, but it was by no means abnormal. For example, when we asked Griselda’s uncle about her decision to marry, he explained, “she wanted to speed things up,” suggesting that marriage is the next stage of a girl’s life.

Griselda, Melisa, and the other girls and women we interviewed in connection with this study struggled to explain what motivated them to go off with their boyfriends. Ana, a woman who is now 28 but who ran off with her boyfriend at 14, told us that she has asked herself the same question many times, and she still does not know the answer. She explained that maybe at that time she saw it as “a game” without realizing what she was getting herself into; she left her husband four years ago. Glynda, another young woman who dropped out of school to go off with her boyfriend, said that she “didn’t even understand herself.” However, she went on to explain that she thought he would give her a better life.

The girls believed that life would improve. As one teacher explained, “They think that in some way or another their lives will be better.” Even if the improvement was marginal, such as Melissa’s newly acquired freedom to swim in the river and wear short skirts, being with their boyfriends was determined to be a more desirable outcome than staying with their families. In small but significant ways, girls believed that their lives would get better, and so they seized the opportunity when they were offered a “trip”—or offered a ticket out of their constraining homes.

⁸ The Spanish phrase he used was “*el tren las va a dejar*.”

In the analysis of our data we attempted to interpret *why* Griselda and Melisa decided to marry early and to identify any personal traits or characteristics that may have made them more likely to elope. One possibility, consistent with judicious opportunism, is that somewhat randomly these girls met and connected with boys. Romantic sparks between two individuals developed, and both Griselda and Melisa took action on these promising leads. We find Johnson-Hanks' notion of judicious opportunism particularly helpful in interpreting the actions of Melisa, who made a spontaneous decision to stay in Aldo's village and move in with his family, even though she originally went to his village to meet another boy. She did not engage in action that fulfilled a prior intention but rather action that was responsive to the "contingent, sudden, and surprising offers that life can make" (Johnson-Hanks 2005, 376). Likewise, Griselda took up Herber's offer of a trip, strategizing to leave her uncle outside the bank so that she could run off with him. She acted rapidly and flexibly when the opportunity arose—her agency was judiciously opportunistic.

Agency as Oppositional

The girls' agency was also oppositional toward their parents and grandparents. Adolescents exercised power by being involved in a romantic relationship against the wishes of their parents and grandparents (see also Bell [2007] for a discussion of similar dynamics in Uganda). Cell phones provided a virtual space for adolescent romantic relationships that allowed them to covertly socialize, thereby circumventing and opposing elder authority. As mentioned above, because of the lack of public spaces for courtship, cell phone conversations and texting were the primary means by which the couples flirted and got to know each other. We asked one of the girls we spoke with, Betty (one of Melisa's friends), to show us a text message exchange with her boyfriend. It read:

Flako hermoso [skinny beauty]
Buenas noches. Te amo bebe [Good night. I love you baby]

In addition to flirting and sending affectionate messages, phones were also used to arrange private meetings in secret spaces. As the teacher Ricardo explained: "There are no spaces, I mean, social spots where you can go and walk and all. Students, well, through technology and messaging it's easy for them to arrange a meeting at some place, some *finca* [farm], to meet there and see each other because presently they can't do it at the school: teachers are there. But they can do what I was telling you, go and pick me up, take me somewhere, get off somewhere in the road and talk, and those are the places where they can go through messaging."

Cell phones are creating a virtual space that fills a physical void. Girls can oppose parental authority from their own rooms, secretly messaging their

boyfriends, or in the words of Ricardo, “Maybe you go to sleep, and there in the other room is the girl, messaging with who knows [what boy]!” According to those we interviewed, if a boy becomes interested in a girl, he will ask for her cell phone number through a friend or family member. Most of the girls explained that the cellular phone was the *only* means they had to establish relationships with their boyfriends. Betty shared one example of this. She had just resumed a relationship with a former boyfriend, but they had not seen each other in months. They reconciled and resumed their relationship entirely by phone. We were also told of cases where couples would get together and break up entirely by cell phone with no physical encounters.

Griselda’s grandfather specifically mentioned the role of the cell phone in her elopement: “Cell phones are not bad. Technology isn’t bad, but the misuse of technology is bad. It has come to destroy our youth. Before kids would get to be 18 years old and say, ‘Mom, Dad, look here I have a boyfriend, a girlfriend.’ And now today, look at this one [Griselda]; she went off.”

