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Adolescent-led marriage in Somaliland and Puntland: A surprising interaction of agency and social norms

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction: Child marriage, formal and informal unions when one or both spouses are under 18, disproportionately affects adolescent girls over boys. It has serious consequences for girls' health, wellbeing, and development. Little is known about the ways in which girls' agency and contextual social norms – unwritten rules of (un)acceptable behaviour in a group – intersect to affect child marriage practices. This paper investigates norms and agency as facilitators and obstacles to adolescent girls' marriage in Somaliland and Puntland.

Methods: Participants (n = 156) were men and women living in Somaliland and Puntland. We conducted 36 qualitative semi-structured individual interviews (12 men and 24 women). We also held 15 focus group discussions (8 in Somaliland and 7 in Puntland) with 6–10 people each (n = 120). Mixed focus groups were conducted with men and women together, and were segregated by age.

Results: Technology and economic deprivation were important contextual factors in explaining the prevalence of child marriage. Participants reported that adolescent girls' and boys' increased agency contributed to, rather than decreased, child marriage. Access to technology expanded adolescents' freedom from their parents' control. Adolescents used that freedom within the existing system of social norms that rewarded early (as opposed to later) marriage.

Conclusions: Effective interventions that aim to reduce marriage among adolescents living in Somalia (where marriage can be a protective strategy) should integrate a social norms perspective to avoid increasing adolescent-led marriage.

1. Introduction

Globally, over 650 million of the women alive today were married during adolescence (UNICEF, 2018). Child marriage – formal and informal marital unions that take place before age 18 (Nour, 2009)– is most prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia and disproportionately affects girls (Svanemyr, Chandra-Mouli, Raj, Travers, & Sundaram, 2015; UNICEF, 2014a, 2018). Child marriage has been called a human rights violation and a harmful practice, due to the negative consequences for the girl bride and her future children, including: low educational attainment, early pregnancies, increased risk of maternal and infant mortality, heightened risk of child malnutrition and perpetuation of the poverty cycle, to name but a few (Chandra-Mouli, Camacho, & Michaud, 2013; Gage,

2013; Godha, Hotchkiss, & Gage, 2013; Neal et al., 2012; Nour, 2009; Raj, 2010; Raj & Boehmer, 2013; Raj et al., 2010; Santhya, 2011).

In Somalia, the 1975 Family Code made marriage before the age of 18 illegal (but note that marriage at age 16 with parental consent was still permitted), and the Constitution (2012) states that marriage is legal once a man and woman reach the 'age of maturity' (OECD, 2019). However, there is no definition for what is intended by age of maturity, which is not helpful in a complex legal system where customary law, Sharia law, and formal law intersect (OECD, 2019). Despite the Family Code prohibiting it, and possibly (at least in part) because of an ambiguous legal system, child marriage is still practised in Somalia. According to Somalia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey data from 2006, 45% of 20 to 24-year-old women married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2006). More recent data from 2013 suggest this proportion remained relatively stable (47.2%) (UNFPA, 2016). Data for Somaliland and Puntland, where our study was conducted, suggest a lower prevalence of child marriage compared to the national average. In 2011, the proportion of 20 to 24-year-old women married before 18 was 24.1% in Somaliland and 35.2% in Puntland (UNICEF, 2014b; 2014c).

The causes of child marriage are multifaceted and intersecting. Socioeconomic factors, such as rural residence, poverty, and education, have repeatedly been associated with the practice (Raj, Jackson, & Dunham, 2018). Parents who anticipate financial and social gains from marrying their children off are often described in the literature as the primary decision-makers (Raj, 2010). Girls' lack of agency, their capacity to "define life goals and act upon them" (Kabeer, 1999), is frequently mentioned in the literature as contributing to child marriage, as it affects these girls' ability to resist unwanted marriage proposals (Klugman et al., 2014; Lee-Rife, Anju, Warner, & McGonagle Glinski, 2012; Lilleston, Goldmann, Verma, & McCleary-Sills, 2017; Loaiza & Wong, 2012; Marcus & Page, 2014; Wodon, Nguyen, & Tsimpo, 2015). Studying child marriage in Honduras, Murphy-Graham and Leal, instead, suggested that, while child marriage can certainly result from girls' lack of agency, it can also be sustained by their capacity to exercise it (Murphy-Graham & Leal, 2015). In this qualitative study, the authors describe the interaction of agency with social norms through the stories of two girls who chose to marry before their 15th birthday, despite parental wishes for them to continue their education. These girls conformed to gender norms (that define women's roles as wives and mothers) and cultural norms that delaying marriage is bad while opposing norms around sexuality. They made decisions that benefited them within their specific sociocultural context. Therefore, differences in whether child marriage results from girls' lack of, or capacity to, exercise agency are partly explained by the existing system of social norms that surrounds them, since these norms can expand or limit the viable options for these adolescents (Taylor, Horn, Vaitla, Valle, & Cislaghi, in press).

