Adolescent Marriage, Agency, and Schooling in Rural Honduras

ERIN MURPHY-GRAHAM AND GRACIELA LEAL

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Abstract

This research examines the connections between adolescent marriage, agency, and schooling in rural Honduras. Through an in-depth qualitative case study, we address the questions: (1) In what ways, if any, do girls exercise agency in their decision to marry? (2) How might education enhance girls’ agency, expanding their choice sets and delaying the age of marriage? We argue that a lack of understanding of the decision-making processes of young girls impedes the design and implementation of interventions to address early marriage. Our in-depth, qualitative case study allows us to document how the agency that girls exercise is simultaneously thin, opportunistic, accommodating, and oppositional. Stemming from these findings, we suggest that schools can enhance girls’ agency through a number of policies including: (1) the provision of resources to design and implement teacher training and curriculum development; (2) flexible enrollment policies and innovative/non-traditional educational delivery (particularly via mobile device); and (3) linking educational efforts with those that create employment opportunities or financial assistance to attend university.

Introduction

In 2009, Griselda1 was 13 years old and living with her grandparents in a rural, coffee-growing community in the western part of Honduras. She attended the seventh grade in Aldea Soraya, an agricultural village that lacked basic services including electricity and water. Griselda enjoyed going to school and was very active there. As her grandfather explained, “At first she was shy, but by interacting with her classmates she started to wake up. She became a girl who had some participation.” Griselda said that she had close friendships with her classmates and that she wanted to “become someone and move forward in life.” But by August 2011, at the age of 15, Griselda had dropped out of school and gotten married.

Research on early marriage suggests that it can undermine a girl’s opportunities for education, sexual and reproductive health, employment, livelihood skills, and decision-making power within the household (Mathur et al., 2003; Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi 2003; UNICEF 2001; UNICEF 2005; UNICEF 2009). Women who marry young tend to have lower levels of social status in their husbands’ families and to have higher rates of fertility, maternal mortality, and domestic violence than those who marry later in life (Mathur et al. 2003; Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi 2003; UNICEF 2001; UNICEF 2005; UNICEF

1 All names (including locations) are pseudonyms.
Globally, rates of early marriage are highest in South Asia, where over 48 percent of 15-24 year-olds are married before they reached 18. In Africa this figure is 42 percent, and in Latin America and the Caribbean it is 29 percent (IPPF 2006; UNICEF 2005).

In this longitudinal qualitative study, we examine the cases of Griselda and another girl, Melisa, both of whom dropped out of school and married by the age of 15. The in-depth examination of the circumstances surrounding their decisions provided by this study allows for a richer understanding of the role that agency plays in the context of early marriage. Existing research suggests that premature school leaving may be due less to marriage and pregnancy than to other factors such as poverty and the perceived value of schooling (Lloyd and Mensch 2008; Piper et al. 2012). In this study, one of our goals was to gain an understanding of the decision-making processes of adolescent girls who decided to marry and how early marriage intersects with their discontinuation of schooling. At the heart of this study is a question posed by Griselda’s grandmother: “Pero por qué se fue?” (But, why did she leave?)

To date, not enough research on early marriage in Central America has focused on the experiences of girls who marry early and the process by which this occurs. Instead, many studies of early marriage in Honduras and other developing countries tend to focus on its causes and consequences, giving less attention to the agency of rural youth and the decision-making processes that inform their actions (Mathur et al. 2003; Myers and Rowan 2011; Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi 2003; UNICEF 2001; UNICEF 2005; UNICEF 2009). Consequently, this paper explores the actions of two early school leavers who chose marriage over education in order to identify ways in which schooling might positively transform girls’ agency to enable them to consider a broader range of future options.

Ultimately, a lack of understanding of the decision-making processes of young girls will impede the design and implementation of interventions to address early marriage. In order to design programs for schools to play a role in delaying the age of marriage, we first need to understand how adolescent girls exercise agency in their decision to marry. Our in-depth, qualitative cases allow us to document how the agency that girls exercise is simultaneously thin, opportunistic, accommodating, and oppositional. In sum, our research was guided by the questions: (1) In what ways, if any, do girls exercise agency in their decision to marry? (2) How might education enhance girls’ agency, expanding their choice sets and delaying the age of marriage?