The use of cell phones is reconfiguring the logistics of courtship, as communication does not require physical contact.⁹ In this way, youth have a new form of control over their romantic relationships and the ability to defy parental control.

In addition to opposing elders through their quotidian use of the cell phone with their suitors, the grand act of opposition by youth is their physical departure, their running away. As one family put it simply, “*se fue*” (she left). In all of the cases of child marriage we were told of, the girl went off without parental consent. A teacher explained that this demonstrated the complexity of a situation in which “if parents do not give them freedom [to date], they’ll go. If they do give them [freedom], they’ll go anyway.” Borrowing from a concept she taught in her mathematics classes, she explained that these are “two difficult parameters.”

Previous research on parental perceptions of the threat of adolescent girls’ sexuality conducted in Malawi describes how parental perceptions of risk weaken their motivation to keep daughters in school (Grant 2012). Our interviews with teachers revealed that some parents wanted to pull their daughters from school because they believed them to be involved romantically, as was the case with Melisa’s grandmother. Threats to pull their children out of school, take away cell phones, send children to live with other relatives (e.g. Griselda), and other protective responses likely contribute to increased tension in adolescent-adult relationships. Indeed, we found that

⁹ There are similarities here with Ahearn’s (2001b) findings in Nepal, where young people were also prohibited from courting in person. There, love letters allowed individuals to get to know each other and elope, thereby challenging traditional arranged and capture marriages. A November 7, 2013, article in *The Himalayan Times*, “Paradigm shift in early marriage” reports that teens in Nepal now use cell phones “improperly” to court each other and this has resulted in early “love” marriages (Maharjan 2013).

tense and conflictive adult-child relationships also fueled girls' oppositional agency and helped explain their decision to move out of their childhood home. In Melisa's case, her teacher mentioned that she felt "boxed-in," and her friends also believed that she had frequent conflicts with her grandmother.

Research also suggests that during adolescence, relationships between youth and their parents and other family members undergo significant changes and can be characterized by increased tension as adolescents attempt to become more autonomous (Furman 2002; Lloyd 2005). Previous research consistently points to romantic relationships as a significant cause of conflict and tension in the family in part because parents and adolescents have different expectations (Furman and Schaffer 2003; Bell 2007). Given these tensions and conflicts, we found that part of what characterizes girls' agency is their desire to oppose authority, both through their everyday use of the cell phone to flirt and get to know their boyfriends and in their culminating act of opposition, running away.

The lack of opportunity for physical interaction (intimate or otherwise) contributes to child marriage. Where options for couples to be together are scarce, cohabitating may be the only available choice. Girls' desire for intimacy and connection may motivate them to oppose traditional norms that constrain girls from dating or having boyfriends when they are in their early teens. When we asked a group of female teachers about girls' decisions to elope, they glanced knowingly at each other until one replied, giggling, "*se van por calentura*" (they go because they are horny). A growing body of work calls for attention to girls' sexuality (e.g., Tolman 2002; Mkhwanazi 2011; Muhanguzi and Ninsiima 2011). A deeper understanding and acknowledgement of how consensual courtship and adolescent sexuality play a role in child marriage is urgently needed.

Agency as Accommodating

While Melisa and Griselda's agency was oppositional toward adult authority and cultural norms regarding sexuality, it was simultaneously accommodating with regards to traditional gender norms in the villages where they reside. In their communities, women commonly worked inside the home and were primarily responsible for all domestic duties, while men were primarily responsible for household income (see Chiu and Casper [2012] for additional discussion of gender norms in rural Honduras). Our findings support Ahearn's (2001a) observation that agency should not be used as a synonym for resistance. In deciding to get married, girls did not seem to be resisting or opposing traditional gender relationships and identities. To the contrary, they quickly settled into the day-to-day activities and practices they associated with being a wife, such as washing their husband's clothes, preparing his meals, cleaning the home, and, for a few of the girls we inter-

viewed, having children. Their actions in no way challenged traditional gender norms, and their agency was therefore accommodating to dominant gender ideologies. As discussed above, Griselda and Melisa both spent their days engaged in the tasks of a housewife—cleaning, washing, ironing, cooking, and otherwise caring for Aldo and Herber. These are the daily tasks of the vast majority of women in their communities.