Social norms – unwritten rules of acceptable behaviour shared by members in a group – have also been frequently studied as sustaining child marriage (Cislaghi & Bhattacharjee, 2017; Jain & Kurz, 2007; Loaiza & Wong, 2012; Verma, Sinha, & Khanna, 2013). While several theories of norms exist (Cislaghi & Legros, 2018), social norms theory is sometimes used without a thorough conceptual framework (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018b). Global health studies that do integrate a detailed social norms framework mostly follow Cialdini's categorization of social norms as peoples' beliefs about 1) what others do (descriptive norms); and 2) what others approve and disapprove of (injunctive norms) (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Practitioners' interest in changing social norms sustaining child marriage has considerably increased in the last decade; yet, few programmes integrate a social norms perspective, particularly in humanitarian contexts (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018a; Malhorta, Warner, McGonagle, & Lee-Rife, 2011). The aim of this paper is to look at how social norms and girls' agency intersected in sustaining child marriage practices in selected communities in Somaliland and Puntland, offering important implications for effective child marriage interventions. In the following sections, we present our qualitative approach and the findings of our analysis. Our results report on the perceived prevalence and experiences of child marriage and how contextual factors, such as poverty and access to technology, in conjunction with existing social norm structures, help explain adolescent-led marriages in Puntland and Somaliland.

2. Methods

Participants (n = 156) in this study were men and women who participated in focus group discussions (n = 120) and individual interviews (n = 36). Participants were recruited from four communities in Somaliland (1 rural, 1 urban) and Puntland (1 rural, 1

Table 1
Number of focus groups discussions and individual interviews.

Tool	Demographics		Region		Total
	Sex	Age Group	Somaliland	Puntland	
Focus Group Discussions[a]	Both	19–30	4 (32)	4 (32)	15 (120)
		31–50	3 (24)	4 (32)	
Individual Interviews	Women	19–30	6	6	24
		31–50	6	6	
	Men	19–30	3	3	12
		31–50	3	3	
Total Participants	Both	Both	74	82	156

Note:
[a] Reports number of focus groups. Numbers in brackets report the total number of participants per each region/age group.

urban). Male and female participants were stratified by age (19–30; 31–50). A convenience criterion was used to select the villages, specifically avoiding regions in the country experiencing conflict at the time of data collection. Table 1 details further participants' numbers and distribution across location, sex, and age for both focus groups and individual interviews.

2.1. Data collection

We initially set out to conduct 48 interviews (24 with men and 24 with women), however, due to participant availability, time and safety constraints, and limited resources, only 12 men presented to be interviewed. In total, we conducted 15 focus groups with men and women, and 36 semi-structured individual interviews (12 men and 24 women). Focus groups were mixed, which allowed us to observe agreements and disagreements between men and women, knowing that we were also going to interview men and women individually. Focus groups included semi-structured questions and participatory activities. We integrated the latter, as they can be particularly appropriate for exploring social norms within groups, and the cultural narratives around which those norms are re-inforced (Cislaghi & Heise, 2017). Specifically, we conducted two participatory exercises. In the first, that drew on ethnographic work by Lundgren and Adams (2012), we showed participants several pictures of animals, and asked them to pick two animals: one they thought had characteristics in common with girls and one that had characteristics in common with boys, and why (e.g. a lion could represent courage, a horse strength, a bird beauty, etc.). They were also allowed to choose an animal for which we didn't have a picture. In a second exercise, participants listed children's actions that would make their parents proud (first list) and ashamed (second list). Next, we added a few actions, which we were particularly interested in (e.g. child marriage). We then asked participants to agree as a group on a ranking of these actions from the ones that would make them feel most ashamed, to the ones that would make feel the proudest.

To enhance data validity and potential for saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015), we also conducted individual interviews. The individual interviews helped create a space where participants could share their beliefs and experiences more privately than in the focus groups (Fontana & Frey, 2003), allowing us to ask people whether or not they disagreed with existing social norms and practices related to child marriage. Themes explored in the focus groups (see Table 2) and the individual interviews (see Table 3) included: age of marriage; causes of and solutions to child marriage; changes in marriage practices; parental role in marriage; personal attitudes to marriage; qualities of a good spouse, and boys' and girls' characteristics.