Research Context: Poverty and Early Marriage in Rural Honduras

Roughly 66.2 percent of the Honduran population lives in poverty, placing this country among the poorest in Latin America (INE 2010). In the last 20 years, some gains have been made in improving educational attainment and school participation. However, in spite of substantial improvements in female educational attainment at the secondary level (Demographic Health Surveys 2006), the number of women who marry by the age
Table 1. Percentage of Honduran women aged 15-49 by rural/urban and age at first union/marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Cohort</th>
<th>Percentage of Women Who Entered Union/ Married Prior to Age:</th>
<th>Never Married</th>
<th>Weighted Number of Respondents</th>
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Source: Demographic Health Surveys 2005-2006

Note: The age at first marriage is defined as the percentage of women who first married or lived with a man before attaining the specified ages. N.A. = not applicable.

of 18 (and are no longer in school) is still large and has changed little in the last two decades, especially among the poorest segments of the Honduran population (Remez et
Early marriage remains a common practice in Honduras, especially in rural areas. According to DHS surveys (2005-2006) in Honduras, among women between the ages of 20 and 49, approximately 60 percent had formed a union before the age of 20, 40 percent before turning 18, and 10 percent before they reached 15 (see Table 1). As Table 1 also illustrates, these rates have changed relatively little over the past three decades (see breakdown by age category). An assessment of the extent to which adolescent union formation and childbearing have changed over time in four Central American countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras) found that even though these unions decreased, the absolute percentage-point decline was lower in Honduras than in the other three countries (6 vs. 10-15 percentage points) (Remez et al. 2009). These statistics suggest that early marriage in Honduras remains a widespread practice that merits further investigation.

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

Theoretical Context

Adolescent Girls and Agency

An important finding from our study is that rural adolescent girls made active choices about their lives and their romantic relationships—they were not passive participants. At the same time, we recognize that their choices were embedded in social structures and power relations that both constrained and enabled their scope of action. Girls were exercising agency, although their agency was murky because of the context in which it was enacted.

Extensive scholarship has addressed issues of agency within the realm of individual practices and social structures in order to examine how individual actions either transform or reproduce the very structures that shape them (Ahearn 2001a; Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979; Sahlins 1981; Sewell 1992). Ahearn (2010) identifies two different meanings associated with the term “agency” in scholarly work: agency as free will and
agency as resistance. In terms of the former, she argues that equating agency with free will “ignores or only gives lip service to the social nature of agency and the pervasiveness of culture on human intentions, beliefs, and actions” (Ahearn 2010, 29). With regards to resistance, she explains that even though a person could demonstrate agency to resist unequal power relations, oppositional agency is only one form of agency (Ahearn 2010, 30). Through this position, Ahearn moves away from a view of agents as completely autonomous individuals and instead situates the multiplicity of intentions and motivations behind human actions within complex relations of power. She presents a provisional definition of agency as the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001a, 112). Ahearn emphasizes that it is not useful to talk of having “more,” “less,” or even “no” agency, since agency is not a quantity that can be measured (2001).

This understanding of agency captures the idea that the capacity to act will differ in different times and at different places. Referencing MacLeod (1992), Ahearn points to the need to conduct research that provides a more thorough understanding of the “complex and ambiguous” nature of agency. She also suggests that research should begin to distinguish among different types of agency, including oppositional agency, complicit agency, agency of power, etc. (Ahearn 2001a). One of the goals of this research is to more comprehensively characterize adolescent girls’ agency in the context of early marriage in rural Honduras to improve our understanding of how education can strengthen girls’ agency.

Our conceptualization of agency is also informed by Klocker’s (2007) study of how female adolescent domestic workers in Tanzania exercised agency in the context of appalling employment situations. Similar to our understanding of girls’ decision-making process about early marriage, Klocker acknowledges that the girls in her study understood and actively negotiated the expectations and power relationships that surrounded them. They made decisions and took everyday actions that were aimed at improving their lives and helping their families economically. Drawing upon Giddens’ structuration theory and Foucault’s notion of power, Klocker distinguishes between “thin” and “thick” agency. Thin agency refers to those decisions and actions that are taken in highly restrictive contexts, while thick agency pertains to those within a broader range of options. In her study, she found that a number of factors intervened in shaping girls’ agency when choosing to become domestic workers (e.g. poverty, lack of educational opportunity, few employment options). She explains: “When their agency is identified as ‘thin,’ rather than non-existent, this enables acknowledgements both of their difficult circumstances and their efforts to survive and to build better lives” (Klocker 2007, 92).

In a study that looked at agency in intimate relationships, Bell (2007) examined how young people in rural areas of Uganda negotiated their relationships, despite elder disapproval. In this context, parents believed that serious girlfriend-boyfriend relationships were unacceptable until the couple has left school and is ready to marry. According to Bell, adolescent girls and boys exercised power and agency by challenging
social norms and expectations regarding relationships with members of the opposite sex. Through a range of subtle strategies and decision-making-processes (e.g. engaging in secretive relationships), young people resisted behaviors that were expected of them. Consistent with our perspective, Bell (2007) and Klocker (2007) found that young people actively make choices, accommodate, negotiate, and construct their own lives, even if their actions might seem flawed or ill-informed.

We also draw upon the notion of “judicious opportunism” developed by Johnson-Hanks in her study of young Beti women in Cameroon (2005, 370). In this research, Johnson-Hanks conducted in-depth interviews with women to better understand how they planned for their future, particularly with regards to marriage and fertility. In a context characterized by high levels of poverty and extreme uncertainty, Johnson-Hanks found that for the women in her study, “what works is not the best strategy but the most flexible one—one that takes every present in the subjective, that keeps every alternative open as long as possible, and that permits the actor to act rapidly and flexibly to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise” (2005, 377). This judicious opportunism means that rather than choosing to develop a “good plan and follow it,” women take advantage of the “sudden and surprising offers that life can make” (376). This concept is particularly helpful in explaining why the adolescent girls in our study decided to elope even though they had previously expressed a desire to continue their studies—their actions were opportunistic, seizing offers that presented themselves because of their uncertainty regarding what other options would be available to them in the future.