Again, as illustrated in table 1, household survey data suggest that while overall fertility has decreased over the past two decades in Honduras, age at first union has stayed relatively constant (Remez et al. 2009). In practice, this implies that the mothers of this generation of adolescent girls were also married at an early age. Likewise, the fathers were the ones “taking the girls away.” For example, we interviewed a young girl named Yoeli who was 15 and had recently run off with her boyfriend. When interviewing Yoeli’s mother, we learned that she had run off with Yoeli’s father when she was 15, without her parents’ permission. She tearfully narrated the course of events on the day she returned home from running an errand and discovered that Yoeli was gone. When we asked her how she felt about this, she said that she and Yoeli were “two sides of the same coin,” because she had done the same thing as an adolescent girl. In replicating the actions of their parents, girls accept early marriage as a normal part of life in rural villages where choices are limited.

While girls’ mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers told us in our interviews that they thought the girls were too young to get married, their own experiences with child marriage seemed to dampen their parental authority and their ability to respond to this practice. Several of the teachers we interviewed thought that parents might subtly encourage the marriage of young girls because they do not have the financial resources to feed, shelter, and support the school attendance of all of their children. If their adolescent daughter leaves the home, it means one fewer mouth to feed. The teachers stressed that parents might not like the fact that their girls leave, but the constraints of poverty are an everyday struggle for many families. Early marriage is a way to accommodate these harsh realities. One example of this is Melisa’s grandmother’s explanation that Aldo is a good person, even sending money for the grandmother with Melisa from time to time, and so she tells Melisa to “be good to him” and “not make him mad.” In sum, in addition to accommodating patriarchal gender norms, our data suggest that girls may also exercise agency to accommodate the material scarcity of their familial homes.

Discussion

Much of the policy discourse regarding how to prevent child marriage mentions schooling as a protective factor. In a recently published review

of more than 150 programs that measure changes in attitudes, knowledge, and/or behaviors related to child marriage, enhancing girls' access to quality education is identified as one of five strategies to end child marriage (ICRW 2013). To better understand how education might play a role in delaying the age of marriage, we have argued here that we first need an understanding of how girls exercise agency in their decision to marry. Through the qualitative case studies, we highlight how, in this context, girls exercise agency that is simultaneously thin, opportunistic, oppositional, and accommodating. In this context, how might education enhance girls' agency, expanding their range of options?

Returning to Ahearn's notion of agency as the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (2001a, 112), we suggest that for education to enhance adolescent girls' agency it must target girls within schools as well as attempt to change the sociocultural context in which their actions are embedded. In order for education to enhance girls' agency, focusing on access and retention of girls in secondary school is not enough. Education (in and outside of schools) also must address the sociocultural conditions that constrain girls' actions. In devising effective strategies to promote girls' participation in post-primary education and delay marriage, education needs to take place within schools, families, and communities. In particular, educational efforts at the community level must focus on raising critical awareness around gender issues and on changing norms regarding consensual adolescent courtship. Across the four descriptors of girls' agency, patriarchal gender norms constrain girls' capacity to act. For girls to have more choices available to them, these norms need to be explicitly challenged in and through education.

Table 2 summarizes the central findings from our research in terms of how the sociocultural context mediates girls' capacity to act, and briefly describes how education might play a role in enhancing girls' agency.

In sum, our findings highlight that expanding adolescent girls' agency in post-primary education will require a multitiered strategy that emphasizes building critical awareness of gender issues, challenging cultural norms of adolescent courtship that constrain girls' choices, and simultaneously engaging schools, families, and communities.

Implications: Maximizing Education's Protective Potential

Enhancing girls' agency and promoting gender equality should be considered as components of good quality education. However, efforts to improve education quality in developing countries do not usually include attention to gender concerns.¹⁰ For example, the final report of the Learning

¹⁰ An exception to this is EdQual, a research consortium including several universities funded by the British Department for International Development. Among their various papers, at least one study explicitly examined gender as a component of educational quality: <http://Users/erin/Downloads>

