

## **Conceptualizing “agency” within child marriage: implications for research and practice**

### **Abstract**

Background: The concept of child ‘agency’ has become increasingly important for international child-centric organizations, non-government organizations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies, particularly those responding to the issue of child marriage. Interventions to prevent child marriage often include awareness-raising activities focused on sharing information with children on the dangers of child marriage. Such interventions are often based on, and perpetuate, a belief that increased knowledge can lead to an increase in girls’ agency. In this framing, agency is presumed to result in a ‘good’ decision and is positioned as a natural consequence of increased knowledge. This agency is said to enable girls to resist marriages forced upon them by their parents.

Objective: This discussion paper aims to interrogate dominant conceptualizations of child agency through an exploration of child agency narratives on child marriage.

Methods: This discussion paper is based on critical analysis of existing academic and grey (NGO and UN) literature that explores children’s agency in the context of child marriage prevention.

Results: This discussion paper suggests that academics, NGOs and UN actors use varied definitions to describe agency. While academic analysis shows that children’s agency might be contested, contradictory and fraught, NGO and UN agencies tend to narrowly frame agency.

Conclusions: We suggest that adopting a broader definition of children’s agency in research and implementation enables a more nuanced, complex understanding of the drivers of child marriage and the interventions required to address this practice.

## **Introduction**

This discussion paper explores what it means for children to exercise ‘agency’ in the context of decisions about marriage before the age of 18 years. Children’s agency is a controversial and complex topic, linked to what it means to be a child. Some argue children don’t have the cognitive abilities necessary to participate in life-changing decisions (Noggle, 2002), while others suggest that children ought to make – or be actively involved in - decisions on issues concerning their lives (Vaha & Vastapuu, 2018). We explore these tensions by focusing specifically on child marriage. Child marriage refers to any formal or informal union involving a child under the age of 18. It is itself a contested term (Efevbera & Bhabha, 2020). Globally, more than 640 million women alive today were married as children, although child marriages have decreased by 15% in the last decade (UNICEF, 2018). This paper focuses on questions of child agency related to child marriage among girls: while child marriage may involve girls or boys, child marriage is far more common among girls and is most often the focus of interventions (UNICEF, 2018). Although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child underscores the importance of child participation (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) and efforts to improve child and youth participation are often one strategy through which local and global organizations pay attention to children’s agency, more work is needed on conceptualizing child agency which is multifaceted, context-specific, and encompasses child participation.

Our argument is informed by a series of conversations with practitioners in the field who pointed to the need for a paper teasing out the complexities of child agency in relation to child marriage, as well as a literature review. We drew on methods for narrative literature reviews (Ferrari, 2015) to search for available papers on agency, child agency and child marriage. The purpose of the literature review was to synthesize existing research and evidence on agency in the context of child

marriage, in order to understand how children's agency is framed with respect to child marriage. To conduct the narrative review, we used the following academic databases: Academic Search Complete, PsycINFO, JSTOR and Scopus, as well as Google Scholar. We also obtained grey literature from NGOs and UN agencies and searched institutional websites. The key themes in the academic and grey literature were then analyzed. In this discussion paper, we begin by introducing child marriage and then summarizing how agency has been defined in the academic literature. We then examine how definitions of agency and the tensions in these definitions are different in the context of children's agency. We explore how international NGOs and UN agencies, including Plan International, Save the Children, World Vision, UNICEF and ICRW, use definitions of agency in the context of child marriage prevention. We suggest the need to untangle the assumptions and judgments associated with framing children's agency as resulting in a positive outcome, specifically for cases where children themselves decide to marry. Based on the example of child marriage, we conclude by suggesting that adopting a broader definition of children's agency enables a more nuanced, complex understanding of the drivers of child marriage and the interventions required to address this child rights issue.