**Methodology**

Data for this study were collected during three trips to Honduras between 2009 and 2012. In 2009, Murphy-Graham (the project lead) was engaged in a related research study on the impact of secondary school on the lives of rural youth (see McEwan et al, forthcoming). As part of this study, both Melisa and Griselda, the two cases we focus on here, were interviewed, along with their grandparents and teachers. When we returned to interview them in 2011, we learned that they had married and dropped out of school. Because of our longstanding relationship, we purposefully selected them as “revelatory” cases in this study on early marriage in rural Honduras. As Maxwell (2013) explains, one goal of purposeful sample selection in qualitative research is to “select groups or participants with whom you can establish the most productive relationships, ones that will best enable you to answer your research questions” (99). We therefore focused on the cases of Melisa and Griselda because of our existing rapport with them, making the decision that these cases would provide the best data for our study. As Yin (2003) explains, another rationale in case-study research for sample selection is that “the

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2 With the exception of the interviews with Melisa and Griselda in 2009, which were conducted by Murphy-Graham’s research assistants Rebecca Tarlau and D. Brent Edwards, Murphy-Graham and Leal conducted all of the interviews for this study during our joint visits in 2011 and 2012. We worked collaboratively to design the study and analyze data. Murphy-Graham took the lead in authoring this paper, in close communication with Leal.
investigator has access to a situation previously inaccessible to scientific observation. The case study is therefore worth conducting because the descriptive information alone will be revelatory” (43). Indeed, we consider the cases of Griselda and Melisa to be “revelatory” cases because of the descriptive information they provide. We are not aware of any other studies that qualitatively follow girls from pre- to post-marriage. While we recognize that one of the shortcomings of this sampling strategy is that it does not allow us to make any claims about how “typical” or “representative” these cases are, it is unlikely that any number of in-depth case studies on early marriage would ever satisfy this critique (Yin 2003). Furthermore, our goal is not to generalize to other girls in Honduras but to generalize to theory about how girls exercise agency in the process of early marriage, and from this to identify the ways in which schools might thicken agency (see Yin 2003, 38 for “how case studies can be generalized to theory”).

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

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

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

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

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

Findings

Two “Revelatory” Cases of Early Marriage: Griselda and Melisa

Griselda

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

A few months after her return, she went off with a new boyfriend, Herber. Her grandparents explained that it happened when she was with her uncle on a trip. He left her outside when he went into the bank, and when he came out she was gone. In her grandfather’s words “You see, she came with her godfather, and while he stepped into the bank, she had already planned to meet the boy. When he came back out [of the bank], she was gone.”
Griselda and Herber had met at the town’s campo, the soccer field. Her aunt, who is two years older, was dating a friend of his. Herber asked for Griselda’s cell phone number (via the friend and the aunt). She didn’t have a cell phone at the time because her grandparents believed that “she was just a little girl who couldn’t defend herself” and was too young to have a cell phone (because she was too young to have a boyfriend). Griselda gave Herber her aunt’s number in order to contact her. Despite the grandparents’ disapproval, Griselda’s father bought her a cell phone shortly thereafter, which would play a central role in their courtship.

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

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

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

According to her grandmother, Griselda did not want to continue studying because she fell in love. “So, why didn’t she want to continue with her studies?” we asked her. “Well I would say because of that, that she was in love.” When we asked Griselda if she would be interested in completing her studies, Griselda said that she simply did not like going to school anymore—that it was “boring.”

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

**Melisa**

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

Before moving in with Aldo and his family, Melisa lived with her grandmother. Melissa’s mother started a relationship with her current husband when Melisa was still a baby, after Melisa’s father abandoned them and eventually left for the United States. Melisa’s mother felt that she couldn’t bring a child from a previous relationship into her husband’s household. While her mother lived nearby and was a presence in Melisa’s life, her grandmother provided day-to-day care.

When Melisa began the ninth grade, her grandmother suspected that she had a boyfriend and told the teacher to keep a close eye on her. Her teacher, Rosario, explained that:

> Her grandmother told me that she was in love, and so we tried to give Melisa advice since the beginning of the year. Her grandmother didn’t want to put her in school because she was in love and “they’ll steal her away.” But I said to her, “No, I’ll talk to her.” So we talked to her every day.