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF THE NATURE OF GIRLS' AGENCY AND HOW EDUCATION CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Nature of Girls' Agency and How the Sociocultural Context Matters	Potential Ways Education Could Make a Difference	Primary Level of Intervention Required		
		School	Family	Community
Agency as thin: Girls have few real and imagined choices available, and severe constraints are placed on their courtship possibilities.	Creating opportunities/space for healthy interaction between males and females, changing norms regarding female sexuality. Critical awareness that housewife is not the only potential future for girls.	□	□	□
Agency as opportunistic: Given limited future options, girls seize chance to elope.	Cultivating the critical thinking capabilities of girls so that they consider the long-term implications of their choices. Creating direct linkages between post-primary education and work opportunities.	□		
Agency as oppositional: Girls oppose elder authority regarding constraints on their courtship.	Engaging families and communities to support adolescents, implement family-based education programs focused on improving dialogue and relationships between adolescents and adults.		□	□
Agency as accommodating: Married girls quickly take on traditional gender division of labor as housewives.	Working through formal curriculum in schools and non-formal efforts in community to raise critical awareness about gender, challenge patriarchal gender norms. Implement social media campaigns that critique practice of child marriage.	□	□	□

Metrics Taskforce,¹¹ a multistakeholder group representing more than 30 organizations convened by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Brookings Institution Center for Universal Education, mentions gender only with regards to analyzing achievement data (UNESCO 2013, 31). While it is too early to determine the influence that the proposed “Global Framework of Learning Domains”¹² will have on education policy and practice, the lack of serious engagement with gender concerns is troubling. Looking ahead, there may be some potential to incorporate gender issues in the elaboration of learning indicators that would be used to measure educational quality.

/exploring%20gender%20Halai%20and%20Rubagiza%202010.pdf. An article published in the journal *Comparative Education* (Aikman, Halai, and Rubagiza 2011, 45) makes a similar argument to ours: that “education quality demands an analysis of gender dynamics in the wider social context of the lives of boys and girls”.

¹¹ See <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/lmtf-summary-rpt-en.pdf>.

¹² The report proposes seven learning domains: physical well-being, social and emotional, culture and the arts, literacy and communication, learning approaches and cognition, numeracy and mathematics, science and technology.

One proposed indicator in the framework is “citizen of the world”—that youth “demonstrate the *values* and skills necessary for success in their communities, countries, and the world” (UNESCO 2013, 23). Given previous international agreements (i.e., the Beijing Declaration, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), we hope that gender equality is seen as a *value* vital for youth across the globe. Research from the UK-based EdQual Research Programme Consortium (<http://www.edqual.org>), particularly the work of Aikman et al. (2011, 45), provides compelling justification for “gender equitable quality education.”

Education that promotes gender equality and enhances girls’ agency will require teacher professional development and the implementation of gender-sensitive curriculum. Our findings suggest that teachers could play a key role in enhancing girls’ agency, particularly in facilitating a thorough examination and consideration among girls of the implications that marriage might have for their future choice set. Teachers are in a unique position to counsel and help students think about their decisions carefully. They can help girls think through the consequences of their decisions, encouraging girls to not be opportunistic but rather be deliberate and comprehensive when making a decision as important as whom and when to marry. They can be respected adults in the lives of girls, especially if they understand the constraints of the environment and the lure of adolescent romance. While their efforts to talk girls out of marriage might not always succeed, our findings suggest that they may be in a unique position to dissuade girls from exercising agency opportunistically—helping them see that schooling can ultimately broaden their choices whereas early marriage could narrow them.

The topic of child marriage should be incorporated into the curriculum so that norms around child marriage are challenged and explicitly discussed.¹³ In Honduras, the Ministries of Health and Education have already agreed to this, but the country lags far behind other countries in the region in terms of implementation (Hunt and Monterrosas Castrejón 2012). Teacher preparation and in-service professional development courses (for both primary and secondary education teachers) should explicitly address gender norms and child marriage and provide materials that could be introduced to students. Curricular guides, including the Population Council’s *It’s All One*¹⁴ (which has been translated into Spanish and is currently being adapted for use in Guatemala), could be modified for use in classrooms so

¹³ The Honduras Ministry of Education has approved the use of the curricular guides “*Cuidando mi salud y mi cuerpo*” (Taking care of my health and my body), but these contain no explicit mention of early marriage. The Ministry of Health and a network of local NGOs are leading the effort to use these guides to train teachers; the role of the Ministry of Education has been minimal. See <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Pais/Ampliaran-educacion-sexual-en-Honduras>.

¹⁴ See http://www.popcouncil.org/publications/books/2010_ItsAllOne.asp.

that teachers have tools at their disposal to discuss these topics with their students.