### **Child marriage: definitions, drivers and approaches to interventions**

Non-government organizations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies, among others, have sought to prevent and respond to child marriage. Data across multiple settings draws attention to child marriage as an often complex practice that is context-dependent, non-linear and shaped by interlocking structural, household-level and interpersonal factors. Studies suggest child marriage is often cultural and historical (Birech, 2013; Schaffnit et al., 2019) and may represent a status symbol or a sign of prestige for girls and their families (Cislaghi & Bhattacharjee, 2017; Yount et al., 2016). The practice is also linked to social norms that emphasize the value of producing

children and women's role in caring for children (Dean et al., 2019; McDougal et al., 2018). In some contexts, child marriage may be a response to economic insecurity (Paul, 2019) or forced displacement (Mourtada et al., 2017), offering a way of reducing the financial burden on their families by marrying a child, which may be a particularly attractive prospect if bride price is available. Within the literature, girls' lack of agency to resist marriages arranged for them, or forced upon them, is also identified as a contributing factor to child marriage (Klugman et al., 2014; Lee-Rife et al., 2012; Lilleston et al., 2017). Most often most often child marriage is forced upon girls, however, rare examples describe children themselves choosing to marry (Bantebya et al., 2014; Horii, 2020; Kenny et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2019).

Significant global evidence documents the negative consequences of child marriage, alongside the need for action by NGOs and UN actors. Empirical research links child marriage to poor maternal health (Adedokun et al., 2016; de Groot et al., 2018; Gage, 2013), unintended pregnancy (Godha et al., 2013), risks to child health (Efevbera et al., 2017; Raj et al., 2010), poor access to health services (Nasrullah et al., 2013; Sekine & Carter, 2019), school drop-out among girls (Bajracharya et al., 2019; Prakash et al., 2017) and gender-based violence (Erulkar, 2013; Kidman, 2017; Yount et al., 2016). Development and humanitarian literature presents child marriage as a serious problem in largely low-income contexts that requires action by the international community. Married girls are described as 'invisible' (UNICEF, 2005, p. 1), with limited economic opportunities and poor access to health services (International Center for Research on Women, 2005). In particular, many reports draw attention to the connection between child marriage and school dropout (International Center for Research on Women, 2005; Plan International, 2011; Save the Children, 2019; UNICEF, 2005; World Vision, 2008). In these reports, child marriage is depicted as a violation of child rights that needs to be rectified.

Child agency is central to many of the interventions implemented by international NGOs and UN actors to prevent child marriage. These interventions include ‘empowerment’ of girls (referring to provision of information or opportunities) (Lee-Rife et al., 2012; Malhotra et al., 2011; Warner et al., 2016), increasing access to education (Erulkar & Muthengi, 2009; Mehra et al., 2018), improving economic security (Shahnaz & Karim, 2008; Sinha & Yoong, 2009), transforming social norms linked to child marriage (CARE, 2019; Cislighi & Bhattacharjee, 2017; Watson, 2014) and advocating for legislative change (Arthur et al., 2018). A common narrative within these interventions is that the knowledge and information provided to girls about the dangers of child marriage, including the negative health consequences, results in increased ‘agency’ that enables girls to resist marriage. Similarly, in many reports released by international NGOs and UN agencies, children are to use ‘agency’ or ‘empowerment’ (these are often used interchangeably) to defy marriages that have been forced upon them (Davis et al., 2013). The Girls Not Brides coalition of organizations working to address child marriage states that girls should ‘speak up and act to challenge child marriage and mobilize peers and the wider community’ (Girls Not Brides, 2016, p. 3). Importantly, the idea that girls exercise agency is also present in interventions with other groups; social norm change and child rights interventions also work with parents and community/religious leaders, advocating for greater agency for children. Culture and traditional beliefs are presented as associated with child marriage, and depicted in stark contrast to education and economic activity (Save the Children, 2019, p. 6; World Vision UK, 2013, p. 3) – which girls only pursue through exercising agency.

### **Challenges in conceptualizing ‘agency’**

Within the academic literature, analysis on children's agency in relation to child marriage is scarce (Bantebya et al., 2014; Horii, 2020; Kenny et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2019). As such, our discussion paper draws also on broader critiques of the term 'agency'.

Within the literature, there are myriad definitions for the term 'agency', as well as numerous critiques of this term, which raise important definitional questions about how notions of action, silence, choice, resistance should be included in definitions of agency. These definitions have consequences for how child marriage interventions are designed, monitored, and evaluated. Most definitions of agency include the notion of an action being taken. Giddens (1984) for example, notes: 'Agency refers to doing' (p. 12). A few scholars, however, have challenged even this simple conceptualization linking agency to action. For example, Thomson (2013) critiques the way agency is 'rooted in action' while silence is seen to signify powerlessness (p. 601). She argues that in such narratives, the strategic use of silence to exercise choice is diminished. Linked to this is how women who leave abusive relationships are seen as exercising agency while women who remain in such marriages are seen as victims who lack power (Aisyah & Parker, 2014, p. 207). In the context of child marriage, agency therefore is linked to a girl refusing a marriage.