Rosario attempted to make sure that Melisa was under her watch at all times. If she had forgotten her homework, Rosario would tell her that she could have it sent to her in the afternoon after she got home. Allowing Melisa to walk home alone was a risk that Rosario did not want to take (because, presumably, she could arrange a secret meeting with her boyfriend while her grandmother thought she was in class). Despite these precautions, according to Rosario, Melisa still found ways to see her boyfriend:

> But she would escape at night—even if they had locked the door. She would go dance in San Juan (a nearby town) with her boyfriend. Sometimes she’d say that she was coming over here, to school, and she’d go out. I’d talk to her and tell her not to do this, and she’d say, “Ok, profe, I’m going to do as you say.”

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

One afternoon, Melisa and Lino planned to meet up at a nearby village and go together to the carnival in the city of La Ceiba. Melisa went to meet Lino and his friend, but they never showed up (apparently, they were killed because of their involvement in narco-
trafficking). That night while she waited for Lino, she met Aldo, the boy with whom she now lives. Aldo’s mom was a friend of Melisa’s grandmother, so when she found out that Melisa was alone waiting for Lino, she sent her daughter Marisela, who is the same age as Melisa, to bring her to their house. Since that day, Melisa has stayed with them: “I was 15, and he was 20, and I stayed,” Melisa explained. Aldo’s mother used the term “se casaron” (they got married) to refer to their relationship, even though she is too young to marry legally. It was at this time that Melisa stopped going to school.

Aldo and Melisa lived in San Pedro Sula for a few months with one of Aldo’s sisters. He worked in a maquila, and she babysat Aldo’s two-year-old nephew. When we talked to Melisa’s mother about why Melisa went off with Aldo, she said, “Everything was good, but she fell in love!” Her mother summarized the chain of events that led to Melisa and Aldo’s relationship:

She didn’t get together with him … the first boy was a junkie and now he’s gone missing. They haven’t found him, and some say that he was killed. I don’t know. But now she is with this other boy, and he’s a good worker (trabajador)… he’s from a good, humble family. They don’t have vices. She’s not studying, but she says she’ll start studying again. I don’t know.

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

During our 2011 data collection, we believed that one of the factors that influenced Melisa’s decision to leave was that she and her grandmother were not getting along. Melisa’s friend told us that she had been fighting with her grandmother, who was very strict and would not give her permission to do many of the things Melisa enjoyed. These included wearing short skirts and tight clothes. Melisa also loved to go swimming in the river. In 2009, Murphy-Graham took a group of girls to the village swimming hole, and Melisa fondly remembered that trip and treasured the pictures we took of her sitting on a big rock with her girlfriends. When we visited in 2011, Melisa missed our outing to the river because she was no longer living in the village. In 2012, we brought Melisa and her friends to the swimming hole in the village where Aldo and Melisa now live. Melisa was delighted to show us this place, and she mentioned that she goes swimming all the time now because she isn’t restricted like she was when she lived with her grandmother. Likewise, we noticed that Melisa changed out of her short skirt and tight tank top prior to our visit with her grandmother. While she is now responsible for taking care of Aldo — making his food, cleaning his clothes, ironing, etc. — he did not prevent her from

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3 Accompanied by her research assistant Rebecca Tarlau.
swimming or dressing the way she wanted to, and according to Melisa, this made her happy. Melisa’s teacher Rosario remarked, “She felt very boxed-in, you know? She wanted freedom.”

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

**Agency in the Practice of Early Marriage**

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

**Agency as “Thin”**

Similar to the domestic workers in Klocker’s Tanzania study, our data support the notion of the girls’ agency as “thin” (2007). The girls made decisions and took action in a highly restrictive context. Characterizing agency as “thin” recognizes the girls’ efforts to build better lives, even if those improvements are personal, subjective, short-term, and marginal. In rural areas of Honduras, young people face severe limitations in terms of the opportunities and choices that are available to them. For both adolescent girls and boys, formal job opportunities are scarce. Men, in general, have greater access to cash income because of their work in the agricultural and construction sectors. Economic opportunities for girls and women are quite rare. A small percentage might go on to work as teachers or to other jobs in the service sector. Melisa spoke of getting work in a factory, but she was underage. Both boys and girls see little reason to delay marriage because they have so few employment options.

While Melisa hinted at plans to return to school the following year, Griselda had no plans to return, saying that she “didn’t like it.” Other phrases that the youth we interviewed used to describe school were “aburrido” (boring) and “no me gusta” (I don’t like it). According to a teacher in Griselda’s community, Ricardo, one of the challenges is that school simply is not relevant to students’ lives: “It’s just hours and hours in the classroom talking about topics that are totally unfamiliar to what they experience in their lives. We can talk about mathematics, Spanish, but we don’t know how they live, at what time they go to bed, what they do in the evening, when night falls, if they get together with their families, or if they go for a walk.” School has little connection to students’ daily lives. While parents and students alike spoke of the importance of schooling for “moving forward” (para seguir adelante), the ideology around schooling and the reality of life for the adolescents in these communities were mismatched.
The choice to marry early and improve one’s life in the short term might have seemed like a better bet than staying in school and hoping for a brighter future. Adolescents spoke of the difficulty of getting jobs in their communities, even for individuals with university degrees. While they know that school is supposed to improve one’s life, many of the students we spoke with were somewhat skeptical of this claim because of job scarcity. One teenaged boy we spoke with informally while visiting Griselda’s school explained that: “If one earns a degree, one takes the risk of, of not being wanted, not being offered any jobs. And you’re left only with your studies. I’ve seen people that study and end up the same, working the land.” The low quality and relevancy of schooling in part explains the thin nature of adolescent girls’ agency—continued schooling is not perceived as beneficial in the context of limited opportunities.