We recognize that the incorporation of curriculum on adolescent romance and sexuality is highly controversial. In fact, just four out of 21 Latin American countries surveyed by the United Nations Population Fund have implemented sex education in the school system (Cevallos 2006). Despite the signing of a Ministerial Declaration “Preventing through Education,” in June 2010, in which 30 Ministries of Health and 26 Ministries of Education from the region (including that of Honduras) agreed to strengthen efforts to incorporate comprehensive sex education in schools, progress has been slow.¹⁵ Given government’s historical reluctance to play a key role in sex education, continued funding of international and nongovernmental organizations that can support teacher training and curricular development in sex education will be essential.

In addition to work with teachers and the curriculum, educational interventions to enhance girls’ agency must target families and communities. One promising strategy for family and community education is the use of media campaigns, which have demonstrated effectiveness in increasing girls’ participation in school (Unterhalter et al. 2014). Media campaigns have the potential to challenge community norms on courtship and child marriage. One potential vehicle for these campaigns is already in girls’ pockets: their cell phones. Our findings, supported by articles in the popular press (e.g., Maharjan 2013), suggest that cell phones may be a very powerful educational tool, given their pivotal role in adolescent romantic relationships. A variety of public health campaigns, particularly in the domain of HIV/AIDS prevention, have been designed for delivery via mobile device (WHO 2011; Jamison et al. 2013). Efforts to prevent child marriage and promote more equitable gender relations might use similar strategies to reach girls, boys, and their parents with information about the adverse consequences of child marriage. Campaigns using SMS might also encourage deeper communication between young couples and between youth and their parents.

Finally, while completing secondary school, at least in theory, opens up additional life opportunities for rural girls, economic constraints in environment are powerful forces that limit agency. With the exception of their teachers, youth have few professional role models to emulate and relatively little exposure to examples of how secondary education might be a way to *seguir adelante* or move forward in life. The notion that “sooner or later” girls will marry and become housewives can only be challenged if girls see alter-

¹⁵ For the English language text of the Declaration, see <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Santiago/pdf/declaration-preventing-education-english.pdf>. For a progress report as of 2012, see <http://coalicionmesoamericana.org/sites/default/files/EvaluacionDeclaracionMinisterial2012.pdf>.

native options. For schooling to expand the range of choices that girls face, there needs to be a tighter link between secondary schooling and what they are able to do afterward (e.g., have access to scholarships for tertiary education, job training, and entrepreneurship programs). More comprehensive strategies of this nature will require the coordination of development efforts across sectors, considerable resources, and a longer time frame.

Conclusion

Efforts to delay marriage matter not only for the lives of individual girls around the world but also for gender equality more broadly. Focusing attention on child marriage is important given the ways in which household gender relations and gender equality outside the private sphere intersect. In discussing the gendered nature of vulnerability in the less developed world, Manion Young (2009) extends Susan Okin's (1989) theory of how the interaction of gender relations in the family with gendered norms of labor outside the home reinforces women's vulnerability. Briefly, Young argues that women cannot achieve equality unless social structures change to encourage men to share equally in domestic work and childcare. Because women are primarily responsible for domestic work and childrearing and are generally dependent on their husbands for material support, they are far more vulnerable to unforeseen changes in domestic arrangements and to economic shocks because they lack opportunities to advance in the public sphere (Young 2009).

In our research, we found that girls who married early have slipped quickly into their traditional roles as housewives, with little opportunity to work outside the home. The framing and justification for efforts to prevent child marriage should be linked with the broader goal of gender equality rather than a narrow focus on reducing teen pregnancy or fertility. Similarly, curricular design should focus not only on specific manifestations of gender inequality, such as domestic violence and labor market discrimination, but take a more comprehensive view that grounds these in the overarching topic of gender relations.

Ending child marriage has become an increasingly visible goal of the international development community, spearheaded by initiatives including Girls not Brides, a global partnership of 54 countries and 311 member organizations (see <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org>). Providing girls with access to education and enhancing its quality are key components in strategies to end child marriage. However, education about the adverse implications of child marriage does not have to take place strictly within schools; it should be spread more broadly through a variety of media channels and other social settings (e.g., youth groups, church). Finally, any effort to end child marriage must incorporate strategies to identify and promote viable liveli-

hood strategies for young women so that being a housewife is not the only future they can expect.

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