As we designed the interview guides, we were aware that social desirability biases might affect responses. For this reason, we included vignettes and exercises where participants could provide justification for their approval or disapproval of child marriage. To collect the data, we recruited and trained 6 Somali-speaking interviewers (3 men and 3 women). The interviewers that were selected had extensive pre-existing experience in qualitative research in Somalia, could speak the local language, and had worked on child marriage before. Interviewers were trained over a period of three days by Somalian co-author HK, who also supervised data collection in the field, in cooperation with co-author MS, who was in Somalia at the time of data collection. Their training included sessions on how to recognise possible signs of blatant lies (smiles, laughs, looks of surprise, etc.) that might reveal false responses. These sessions were also informed by a recent study, carried out in Somalia by co-author MS, that tested social desirability bias in adults' responses to their approval towards child marriage. Findings showed that men (but not women) were likely to say they approved of child marriage when fearing a social judgment (asked a direct question), as opposed to when they were asked a list randomisation technique that reduced social biases (Sulaiman, 2017). Interviewers used a non-probabilistic random route sampling to choose participating households (Marshall, 1996). In each household, interviewers invited one household member of their sex to participate; where participants did not wish to take part, interviewers moved on to the next household. The interviewers reported daily on challenges and best practices, which helped increase the quality of data collection and solve challenges as they presented themselves. Focus groups and individual interviews were audiotaped. Two Somali-speaking interpreters transcribed and translated the data in English, under the supervision of Somali-speaking author HK who conducted sample reverse translation as validity checks. All participants gave oral informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (ref: 14397).

2.2. Data analysis

To analyse the data, we used theoretical thematic analysis strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006), informed by concepts of agency and

Table 2
Themes investigated in the FGDs.

Theme	Example of question
Causes of child marriage	The picture here depicts Aisha who is 16 and Ahmed who is 17. Aisha and Ahmed are from your community they are married. Why do you think they are married?
Solutions to marriage	Let us discuss two other young people, a boy and a girl aged 16 and 17, who are *not* married. Why do you think they are not married?
Boys' characteristics	Thinking of a 15-year-old boy, what animal do you think best describes his characteristics, the way he lives and behaves?
Girls' characteristics	What animal can we take to represent a 15-year-old girl who is at her family's home, going to school or helping in house chores?
Peer influence	Everybody has a group of people around him that influence the choice that we do. Who do you think has the most influence on the young couple's decision to marry?

Table 3
Themes investigated in the IIs.

Theme	Example of question
Changes in marriage practices	What has changed, in terms of marriage practices, over the past 10 years?
Age of marriage	What do you think is the best/most appropriate age for a girl to marry?
	What do you think is the best/most appropriate age for a boy to marry?
Parents' role in marriage	What role do parents play in the marriage proposal?
Qualities of a good husband	As a parent who has a daughter, what qualities would you want her husband to have?
Qualities of a good wife	As a parent who has a son, what qualities would you want his wife to have?

social norms and we followed a five-step process. Initially, all authors independently familiarised themselves with the dataset, reading the transcripts multiple times. Next, we generated codes by analysing the English transcripts. In an effort to limit possible biases we conducted the initial coding independently. As we progressed, we held several conference calls to compare our codes, identify assumptions, resolve contradictions in our coding strategy, and to discuss emerging patterns of interpretation. At the end of this step, we had several preliminary themes, each grouping relevant families of codes. In the third step of the process, we iteratively reviewed and refined these themes, aiming to achieve internal thematic coherence as well as external heterogeneity across the different themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). Examples of themes and codes are provided below in Table 4.

Next, we discussed the interpretation of the themes, the 'so what' of our data. After several conversations on the themes, we began to recognise preliminary findings that made sense to all authors. We largely conducted a semantic interpretation of the data, but the work of HK, the Somalian co-author, and MS, who had worked on child marriage in Somalia for an extended period, pointed to places where the interpretation could go beyond the surface of the data. Finally, we agreed on one specific line of inquiry in the data – the one presented in the results section below – and started writing the research report, under the leadership of co-author LK.

3. Results

To understand the current prevalence and age of child marriage, as well as participant's opinions of it, we analysed data on 'age of marriage' and 'personal attitudes towards child marriage'. These emerged as key themes describing not only an increasing trend but also a change in the types of child marriage practiced. To help explain these emerging child marriage practices we looked at transformations in adolescent agency, in relation to marriage decision-making. Finally, we explored emerging themes that intersected with agency in driving child marriage practices. These included: normative structures that typically sustain child marriage; increased access to technology (as something mentioned across themes); and the wider context of poverty.