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

For Griselda and Melisa, the ability to spend more intimate time with their boyfriends was one of the improvements they were longing for. The girls believed they were in love, and being with their boyfriends represented an immediate improvement in their lives, even if it may have negative implications in the long run in terms of their future schooling or work outcomes. The girls seemed to internally negotiate what they believed would be the best outcome for them, given their limited choice set.

Two of the teachers we interviewed, Ricardo and Rosario, mentioned attempts to intervene so that girls would not make shortsighted decisions. Ricardo recalled a girl who was “a high achiever, very intelligent” who spoke of her love for her boyfriend and her plans to marry him. “I said to her, ‘Are you sure this is love, or is it just a passing whim to be contrary to your parents?’” He further cautioned her that the boy came from a family that didn’t seem to value women as professionals and that she’d be “making tortillas.” He asked her, “Do you prefer to go off and burn your nails [making tortillas] or to make something of yourself because you have the potential to do so?” She thought
about it and said, “You’re right, profe.” A few days later, she told him that she had “analyzed” the situation and ended the relationship. However, he later learned through one of her friends that they continued to text and call each other. Rosario likewise tried to intervene with Melisa, talking to her every day and attempting to help her think about her future. While these teachers tried to help the girls focus on the long term, both made choices that reflected their scarce choice set.

**Agency as “Opportunistic”**

In response to their limited choices, the girls exercised “judicious opportunism.” When presented with an option for a life outside their childhood home, they exercised opportunistic agency, acting quickly and deliberately to seize that chance. They could not be certain that they would have another opportunity for marriage. Several individuals we interviewed explained that a prevalent cultural norm was that girls should not wait too long to marry because if girls do not marry by the age of 20 “they’re going to miss the train” (*el tren se las va a dejar*). This belief is linked with the idea that “sooner or later” girls are going to leave their homes to get married (“*tarde o temprano se van*”). The perception among parents and teachers was that it is inevitable that girls will get married and become housewives sooner or later, which implies that for some girls it will be sooner. Getting married young was not viewed as model behavior, but it was by no means abnormal. For example, when we asked Griselda’s uncle about her decision to marry, he explained, “she wanted to speed things up,” (*se quiso adelantar*) suggesting that marriage is the next stage of a girl’s life; Griselda just did things a little bit faster.

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

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

In our analysis of the data from this study we attempted to interpret *why* Griselda and Melisa decided to marry early and to identify any personal traits or characteristics that
may have made them more likely to elope. Since both were raised by their grandparents, one possible explanation is that they experienced feelings of abandonment and were therefore more responsive to the tenderness and affection that they received from their boyfriends. While we find this interpretation plausible, we did not find any mention of this in the data. We did, however, find that their environments limited their ability to court, as we explained above.

A second possibility, one that is consistent with judicious opportunism, is that somewhat randomly these girls met and connected with boys. Romantic sparks were in the air. Instant chemistry between the two individuals developed, and both Griselda and Melisa took action on these promising leads to a better life. We find Johnson-Hanks’ notion of judicious opportunism particularly helpful in interpreting the actions of Melisa, who made a spontaneous decision to stay in Aldo’s village and move in with his family, even though she originally went to his village to meet another boy. She did not engage in action that fulfilled a prior intention but rather action that was responsive to the “contingent, sudden, and surprising offers that life can make” (Johnson-Hanks 2005). Since her first boyfriend, Lino, never showed up, Melisa kept her alternative options open and began to develop a relationship with Aldo when the opportunity arose. Likewise, Griselda took up Herber’s offer of a viaje, strategizing to ditch her uncle outside the bank so that she could run off with him. She acted rapidly and flexibly when the opportunity arose—her agency was judiciously opportunistic.

**Agency as “Oppositional”**

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

*Flako hermoso* (skinny beauty)

*Buenas noches. Te amo bebe* (Good night. I love you baby)

In addition to flirting and sending affectionate messages, phones were also used to arrange private meetings in secret spaces. As the teacher Ricardo explained:

There are no spaces, I mean, social spots where you can go and walk and all. Students, well, through technology and messaging it’s easy for them to arrange a meeting at some place, some *finca* (farm), to meet there and see each other because presently they can’t do it at the school: teachers are there. But they can do what I was telling you, go and pick me up, take me somewhere, get off
somewhere in the road and talk, and those are the places where they can go through messaging.