Scholars have also linked agency to the notion of having choices or options. For example, Kabeer (1999) draws on the notion of choice in describing agency: 'Agency operationalizes the concept of choice. It refers to the capacity to define one's goals and act on them' (p. 20). Ahearn's (2001) much-cited work defines agency as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (p. 112), implicitly referencing the fact that agency occurs within contexts that may be restrictive. Klocker (2007) goes further to differentiate between 'thick' and 'thin' agency, suggesting agency can be undertaken in open or restrictive contexts. Based on Klocker's work, others have created hierarchical categories for agency (Johnson-Hanks, 2005; Murphy-Graham & Leal, 2015). Central

to these conceptualizations of agency is the idea that agency does not exist if there is lack of choice (Aretxaga, 1998). Where agency is a ‘coping strategy’ rather than a transformative act, for example in cases where women initiate sex as part of a survival strategy (Burnet, 2012), this may negate agency. This conceptualization of agency raises fundamental questions about whether agency should even be used in the context of forced marriages where the girl being married may participate as a ‘coping strategy’ without a choice.

However, perhaps the most contentious issue relates to the suggestion by some scholars that agency involves not just the exercise of choice, but the exercise of a *good* choice. In this framing of agency, an act of agency always has a positive result, otherwise it is not agency. This conceptualization of agency is advanced by the linkage between agency and the notion of ‘empowerment’ (Alkire, 2008; Ibrahim, 2017; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2008), which itself is complex and much-debated (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Rissel, 1994; Rowlands, 1995; Tengland, 2008). Development and humanitarian narratives suggest that agency is exercised by those who have been empowered; participating in an activity such as a training or an information session ‘empowers’ women and girls and they therefore exercise agency (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2008). Choices that are judged as bad decisions are therefore seen as due to the individual’s lack of knowledge that other choices were available to them (Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007, p. 985). As part of these ‘empowerment’ narratives, agency is often connected to the concept of gender equality, which focuses on ensuring women have the same rights, opportunities and status as men. Hanmer & Klugman (2016) write: ‘Agency and empowerment are central to the gender equality agenda’ (p. 257). To overcome patriarchy, which is the system enabling gender inequality, agency must be exercised (Ahearn, 2001, p. 115). Agency thus is weighted with specific meaning,



carrying with it this idea of overcoming a negative force, and of pursuing a defined set of positive outcomes like delaying or rejecting marriage before the age of 18 years.

The positive connotations attributed to agency mean that a person exercising agency is depicted as participating in a kind of ‘resistance’ (Bierrria, 2014; Jeffrey, 2012; Meyers, 2016). Bierrria’s (2014) use of the term ‘insurgent agency’ is a good example of how agency is linked to overcoming oppressive conditions (p. 140), a framing which other scholars challenge. In this conceptualization, agency becomes framed in terms of whether people can achieve social transformation by challenging oppressive forces around them (Mahmood, 2001, p. 222), which Asad (2000) suggests is linked to the romanticization of resistance. This dimension to how agency is often understood has particular implications for issues like child marriage. If exercising agency requires resistance to an oppressive force like child marriage, it means that the decisions of individuals are devalued if they are deemed by others to fall outside of being transformative. In the framing of agency as resistance, individuals thus become either ‘catalysts for social change’ or ‘mere slaves to culture’ (Frazier, 2013, p. 354); exercising agency means they are resisting oppression and not exercising agency relegates these individuals to being powerless, seemingly irrespectively of the context surrounding them. Meyers (2016) takes the argument further, suggesting that infusing agency with the notion of stopping ‘evils’ results in ‘a greater onus on victims to solve historically intractable social and economic problems’ (p. 550), echoes of which we see in the section below on NGO and UN narratives about the power of the adolescent girl to resist child marriage.

