

HARMFUL PRACTICES AGAINST GIRLS AND TEENAGERS IN MALAWI



IN A NUTSHELL

- Identify and understand traditional practices that harm the development and well-being of children in Malawi, such as child marriage and sexual initiation rituals.
- Investigate whether introducing a low-cost and easy to scale signaling intervention — a system of public donation boxes — can decrease support towards harmful traditional practices.
- Understand under what conditions parents are open to changing harmful norms.

MOTIVATION

Girls in developing countries are often exposed to a number of traditional practices that have strong and negative effects on their future. Early marriage is common in many developing countries and Malawi – where almost 50% of girls are married before the age of 18 and 10% before the age of 15 – makes no exception. Child marriage, in addition to being a violation of human rights, compromises the development of girls and often results in early pregnancy and social isolation, leaving them poorly educated which in turn reinforces the gendered nature of poverty.

Moreover, the age at which a girl gets married is closely related to the age at which she will become sexually active and to the number of children she will have. This is an important fact to consider in the context of developing countries where pregnancy related complications are one of the leading causes of mortality of young girls.

In Malawi, traditional sexual initiation rituals prepare young girls for marriage. These rituals sometimes involve forced and unprotected sexual intercourse between adult men and young girls. Girls involved in such practices suffer from abuse, are exposed to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, and are forced into early marriage due to unwanted pregnancies.

PROJECT PLAN

The measurement of the prevalence of these harmful traditional practices is particularly difficult and in consequence, reliable evidence is scarce. This research project aims at measuring the prevalence of different harmful traditional practices and to shed light on their underlying behavioral mechanisms. Indeed, although data suggests that cultural, institutional, and social aspects play an important role, little is known on how social norms develop inside a group and thus on what interventions would be effective in addressing these issues. We test the hypothesis that families take part in harmful traditional practices for the purpose of social signaling: Are individuals who participate in harmful traditional practices perceived as more trusting, reliable, and pro-social than individuals who do not participate in harmful traditional practices? Such a mechanism would lead to two new policy recommendations. First, improving self-esteem could make individuals less receptive to social desirability concerns



and thereby reduce the participation in harmful practices. Second, introducing new, less harmful signaling opportunities might decrease participation in other, more harmful domains.

In order to causally identify behavioral micro-mechanisms behind harmful traditional practices, the study proposes an easy to implement and non-interfering intervention. An alternative signaling opportunity could lower the costs of building social reputation and thereby decrease the reputational benefit attached to the participation in harmful practices. For this purpose, a new signal is created by giving colorful bracelets to most pro-social individuals. We then make colorful bracelets available in return for food donations (in kilograms of maize) to the poor of the rest of the village.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

An intervention jointly targeting early marriage and harmful initiation rituals by speaking to public image concerns has shown to be very effective. First analyses suggest that Malawian families partly engage in harmful traditional practices to obtain a positive public image and that these practices are substitutable, without families losing their public reputation. At the same time, positive attitudes towards child marriage and sexual initiation rituals were reduced by 20-30% within 5 weeks after introducing an alternative language for signaling publicly desirable traits.

POLICY AND PROGRAMATIC IMPLICATIONS

The study uses rigorous research and methodological acumen to generate reliable and valid evidence with regard to the prevalence of harmful practices. This in turn provides the basis for programmatic decision-making and policy advocacy.

The project addresses key policy questions that UNICEF Malawi has considered as priority for evidence-based programming for high impact child interventions. Eventually, this project helps UNICEF Malawi to successfully design interventions to end harmful traditional practices in the country.

BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS

Ultimately, if communities refrain from carrying out harmful traditional practices on girls and teenagers, the impact of the interventions for the beneficiaries is meaningful progress in the well-being and health of girls and teenagers in Malawi - added to an advancement in gender equality. If the intervention proves effective in stopping harmful traditional practices on girls and teenagers, it could be scaled-up and used to enhance the effectiveness of existing programs. This would have a considerable impact on the lives of millions of girls and teenagers in Malawi, where over a half of the population is under the age of 18. Moreover, the benefits of this intervention will transfer into adulthood.

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