Cell phones are creating a virtual space that fills a physical void, in that they allow for the courtship that teachers and parents do not permit. Girls can oppose parental authority from their own rooms, secretly messaging their boyfriends, or in the words of Ricardo, “Maybe you go to sleep, and there in the other room is the girl, messaging with who knows [what boy]!”

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

Griselda’s grandfather specifically mentioned the role of the cell phone in her elopement:

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

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

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

Previous research on parental perceptions of the threat of adolescent girls’ sexuality, conducted in Malawi, describes how parental perceptions of risk weaken their motivation to keep daughters in school (Grant 2012). Our interviews with teachers

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4 There are similarities here with Ahearn’s (2001b) findings in Nepal, where young people were also prohibited from courting in person. There, love letters allowed individuals to get to know each other and elope, thereby challenging traditional arranged and capture marriages. A November 7, 2013, article in The Himalayan Times, “Paradigm shift in early marriage” reports that teens in Nepal now use cell phones “improperly” to court each other and this has resulted in early “love” marriages (Maharjan, 2013).
revealed that some parents wanted to pull their daughters from school because they believed them to be involved romantically, as was the case with Melisa’s grandmother. Threats to pull their children out of school, take away cell phones, send children to live with other relatives (e.g. Griselda), and other “protective responses” likely contribute to increased tension in adolescent-adult relationships. Indeed we found that tense and conflictive adult-child relationships also fueled girls’ oppositional agency and helped explain their decision to move out of their childhood home. In Melisa’s case, her teacher mentioned that she felt “boxed-in,” and her friends also believed that she had frequent conflicts with her grandmother, who would not permit her to wear short skirts or engage in certain social activities.

The tension between adults and adolescents is a well-established feature of adolescent development. Relationships with parents and other family members undergo significant changes and are characterized by increased tension as an adolescent attempts to become more autonomous (Furman 2002). Previous research consistently points to romantic relationships as a significant cause of conflict and tension in the family in part because parents and adolescents have different expectations (Furman and Schaffer 2003). Given these tensions and conflicts, we found that part of what characterizes girls agency is their desire to oppose authority, both through their everyday use of the cell phone to flirt and get to know their boyfriends and in their culminating act of opposition: running away.

The lack of opportunity for physical interaction (intimate or otherwise) contributes to early marriage because if couples want to be together their options are scarce—cohabitating is one of their only available choices. While girls did not speak directly of this in our interviews, we believe that girls’ desire for intimacy and connection motivates them to go live with their boyfriends, and in making this decision they are also opposing traditional norms that constrain the healthy expression of female sexuality. When we asked a group of female teachers about girls’ decisions to elope, they glanced knowingly at each other until one replied, giggling, “se van por calentura” (they go because they are horny). At the same time, strict cultural beliefs dictate that girls should not date or have boyfriends when they are in their early teens. A growing body of work calls for attention to girls’ desire (e.g. Tolman 2002; Muhanguzi and Ninsiima 2011; Mkhwanazi 2011). A deeper understanding and acknowledgement of how consensual courtship and adolescent sexuality play a role in early marriage is urgently needed.

**Agency as “Accommodating”**

While Melisa and Griselda’s agency was oppositional towards adult authority and cultural norms regarding sexuality, it was simultaneously accommodating with regards to traditional gender norms in the villages where they reside. In their communities, women commonly worked inside the home and were primarily responsible for all domestic duties while men were primarily responsible for household income (see Chiu and Casper, N.D. for additional discussion of gender norms in rural Honduras). Our
findings support Ahearn’s observation that agency should not be used as a synonym for resistance (2001a). In deciding to get married, girls did not seem to be resisting or opposing traditional gender relationships and identities. To the contrary, they quickly settled into the day-to-day activities and practices they associated with being a wife, such as washing their husband’s clothes, preparing his meals, cleaning the home, and, for a few of the girls we interviewed, having children. Their actions in no way challenged traditional gender norms, and their agency was therefore accommodating to dominant gender ideologies. As discussed above, Griselda and Melisa both spent their days engaged in the tasks of a housewife: cleaning, washing, ironing, cooking, and otherwise caring for Aldo and Herber. These are the tasks that the vast majority of women in their communities occupy themselves with on a daily basis. Their lack of economic opportunities constrained them to a choice set that is very similar to that of their parents and grandparents.

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

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

Much of the policy discourse regarding how to prevent early marriage mentions schooling as a protective factor. In a recently published systematic review of more than 150 programs that measured changes in attitudes, knowledge, and/or behaviors related to child marriage, enhancing girls’ access to quality education is identified as one of five strategies to end child marriage (ICRW 2013). To better understand how education might play a role in delaying the age of marriage, we have argued here that we first need an understanding of how girls exercise agency in their decision to marry. Through the analysis of qualitative case studies, we highlight how, in this context, girls exercise agency that is simultaneously thin, opportunistic, oppositional, and accommodating. In this context, how might education enhance girls’ agency, expanding their range of options? We identify a number of implications from our findings below, including: (1) the provision of resources to design and implement teacher training and curriculum development; (2) flexible enrollment policies and expanding innovative/non-traditional educational delivery (particularly via mobile device); and (3) linking educational efforts with those that create employment opportunities or give financial assistance to attend university.