3.1. Typical age at marriage and parents' attitudes towards it

Participants almost unanimously said that child marriage had become more common in their villages over the last decade. A man from Somaliland described there had been a change: "early marriage is very high now," and a woman from Puntland said "[early marriage] is very high now, and includes [young people] who are planning for it". Most said that the average age of marriage for girls in their community had dropped considerably in the last few years and was now 14, even though they mentioned exceptions of both younger (10-year-old) and older (18-year-old) brides. A man from Somaliland, for instance, said in a focus group that, "Now children are eloping, but in the past people married at 20 and older" and an elder woman, also from Somaliland, remarked that "In the past [it was different]; now, very young people are getting married. You could see a 14-year-old boy eloping with a girl who is probably younger". One man from Puntland who did not agree said that child marriage had not increased but that definition of a 'child' had: "I don't agree [that child marriage has increased]. In the past, people were responsible at 15 years and now people are considered children at that age".

Despite the increase in child marriage, most participants were against it, suggesting the presence, among adults, of an injunctive norm against child marriage. They argued that men needed to be old enough to provide for their families, while women needed to be mature enough to bear and raise children. They mentioned it was good for a girl to be younger than her husband, but they wished for girls to be at least 18, with many saying they should marry in their 20s. These marriages were a source of family honour and pride; a mother from Somaliland described that she would be embarrassed by an "early marriage" but would feel proud if her daughter "married in the correct way", by waiting until she was mature and asking for parental permission. The majority of participants preferred their children to complete their education rather than get married: "I will be happy if my [18-year-old] son continues his education and does not slip into marriage," said, for instance, a mother from Puntland. Very few participants said that it was good for girls to marry before reaching 18 years of age. Those who did argued that this way they could have children when still young. One of these few, a man, said: "When a girl is married at a young age she … won't get old soon after her first child; not like one who gets married at 30 and is old already when she has her second child". That several parents were against child marriage (albeit considering the possible social bias, addressed in the discussion section) surprised us, as this was contrary to the increase in its prevalence that participants described. We thus looked in the data to understand what could explain this inconsistency between what parents wanted for their children, and what actually happened.

Table 4
Examples of themes and codes emerged in the focus group data.

Themes	Codes	Example from the dataset
Girls' age at marriage	Perceived age at marriage (Current)	"[Girls who marry] are very young … sometime 10 years old. Boys are a little older"
	Perceived age at marriage (Past)	"Now children are eloping, but, in the past, [those to get married] were people of 20 years and older."
	Preferred age of marriage for boys	"I am a poor mother. I clean the rubbles to provide them school fee and food … I would support if he [the son] marries at 20 years old … but not a 13-year-old."
	Preferred age of marriage for girls	"For girls, I would say around 25 years. I chose 25 for girls because I have personally seen the difference among from three wives … the last one was 25 and seem to be more responsible and mature than the other two whom I married them at a younger age."
Causes of Child Marriage	Technology and social media	I asked them about [the son] and they [his friends] told me that he has escaped with a girl whom they met on the phone and Facebook. "From where?' I asked and they told me that he brought her from [name of village]."
	Love and desire	"So, they see each other in schools and fall in love. Then they decide to get married; be it that they come to their parents and ask for consent or elopement … So, there is that thing called love that was not there in the past."
	Changes in parental influence	"Another thing to blame is the negligence from the parents. The mother may have gone to town and so as the father has gone to work. So, it is only children the stay at home."
	Peer pressure and influence	"When he sees his peers [age-mates] getting married … he would also decide to get married and follow them."
	Poverty	"The poverty … the boy know that his father won't be able to support him with any formal marriage, so he will opt to elope with her … so that the parent is forced to support."
Changes in Child Marriage Practices	Changes in age of marriage	"The marriage practices were different. In the past, there were two practices; One which the two respective families would meet and the boy's family takes the consent from the girl's family. The other type was one which the couple used to elope. It was called Masafo and they used to say that the couple are formally married if they reach a certain distance away from their families … Now it is children who are eloping, but, in the past, they were youth people of 20 years and older."
	Change in bride price	"In the past, there was huge bride prize to be paid by the groom … so unless the man had some wealth he would not go for marriage but now even if the young boy is bare handed he counts on his family's wealth."
	Changes in marriage costs	"Alongside this, there is another very costly type emerged recently …. It takes place in big hotels and people spend a lot of money on it."
Consequences of Child Marriage	Isolation from parents and family	"Because when my child who I sent to school and was paying all his fees suddenly decides to get married; them the parent will pressurize and isolate him/her."
	Debt	"In the urban settlements, young couple from poor families would want to get married and then they sneak away … the families are not financially capable to handle costs of this marriage … They borrow a lot of money to establish that family. They become heavily in debt."
	Divorce	"One of the consequences of this is the higher rate of divorce. Because the young couple cannot go along with each other."
	School Drop Out	"Because they left school … The girl cannot go back to school because she would be embarrassed. So, she may never go back to school."
Obstacles to Child Marriage	Education and School	"When the girl has been studying all that time. She won't rush in to marriage. She would carefully study the man she would want to marry. She would marry someone who they might have been studying together for all that and one that she knows very well and trust. Some of them grow so until age of 25 years old."
	Respect of parents	"Parents …. Some parents are so tough. Most of the children who would like to marry but don't do so because of their fear for their parents."
	Fate and Allah	"Firstly, this is by the will of Allah."