Within the academic literature, there is acknowledgement that the definition of agency should be broadened. In critiquing the narrow definitions of agency, Ahearn (2001) argues that making

distinctions between different kinds of agency may allow greater complexity in our understanding of agency (p. 130). Alderson & Yoshida (2016) bring to life the different forms of agency, writing:

Agency may be seen as ambivalent, intended or inadvertent, rational or foolish, cautious or risky, compliant or resistant, individual or collective, partly autonomous and partly heteronomous, chosen yet constrained, effective and ineffective, creative and destructive, competent and incompetent (p. 86).

Our review of the academic literature on agency reveals myriad definitions, and a lively debate about tensions and limitations in how these definitions of agency are used. We now turn to a discussion on how agency is conceptualized in relation to children where the framing of agency as linked to positive decisions is often used to characterize children's agency in the context of child marriage. In particular, we examine the formulations of agency that have gained popularity among international NGOs and UN agencies responding to child marriage.

### **Defining 'child agency': the implications of selective narratives**

In grey literature published by international NGOs and UN agencies, there is no single definition for child agency, however agency is generally associated with being empowered and resisting negative forces like child marriage. In these narratives, tensions and contradictions also emerge: children appear as both vulnerable and powerful – unable to protect themselves and yet empowered (and armed with information) to resist the actions of their parents. For example, a report from Plan

places the onus on the child, who, when equipped with knowledge and skills, is supposed to advocate for themselves and resist the decisions of adults:

Enhancing skills and knowledge, as well as reducing social and economic isolation, can empower girls and boys to act as change agents within their communities. They are then able to act and advocate for themselves and on behalf of others. This can give them the confidence and ability to negotiate key decisions with their parents or guardians (Davis et al., 2013, p. 39).

In this report, the argument is that that when girl's agency is built, it enables them to 'challenge and resist' child marriage (Davis et al., 2013, p. 49). This aligns with dominant development and humanitarian narratives about the power of the girl child in overcoming oppression (Bessa, 2019). In other reports, the narrative is less about children having to rid themselves of the oppression of child marriage, instead, softer messaging is used to refer to children making decisions for themselves. World Vision (2013) draw attention to activities that build girl's agency and ability to exercise control over their lives (p. 37). Plan also describes children as 'agents of change', who should make decisions about issues that are related to them (Davis et al., 2013, p. 10). This messaging suggests that it is positive for children to have more control over their lives and such control could, for example, reduce the likelihood of child marriage. UNFPA and UNICEF's (2019) annual joint report on child marriage suggests that empowerment leads to agency and freedom for children to make their own decisions (p. 6). Another example of the use of agency to prevent child marriage comes from UNICEF and the International Center for Research on Women's (2017) report on child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa. The report explicitly states that

‘agents of change’ will ‘lead transformative actions’ and promote gender equality (p. 47). This is the only report to nuance different kinds of agency girls exercise in choosing to marry (p. 24).

These reports generally do not define what is meant by ‘agency’, however common across these descriptions of children’s agency is the implication that agency leads to positive decisions and is wielded by girls themselves. As noted by Horii (2020), campaigns focus on girls’ agency only in terms of a child’s agency not to marry, not allowing for a broader framing of agency where a child might exercise agency to marry (p. 255). The examples above emphasize the role that NGOs and UN agencies can play in enabling children to assert more control over their lives – even to the point of being able to negotiate with adults. NGOs and UN agencies are positioned as important in ‘empowering’ children (especially girls). Their role is framed as positive, as expanding and enhancing child agency, which in turn results in children making positive decisions. In the emphasis on empowerment within these narratives on agency, what is less clear is how certain contexts may offer children more opportunities for exercising agency than others. For example, social and legal rules around child marriage create different options in different settings, which isn’t necessarily accounted for in the generalized associations made between agency and empowerment. There is also less attention to the role of parents, communities, schools and peers in promoting or supporting child’s agency.

However, there are also other conceptualizations of agency used by NGOs and UN actors which emphasize children’s vulnerability and the power hierarchies children are situated within. Within these approaches to agency, social norms are described as limiting the voice and agency of girls (UNICEF & International Center for Research on Women, 2017, p. 46). A child marriage report by Plan states: ‘Those most affected are among the most vulnerable and powerless: they are young, rural, uneducated, poor and female – and their voices are rarely heard’ (Davis et al., 2013, p. 13).