Making Schools More Protective: Quality, Training, and Curriculum Development

Efforts to improve the quality of schooling, which could improve female retention rates, could result in delayed age of marriage. The frank comments of the teacher Ricardo regarding the lack of relevancy of schooling (“...it is just hours and hours in the classroom talking about topics that are totally unfamiliar to what they experience in their lives”) point towards the commonly acknowledged problem of poor school quality in rural Honduras (Martinic 2003; Marshall et al., in press; McEwan et. al, in press). Indeed the comments that school was “boring” or that students “did not like it” were understandable given low quality and relevancy. Griselda, for example, became disengaged in school, and it was only after she dropped out that she decided to marry. If her school were more engaging, it is possible she may have stayed enrolled and delayed her marriage. Research on primary school quality and dropout rates among Kenyan girls and boys argues through a sophisticated statistical analysis that various features of schools (beyond traditional measures of standardized test scores) can serve to encourage or discourage girls to stay in school (Lloyd et. al. 2000). While more research is needed to identify the linkages between elements of school quality and retention of girls in Honduras, efforts to improve school quality and relevancy should result in less apathy towards schooling and hence higher retention rates.

Our findings also suggest that teachers could play a key role in enhancing girls’ agency, particularly in facilitating a more thorough examination and consideration among girls of the implications that early marriage might have for their future choice set. Teachers are key for a few reasons, given what these findings suggest regarding the nature of girls’ agency. First, teachers can help them think through the consequences of their decisions, encouraging girls to not be opportunistic but rather deliberate and
comprehensive when making a decision as important as whom to marry. Furthermore, teachers did not describe students exercising oppositional agency in the same ways that parents did; in fact we found that the girls wanted to go along with their teachers’ advice (“you’re right, profe”). Teachers are in a unique position to counsel and help students think about their decisions carefully. They often become respected adults in the lives of girls, and they understand the constraints of the environment and the lure of adolescent romance. While their efforts to talk girls out of early marriage might not always succeed, our findings suggest that they may be in a unique position to dissuade girls from exercising agency opportunistically—helping them see that schooling can ultimately broaden their choices whereas early marriage will narrow them.

In addition to the work that teachers are already doing one-on-one with students, the topic of early marriage should be incorporated into the curriculum so that norms around child marriage are challenged and explicitly discussed. While in theory the Ministries of Health and Education have already agreed to this, Honduras lags far behind other countries in the region in terms of implementation (Hunt and Monterrosas Castrejón 2012). Teacher preparation and in-service professional development courses (for both primary and secondary education teachers) should explicitly address gender norms and child marriage and provide materials that could be introduced with students. Given their lack of training, it was not surprising that the teachers we interviewed did not feel comfortable talking about these subjects in their classes. For example, the teacher Ricardo explained that teachers are set in their ways, and they do not “leave 20 minutes to talk about what is courtship, what is the purpose of courtship?” Thus while teachers like Ricardo might see the value of discussing adolescent romance, they lack the tools and training to incorporate this subject into their classrooms. Curricular guides, including the Population Council’s It’s All One (which has been translated into Spanish and is currently being adapted for use in Guatemala) could be modified for use in Honduran classrooms so that teachers have tools at their disposal to discuss the topics of early marriage and adolescent courtship with their students.

Teacher training and curriculum development are particularly important because schools are venues to reach adolescent boys as well as girls. We are unaware of any efforts to target adolescent boys directly in child marriage prevention efforts. Schools, if they incorporate appropriate curriculum, could serve as a potential site to change their mentality regarding the appropriateness of marrying a girl before she reaches the age of 18, the legal age of marriage in Honduras.

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

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

3 The Red de Masculinidades (REDMAS, Network on Masculinities), led by PROMUNDO includes several groups around the region that are reaching out to boys and men to challenge machismo and promote alternative notions of masculinity. Of particular note is their new effort to engage men in childcare and domestic work, “Mencare.” These efforts are nascent and require additional funding to go to scale. See http://www.men-care.org/ and http://menengage.org/.
We recognize that the incorporation of curriculum on adolescent romance and sexuality is highly controversial. In fact, just four out of 21 Latin American countries surveyed by the United Nations Population Fund had widespread implementation of sex education in the school system (Cevallos 2006). Despite the signing of a Ministerial Declaration “Preventing through Education,” in June 2010, in which 30 Ministries of Health and 26 Ministries of Education from the region (including that of Honduras) agreed to strengthen efforts to incorporate comprehensive sex education in schools, progress has been quite slow. In Honduras, four curricular guides have been created for early childhood through grade nine, but the government has not allocated funding for their national rollout. The United Nations Population Fund is in the process of creating a virtual platform for the diffusion of the guides so that all teachers will have access to them. Given the government’s historical reluctance to play a key role in sex education, continued funding of international and non-governmental organizations that can support teacher training and curricular development in sex education will be essential.