Note: Here are included some of the themes and codes that were used in this paper. The full codebook included approximately 18 themes and 70 codes.

3.2. Adolescents' agency in the marriage process

Some parents, albeit not all of them, said the reason for child marriage becoming increasingly common was a change in the power relations between parents and adolescents. This change was motivated by both: 1) parents' reduced presence at home, and 2) adolescents' increased access to the internet-enabled smartphones (as we detail further below). In our analysis, we followed this second line of enquiry – where participants said parents were losing control over their children – to understand how a change in power relations specifically affected child marriage.

Traditionally, parents decided when and to whom their daughter would get married. A woman from Somaliland, for instance, explained that "In the past, a girl had no choice. Her father would make all the decisions regarding her marriage". And a man, also from Somaliland, said: "In the past, [arranged marriages] were common. When the father saw a calm and wealthy man, he would marry him off to his daughter; but today it's rare". Evidence that in the past marriages were arranged by parents also came from other participants' descriptions of their own marriages. For example, an older woman from Puntland described how she hadn't made the decision to get married: "My first [marriage] was arranged by my father, with an old man who had three other wives". And another

woman, discussing how she met her husband, said: "In my first marriage I was 17 years old and my husband came over to my family and asked for my hand and [my parents] accepted". At the time of our interviews, participants reported that something had changed. They described their own lived experiences, providing evidence that, contrary to what happened in previous generations, their children were now choosing to elope. These adolescent children were not asking parents' permission anymore: "Now these young boys and girls make all the decisions about their marriage on their own behalf and never involve parents," said a woman from Somaliland. Girls, for instance, picked their own husbands; and a man from Puntland and a woman from Somaliland said, respectively: "No girl in the past would say 'I want that man or boy'", and: "Now girls say, 'we won't accept any other man than that man'". Two mothers, one from Puntland and one from Somaliland, told the story of their children and how they had decided to elope: "One of my daughters eloped with a 16-year-old boy," said the first, and: "A 15 years old son of mine eloped with a girl of 14 years old," told the second. Participants explained that the increase in adolescents' capacity to make key marriage decision was due to a reduction in parents' influence. As a man from Puntland said: "the role and the influence of the parents has gone down from the previous times". "In the past", a woman from Puntland also remarked, "marriage decisions were under parents' control; now what adolescents do, this current marriage, is not under parents' control anymore". Not all parents agreed with this reduction in their influence, however. When probed specifically on their own role, a few felt that they could still make the final decision on their children's marriages. However, as we describe below, this final decision was often perfunctory, rather than genuine, as it protected family honour potentially compromised by adolescents' elopements.

Parents were concerned by these elopements: they thought they were rushed and not thought through enough. For example, a woman from Somaliland explained, "now the young people meet on social [media] and then say 'I like you' and 'I like you too' and then get married without planning for lasting marriage". Another woman from Puntland, echoed this when she said: "Now a young couple just fall in love with each other and decide to get married on a whim; their intention is just to have the wedding; they don't think about what comes next". These elopements, outside of parents' influence and control, brought shame to families. A male from Puntland compared girls in the past and today, when he suggested that girls in the past were a reason for pride, while now they risked compromising their families' reputation: "In the past a girl was like a piece of gold to her family, because she would not marry a man or elope with anyone". Another participant, a woman from Puntland, commented that today a young couple who eloped would be "expelled" and "marginalised by their families" if they returned to the community.

Often, after they eloped, adolescent girls would seek their parents' formal approval of their new union. They did so to comply, albeit only formally, with traditional social and religious norms that assigned to parents the responsibility to choose their children's spouse. That is, parents were expected to be in charge of marriage-related decisions in ways that protected family status. Take, for instance, what a man from Somaliland said when asked about a parent's role in their child's marriage: "by the Islamic teachings, you are responsible to marry your child off. Both the son and the daughter, or else if they do anything wrong you are responsible". And a woman from Somaliland reflected that: "It is only because of religion and cultural practices that parents accept these [adolescent-led marriages], but they are annoyed about it." Norms that parents should have the final say in marriage decisions played out in unexpected ways. Parents consented to marriages they did not agree with, thus exercising what we have called a 'façade consent'. Façade consent ensured parents were formally the final decision-makers, while dealing with adolescents' increased freedom to pick their own partners. As the girls' agency increased, elopement practices appeared to pressure parents into supporting children's decisions to get married. While, traditionally, parents played a big role in marital decisions, participants reported their diminishing involvement, alongside efforts to maintain their role as parents and have the final say on the matter, in front of peers and neighbours in the community.