This same report says that Plan aims to ‘build girls’ resilience and agency so they may challenge and resist this harmful practice’ (p. 49), seeming to indicate that this process of ‘empowerment’ enables the transition from vulnerability to agency. In these narratives, it is worth noting that girls continue to be described as vulnerable after marriage, experiencing violence, social isolation and lack of access to education opportunities (Save the Children, 2019, p. 7). Young brides are said to lack confidence and self-esteem, reinforcing their powerlessness (Plan International, 2011, p. 10). It is taken for granted that child marriage signifies the end of opportunities and possibilities. Being a child bride thus negates the ability to exercise agency. Within literature on ‘what works’ to prevent and respond to child marriage, the focus is on prevention as if once married, the options for exercising agency are non-existent.

The blurred lines between the vulnerability and agency of children reflected in the grey literature are situated in conceptualizations of what it means to be a child - itself a complex determination because of varied cultural and contextual approaches to defining age and the ability to consent. Bhabha (2006) observes the shift in how children ‘emerged over the centuries from anonymity to individuality’ (p. 1527). In their systematic review, Montreuil & Carnavale (2016) point to how health research began to describe children as ‘health change agents’ from around 2005, based on studies of school children in developing contexts (p. 5). This focus on the individuality of a child, however, has limits, perhaps best articulated in the notion of the ‘evolving capacities of the child’ which is mentioned in Article 5 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989): *States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents... to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance.* Article 12 of the CRC further builds on the notion of a child’s changing capacity, stating:

*States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

The CRC thus prescribes limits to a child's choice, while leaving it open as to when a child is able to articulate their own views. Hoang & Yeoh (2015) comment on these tensions between children being positioned as 'human beings' or 'human becomings', emphasizing that the lives of children involve 'everyday negotiations of both being and becoming' (p. 182). In some conceptualizations of children that emphasize their immaturity and young age, children are presented as vulnerable actors requiring protection from the international child protection framework and adults (Shepler, 2014). In these narratives, focus is placed on the power hierarchies surrounding the lives of children (Leinaweaver, 2007; Munday, 1979).

The meaning attributed to being a child is tied closely to a second area of contention – whether a child is capable of making the right decisions. Noggle (2002), for example, positions children as lacking the ability to exercise what he calls 'moral agency' – the ability to pursue 'the good' (p. 100). Graf (2016) observes that the actions and decisions of children 'are always seen as suspicious', justifying the need for adult supervision (p. 21). Others, however, have critiqued this kind of framing of children, arguing that adults themselves may make immoral or harmful decisions, including in their children's lives (Bhabha, 2006, p. 1532). Vaha & Vastapuu (2018) make the argument like this:

[T]o be an agent does not necessarily entail the capacity to consistently make “right” decisions, as the description of moral agency seems to presuppose. Adults do not always make morally “good” or “right” decisions... and this limitation is not considered an obstacle for their agency or personhood (p. 228).

### **Other examples of children’s agency – outside of child marriage**

The question of whether children can make correct decisions becomes particularly stark in cases where children may not just act as victims but also perpetrators. In the absence of a significant body of literature on child agency and child marriage, we draw more broadly on analysis of how children’s agency is framed in relation to other issues outside of child marriage. In her work on girl child soldiers in Sierra Leone, MacDonald (2008) suggests that the idea of a girl child soldier clashes with gendered ideologies about girls as victims who need protection. NGOs in particular may benefit from continuing to represent girls in this way, even in the face of girls volunteering to participate in conflict (p. 136). Denov & Gervais (2007) use the specific example of girls using weapons to assert power or deciding to have sex in the context of conflict in Sierra Leone, as an example of children exercising agency (p. 895). For these girls, deciding to have sex with strategic actors protected them from sexual violence from others (p. 898). Bordonaro’s (2012) study of street children in Cape Verde similarly highlights how street children’s agency was treated as ‘deviance’ that needed correction because they were not acting like children were expected to act (p. 414). In critiquing the categorization of ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ agency, Bordonaro argues that this construction it is based on a moral judgment, is influenced by liberal agendas, and therefore is a ‘false syllogism’:

If children are involved in violence, sexual activities or other actions that contrast with iconic notions of childhood innocence, then their agency is assessed as constrained, because children are not supposed to engage in what is deemed as unchildlike behaviour unless under extremely constrictive circumstances (p. 422).

