

‘Ending Child Marriage – Tackling stereotypes through quotas and motivating governments through regional peer review

Ahead of Girl Summit 2014, LSE’s Alice Evans discusses the campaign to end child marriage.

To mobilise support against child marriage, the UK is hosting the ‘**Girl Summit**’ on 22 July. It will bring together governments, international organisations, civil society and the private sector in a bid to amplify existing efforts.

In Zambia, where the UK International Development Secretary Justine Greening recently **spoke** out against child marriage, a nationwide campaign is already underway. It is backed by government ministries, the country’s First Lady, **Dr Christine Kaseba**, **UNICEF**, **UNFPA** and a number of **traditional chiefs**.

For many, the solution is girls’ education rather than marriage.

Indeed, there is an association here, as highlighted in the widely-shared Twitter picture below:



But how can popular support for girls’ education be galvanised in the first place, so that girls stay in school and out of marriage?

For Justine Greening, “this is not just about changing laws... it’s about changing the attitudes of people and communities around the worth of girls and their contribution to society”. Indeed, so long as families stereotype men as breadwinners they may underinvest in girls’ education. Lacking the confidence of kin and teachers, girls may underestimate themselves. Even if a young woman does not personally endorse these sexist views, she may nevertheless conform so as to secure social respect.

In Zambia and more broadly, agencies like UNICEF and UNFPA often seek to address such beliefs by sensitising traditional chiefs and communities about the harmful consequences of child marriage. But are such abstract discourses and calls for reform sufficient to undermine long-standing gender stereotypes and cultural expectations?

Short answer: not really.

A major problem is that people tend to interpret information – including abstract discourses of equality – by drawing on their own experiences. So, in contexts where men typically *are* breadwinners, families may dismiss NGO’s passing calls to invest scarce resources in girls’ education. In my own research in the Zambian Copperbelt, people tended to be more open to

egalitarian messages if they could make sense of them through first-hand evidence of women demonstrating equal competence in socially-valued roles. Echoing a broader trend, Markus (a 30-year-old miner) explained that he immediately concurred with messages about women’s equal capabilities because he had been single-handedly brought up by his mother, a market trader and grassroots politician. He commented, “See what is right: not that you follow it automatically but if it makes sense to you”.

Although exposure to female breadwinners, electricians and other gender atypical roles is increasing in a context of rising female employment, it is far from universal. Women still face numerous constraints. One way of amplifying exposure would be to tackle the structures that confine women to poorly paid or unpaid, low-status work. Key here is social infrastructure and services to reduce the volume of reproductive labour. Equally critical are active labour market policies, such as gender quotas for rural electrification programmes. As championed by the [World Development Report 2012](#), quotas could showcase women’s competence in socially-valued domains and catalyse attitudinal change by alleviating employers’ discriminatory doubts and inspiring other women to follow suit. This might lead girls (as supported by their families) to expand their horizons, beyond marriage.

A further (perhaps bigger) question for the Girl Summit is how to mobilise commitment to this endeavour – on the part of governments and co-operating partners. Competing with a plethora of developmental objectives, single issue campaigns are rarely the subject of sustained attention. Promisingly, ending child marriage is already prioritised as a gender equality target in the report by the [Open Working Group](#) of the General Assembly, which met last week to prepare a proposal on Sustainable Development Goals for post-2015. At the regional level also, Ministers of Health and Education in [Eastern and Southern Africa](#) have set themselves the target of eliminating child marriage by 2020. However, we know from [mixed progress](#) towards the Millennium Development Goals that international targets are not sufficient for prioritisation over the long-term. One potentially fruitful strategy here is regional benchmarking of outcomes (not processes) and peer review – as suggested by the [High-Level Panel](#). Comparisons with peers may stimulate reputational concerns and thereby motivate improved performance.

In short, I suggest two key approaches to ending child marriage: tackling gender stereotypes (through active labour market interventions) and building mutual accountability at the international level.

The Girl Summit is accompanied by a photograph exhibition at the LSE, ‘Too Young To Wed’ (running till August).

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