3.3. Drivers of adolescent-led marriage: social norms, technology and poverty

Three factors intersected with adolescents' increased agency in sustaining child marriage: 1) social norms condemning premarital sex and assigning a greater status to married adolescents, 2) increased access to the internet (through smartphones), and 3) poor economic conditions. These contextual factors (that likely existed before new technologies entered into the communities of our study) intersected with adolescents' agency expansion (partly driven by the availability of new technology) in increasing adolescent-led marriage.

Two injunctive social norms specifically contributed to adolescent-led marriages. The first was an injunctive norm that "respectable adolescents refrain from premarital sex"; the second an injunctive norm that "married adolescents enjoy greater social status than unmarried ones among peers". The norm against premarital sex made it unacceptable for adolescents to have sexual intercourse outside of marriage. In response to a vignette depicting two adolescents getting married, a man from Somaliland reflected on how adolescents' sexual desires could lead to marriage when he said: "Everyone has [sexual] needs. I think they [the couple in the vignette] decided to get married to satisfy these needs instead of doing so in a wrong way". This same causal inference tying sex and marriage was provided by other participants; for example, a man from Somaliland said the cause was "Higher sexual desires from both boys and girls", while a woman wondered whether "Those who got married had higher sexual desires" than their unmarried peers. Participants felt young people who wanted to have sex were obliged to get married; a man from Puntland, for instance, described: "What pushes them to marry is they want to avoid pre-marital sex. When they meet and date, they decide to get married instead of doing bad things". The injunctive norm proscribing pre-marital sex also affected parental readiness to accept adolescent-led marriages, in an effort to avoid family shame. A woman from Somaliland, for instance, explained this was parents' greatest fear when she said: "For the daughter who sneaked away with the boy, her father accepted [their marriage]. We all had to accept our children's marriages to avoid worse [social] consequences". That she referred to *all* is an indication that she believed adolescent-led marriage to be the norm (a descriptive norm, specifically). Some parents said that what they feared most was their daughter becoming pregnant

outside of marriage: in most focus groups, participants ranked pregnancy outside of wedlock as the most dishonourable thing a child could do. We found it remarkable that fear of family shame was a strong driver of adolescent-led marriage, in spite of the fact that parents disliked the prospect of their children marrying too early. The second norm that contributed to adolescent-led marriages assigned a higher status to married adolescents among their peers. The norm was both descriptive and injunctive. The descriptive norm sustained the belief that all adolescents were getting married; a man from Somaliland and a woman from Puntland, for instance, said, respectively: "Children imitate one another, when classmates elope, they would also decide to do the same", and, "A girl would say: 'that girl got married to the man she loves, so I should also get married' and a boy would say the same." The norm among adolescents was also injunctive: adolescents witnessed the prestige that their married peers got after the marriage – they believed that getting married was approved and considered appropriate among their peers – and wanted that prestige too. A woman from Somaliland, for instance, remarked that boys were convinced that, if they couldn't get a job, they should at least get married: "When a boy sees his peers getting married, and he has no job, he believes that marriage is better than staying idle.".

Increased access to new information technologies (e.g. smartphones) contributed to sustaining these normative models. Reflecting on the descriptive norm of marriage, a woman in Puntland explained: "Adolescents see others on the internet and want to imitate those who live elsewhere [in Somalia]". Increased access to smartphones facilitated adolescent-led marriages in various ways. Internet-enabled smartphones offered new opportunities for young people to negotiate and enter into relationships in ways that their parents struggled to fully understand. One mother from Somaliland explained how, as a result of her daughter using social media, she felt excluded from her daughter's relationships and had lost control over who she spoke with: "When my daughter finishes the house chores she goes on Facebook and chats with God-knows-who". Respondents felt that technology had made it easier for young people to meet, increasing opportunities to connect and eventually pushing them to marry. Take, for instance, what another woman from Somaliland said when she argued that: "Now adolescents chat on the phone and may even never see each other. When they finish their phone chat, they decide to elope; " or, what was said by another woman from Puntland: "[The couple] both have smartphones and chat online, and then you realize that your daughter has left your house to sleep with a boy". Some participants offered more detail on the dynamic of virtual dating, suggesting these adolescents met at school first and then continued their romantic relationship over the phone. A woman from Puntland said: "Young girls and boys meet in schools and get to know each other on the phone and on the internet, so dating is easier now". Technology provided a new space where adolescents could "learn about romance and love" (in the words of a male participant) and come to know both that their peers got married and that their friends approved of these marriages (witnessing their peers' reactions to the news of their friends getting married). This affected their beliefs that marriage would give them status among their peers, eventually influencing their decisions to get married themselves.