Vacchiano & Jiménez (2012) use the term ‘infantile agency’ to describe how children decided to flee their homes to improve their own well-being, yet their mobility was viewed by border regimes as requiring disciplinary action; their agency was in a sense negated by referring to these children as ‘unaccompanied minors’ (p. 467). These examples raise important questions, such as, how does innocence and vulnerability co-exist with the idea of children making decisions to act with violence? Or, conversely, can children be described as lacking capacity and needing protection when they make what people feel are ‘good’ decisions, including the decision to resist a forced marriage, to seek refuge in another country, or to attend school? These contradictions emerge in the literature on child protection and agency. For example, Alderson & Yoshida (2016) note the contradictions when school children in Tanzania were viewed as both ‘irresponsible and immature’ yet ‘entirely responsible for their own agency’ and able to behave well (p. 77). Hanson (2016) also draws attention to the inconsistencies in agency narratives: ‘When children don’t “do the right thing”, their autonomy and agency are no longer subjected to empirical verification but are deemed impossible by definition’ (p. 474). The agency of children – similar to that of adults described in the section above - thus holds an ideological position: agency is only agency if it aligns with acceptable behaviour. Although agency is contextual, varying in different settings, we suggest that the common framing of agency problematically suggests that agency cannot result in a negative outcome. In each example above, these conceptualizations of agency have implications for further



research and for interventions developed to prevent and respond to child marriage. These conceptualizations also have consequences for other child protection outcomes related to issues like child labor, female genital cutting, and violence perpetrated by children.

### **Moving forward: broadening the definition of child agency**

This discussion paper uses the example of child marriage to argue that there is a need to broaden the definition of children's agency. In line with scholars who suggest that children may be both deserving of care and protection as well as able to make conscious decisions even in constrained contexts (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015, p. 193), our discussion paper points to the need for children's agency to be understood beyond a linear framework that determines the presence of agency based on a judgment about whether a positive outcome has been achieved, and defines when children can exercise agency (e.g. before a marriage). This discussion paper outlines how existing literature and evidence positions children's agency within child marriage. We demonstrate how current academic, NGO and UN framings of agency in the context of child marriage have implications for the design, delivery and perceived success of child marriage interventions that are designed to ensure the protection of children. Importantly, how agency is defined is linked to understanding children as either active agents, as vulnerable, as strategic, as (im)mature, and/or (ir)responsible. The debates and contradictions we have articulated draw attention to the need for a clearer conceptualization of why children are trusted with certain acts of agency, but not others, as well as the role parents, communities and peers play in supporting or challenging child agency. Especially given the ways in which NGOs deploy the term 'agency' and the linkages between agency and other complex and contested terms like 'empowerment', we suggest there is a need to

more explicitly acknowledge how agency is being defined in research and intervention design, including the limitations and strengths of such an approach.

As such, our paper represents an invitation for practitioners and policy-makers to untangle and broaden the definitions of child agency in the context of child marriage. This may mean assessing the explicit or implicit definitions of agency in child marriage interventions, or conducting further research into the different forms that child agency can take (for example research that focuses on agency as silence), or on child agency when children challenge or grapple with predetermined assumptions about what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘right’ choice. Research on child marriage that frames agency as an iterative process that isn’t solely limited to the period before marriage, may also have important policy and programming implications, allowing organizations to explore how a married child may continue to exercise agency. This discussion paper may have implications for broader work on child protection issues, outside of child marriage. Further research on how legal, political, community, and household environments interact with, and inform, ideas of agency will also be important in situating agency as contextual and normative and not only exercised by children in isolation. There is also be a need for a systematic review on academic and grey literature focused on agency and child protection.

Interventions that draw on a more nuanced definition of agency offer opportunities to consider new approaches to preventing child marriage that consider agency as evolving, complex, and not limited to a particular moment. These interventions may also have scope to move beyond empowering children as individual actors, engaging other actors and community members in efforts to incorporate child agency, and reaching children who are currently married. Such

interventions may also be more likely to center children and their voices in their design and development of interventions and incorporate more nuanced approaches to child participation without a predetermined outcome or goal. In other words, interventions that incorporate more complex conceptualizations of agency may be better able to respond to children's current and changing lived experiences and circumstances.

We believe that engaging in greater dialogue on the meaning of children's agency will help position child marriage research and interventions differently, leading to new opportunities and perspectives on preventing and responding to child marriage as a child rights issue.

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