Finally, poverty contributed to adolescent-led marriage in various ways. Lack of job opportunities contributed to men's decisions to elope: since they couldn't afford to pay the bride price, they often decided to elope with their future spouse. A young man from Somaliland, for instance, explained: "A boy [willing to get married] knows that his father won't be able to pay the bride price for him; he will elope with the girl so that her parents will be forced to accept the marriage". Lack of economic resources also contributed to convincing parents to approve of marriages (following an elopement) for two reasons. The first is that approving of elopements spared them from having to pay to organise a formal marriage. The second reason is that, often, the family of the adolescent boy could ask the family of the girl to pay a fine, in cases where the latter didn't approve of the formal union. A man from Somaliland said: "When young children elope, their parents would instantly decide to formalize their marriage [...] it is either you marry [your daughter] or you pay penalty". The scarcity of economic resources and the limited job opportunities for young people hence contributed both to increase the appeal of marriage among for adolescent men, and, for parents, to see in their children's elopements an opportunity to avoid marriage-related expenses.

4. Discussion

In our analysis, we found several factors that interacted to sustain child marriage, including agency, social norms, poverty, and availability of and access to technology. One striking feature that emerged from our dataset was the presence of an injunctive norm against child marriage among parents, alongside participants' belief that child marriage was increasing and initiated by adolescents themselves. Different injunctive and descriptive norms acted simultaneously on parents and adolescents, helping explain the perceived increase in adolescent-led marriage amongst participating communities (see Table 5). We differentiated between types of social norms (descriptive and injunctive) because, while they can exist side-by-side and be both aligned or contrasting, they influence people's actions through different pathways (Cialdini, 2003; Cislaghi & Heise, 2018a). We specifically found a descriptive norm that most adolescents marry before 18, and an injunctive norm that adolescent peers approve of those who marry before 18. These norms, together, contributed to adolescent-led marriages. Similarly, we found evidence that people both believed other parents in the community were accepting adolescent-led marriage (descriptive norm) and anticipated negative sanctions for not having control over their children's behaviours and decisions (injunctive norm). Finally, we found that the same injunctive norm prohibiting pre-marital sex affected both parents' and adolescents' decisions.

Our findings also suggest that social norms were not exclusive drivers of child marriage, but that they interacted with other economic and social factors, including adolescents' agency. While traditionally, parents arranged marriages for their children, participants reported that now girls had a say in choosing their partners. One might anticipate that girls' expanded agency would contribute to a decline in child marriage – as is often assumed in international development efforts (World Bank, 2012) – yet our data provide evidence of the opposite. This finding is surprising, but not isolated. In a recent qualitative study on child marriage in Honduras, for example, the authors found that in spite of the fact that girls had increased access to education and greater agency as compared to the past, they still chose to get married (Murphy-Graham & Leal, 2015). Another qualitative research conducted in

Table 5
Descriptive and injunctive norms contributing to child marriage as highlighted by participants.

Subjects[a]	Practice under normative influence	Reference Group[b]	Descriptive Norm	Injunctive Norm
Adolescents	Under-18 marriage	Peers	Most peers marry before 18	Peers approve of those who marry before 18
	Premarital Sex	Adult community Members	n/a	Adult community members disapprove of premarital sex
Parents	Family decision-making	Other parents and adult community members	Most parents approve of their children's marriage to save family honour	Adult community members disapprove of parents who do not have control over their children[c]
	Premarital sex	Adult community members	n/a	People disapprove of families where children engage in premarital sex

[a] People whose behaviour is influenced by the norm.

[b] People whose (dis)approval subjects anticipate for (not)complying with the norm.

[c] Participants said they needed to play the role of decision-makers in their children's affairs. We interpreted this evidence, coupled with evidence of their desire to approve of adolescent-led marriage to save family honour, as suggestive of the fact that they believed other adult community members would disapprove of them if their children disobeyed them.

Uganda provided evidence of the link between elopements and child marriage, similar to what we found in this study (Bantebya, Muhanguzi, & Watson, 2014). Both in Honduras and Uganda, economic deprivation contributed to child marriage, because girls sought partners who could help them financially. In addition to economic deprivation, we found that access to new communication technologies played a key role in sustaining child marriage in Somalia. Technology expanded adolescents' agency to enter into pre-marital sexual relationships without their parents' knowledge, it facilitated communication and dating, and spread injunctive norms of appropriate age of marriage.

Our findings have important implications for effective practice to reduce child marriage. We mention here three in particular. Firstly, these findings challenge the assumption that an increase in adolescents' agency necessarily improves their health and wellbeing, as this relation is highly influenced by the local system of norms affecting how adolescents exercise agency. Since agency and norms are highly contextual, how they affect one another varies greatly across different contexts (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018b). Practitioners need to develop a deep understanding of the socio-cultural context in which they want to carry out their interventions, even when they are replicating interventions that have been rigorously tested and found effective elsewhere. Secondly, our findings suggest that working exclusively with adolescents might not only be ineffective, but actually harmful. Interventions that aim to expand adolescents' agency should also help them (and their families) challenge the existing system of norms that affect what options are available to these adolescents. A shift in the normative system can be achieved by facilitating critical conversations across adolescents' social networks, including their peers, family, and other community members. An example of an intervention achieving such normative change comes from the work of the NGO Tostan, that implements a three-year community-led programme in West Africa. Their 'Community Empowerment Programme' integrates conversations on local norms and practices between community members of different ages and sexes, and has resulted in a reduction in the prevalence of child marriage and female genital cutting (Cislaghi, 2018). Thirdly, our findings highlight the importance of designing intervention strategies that integrate awareness of adolescents' access to modern communication technologies. Practitioners could, for instance, equip parents (especially illiterate parents and those living in rural areas of low and middle-income countries) with the skills necessary to discuss internet use with their children. At the same time, practitioners could help adolescents look critically at the models they find on the internet and on social media, and to reflect on the potentially harmful consequences of following them blindly (Guse et al., 2012; Muessig, Nekkanti, Bauermeister, Bull, & Hightow-Weidman, 2015). Finally, our paper highlights the importance of conducting further research at the intersection between agency, technology, social norms and child marriage. Future research efforts will need to explore the potential of increasing agency and facilitating positive norms transformation for adolescents' sexual and reproductive health.

This study has two main limitations. The first relates to the fact that, at the time of data collection, some of the communities had just started an intervention that included a child marriage component. The intervention (albeit in its inception phase) might have generated social desirability bias in how participants responded to the questions (particularly on whether they approved of child marriage). However, in addition to the precautionary measures explained in the methods section, we also found very similar patterns in participants' responses across intervention and non-intervention study sites, suggesting a possibly limited effect of social desirability biases. The intervention baseline study also confirms our qualitative findings, as it evidences a large percentage of the population (75%) disapproving of child marriage in the area (Sulaiman, Kipchumba, & Magan, 2017). A second limitation of this study is the absence of adolescents in the sample. We had initially chosen not to work with adolescents following the advice of local researchers who suggested (after speaking with local community leaders) that research discussing sexual practices with adolescents would have been considered unacceptable by the local communities. We did, however, interview young adults about their own marriage experiences, as well as parents' opinions on their children's beliefs and desires. We were also reassured by the fact that the only (non-peer-reviewed) qualitative report on child marriage in Somalia we could find, contains quotes on peer pressure and social media that are evocative of our study (Isse, 2017). Even considering these limitations, our study offers one main contribution, highlighting the need to understand how adolescents' expanding agency can intersect with local social norms in ways that are harmful to their health. This opens important ethical questions around what culturally sensitive and respectful interventions should do with regard to adolescents' marriage choices.

5. Conclusion

No studies have employed qualitative methods to understand the social norms that sustain child marriage in the Somali context. Using focus group discussions and individual interviews with men and women living in Somaliland and Puntland, we found that adolescents living in these communities were experiencing expanded agency and freedom in their romantic relationships. We found that greater agency was partly explained by increased access to communication technologies that reduced parents' control over adolescents' marriage practices, allowing young couples to decide who and when to marry. We also found that parents disapproved of these unions, but that they felt obliged to accept them, both to comply with norms that assigned to them a traditional role as decision-makers, and to marry off their children without incurring marriage-related expenses. Social norms against premarital sex also contributed to both young people's decisions to marry, and parental obligation to consent these adolescent-led marriages. Our findings show that in Somaliland and Puntland, within a context of economic deprivation and increased access to technology, norms that sustained child marriage intersected with young people's increased agency in ways that explained new adolescent-led marriage practices. While our findings resonate with those emerging from recent research in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa on how technology can increase girls' agency and contribute to elopements (Allendorf, 2013; Bantebya et al., 2014), the study of how new communication technologies are affecting adolescents' sexual relationships and marriage practices in low and middle-income countries is still a relatively unexplored field. Future research could look at how agency and technology intersect in ways that shift or maintain existing harmful social norms. Novel interventions to target child marriage practices should capitalise on the near-universal access to

technology while considering the system of norms and the wider context in which young people live. Finally, our findings raise important ethical questions on whether practitioners should respect adolescents' decisions to get married (when that decision is taken relatively freely), or whether they should work to influence the socio-cultural context so that adolescents wait until they are 18 or older to get married.

Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.02.009.

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