**Policies that Promote Flexibility and Nontraditional Delivery of Education**

Policies that enable maximum enrollment flexibility (e.g. mid-year transfers, recognition of time spent in other schools, and alternative modalities) will also be important to minimize the impact of early marriage on girls’ educational trajectories. While policies such as these already exist on paper in Honduras, administrators and parents may not be aware that they exist. Campaigns to educate and enforce these policies could thus prove beneficial. Recall Melisa’s case: she moved to the community where Aldo lived in the middle of the school year. Her teacher, Rosario, spoke with her about re-enrolling in school at the start of the next school year, and Melisa expressed her interest in doing so, but the idea of enrolling in school in Aldo’s village was not seen as a possibility. In our interviews with other girls and women who had married at a young age, roughly half had returned to school. This points to the fluidity of dropout, meaning that students may discontinue their studies temporarily, only to return at a later point in time (see Parker 2004). Outreach to students who have temporarily dropped out may be particularly fruitful.

In addition, a variety of alternative secondary education programs exist in rural Honduras (see Marshall et. al 2012), and outreach devoted to re-enrolling girls who have married would allow them another chance at schooling, which could potentially thicken their agency. For example, one woman we interviewed, Ana Maria, married and had her first child at age 14. She enrolled in an alternative education program and is now, at age 28, studying to become a teacher. These findings suggest that traditional schools are not the only mechanism by which girls’ options can be expanded. Alternative programs can

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potentially play a key role in reaching married girls who have discontinued their schooling.

Educational efforts must also take place outside the classroom walls. One potential tool to prevent early marriage and promote more equitable gender relations might be literally in girls’ pockets: their cell phones. Our findings, in addition to several stories in the media (e.g. Maharjan 2013), suggest that cell phones may be a very powerful educational mechanism, given their pivotal role in adolescent romantic relationships. A variety of public health campaigns, particularly in the domain of HIV/AIDS prevention, have been designed for delivery via mobile device (Jamison et al. 2013; WHO 2011). Efforts to prevent early marriage and promote more equitable gender relations might use similar strategies to reach girls with information that encourages them to critically consider the implications of choosing to marry early. Campaigns using SMS might also encourage deeper communication between the couple, suggesting conversation prompts (e.g. “What does he think of men who do the washing up, take care of the kids, etc.?”) so that adolescents can get to know each other better, thereby making more informed choices and supporting more equitable gender norms. While parents and teachers framed cell phones as being used “inappropriately,” they may also allow for deep, one-on-one conversations that would not be possible face-to-face due to shyness or lack of privacy. Thus cell phone conversations could positively enhance courtship, allowing couples to talk and share in ways that were not available previously. Coupled with encouragement to delay marriage, cell phones could be used to improve communication, which some research suggests is a key component of equitable relationships (Fincham 2004; Murphy-Graham 2012).

Educational campaigns via cell phone or other media should also focus on other pivotal issues that we have found play a role in early marriage. These include improving parent/child communication (and thus addressing the issue of girls’ oppositional agency) as well as reaching young men with slogans along the lines of, “If you really love her, you can wait to marry until she finishes school.” These campaigns should also address the fact that consensual courtship is restricted and that this may inadvertently lead couples to elope.

We have reason to be optimistic that norms around early marriage and pregnancy can change. For example, several decades ago in the United States, rates of teenage motherhood were on the rise and seemed resistant to various types of interventions. However, the past two decades have seen adolescent births decline to record lows. Professionals in this field believe that this can be attributed to a combination of better contraceptive use and delayed sexual activity, but that both were grounded in a growing consensus that “having a baby when you are 16 is just a really bad idea” (Hymowitz 2014). However, norms around early marriage and childbearing will only change if girls have other opportunities available to them. For adolescents with dismal future prospects, having a baby to love does not seem like such a bad idea. As one 16-year-old
Linking Secondary School with Future Employment or Educational Opportunities

While completing secondary school, in theory, opens up additional life opportunities for rural girls, the constraints of their environment (extreme poverty, lack of jobs, etc.) are powerful forces that thin their agency. Given these constraints, access to high quality schooling will not completely resolve the issue of child marriage, and girls will continue to see their most likely life outcome as becoming a housewife. In describing girls agency as “thin” we have highlighted that they do not necessarily see that schooling will expand their options. Staying in school may not be seen as beneficial in the context of limited opportunities. In Griselda’s community, coffee is the main cash crop, and aside from planting, tending, and harvesting, there are few economic opportunities. In Melisa’s community, remittances from the United States are a large source of income. Therefore in both communities, with the exception of their teachers, youth have few professional role models to emulate and relatively little exposure to concrete examples of how completing secondary schooling might be a way to seguir adelante or move forward in life.

The notion that “sooner or later” girls will marry and become housewives can only be challenged if girls have alternative options. Due to the lack of financial resources, few girls are able to attend university. A lack of credit and economic opportunities also limit their potential to work outside the home. For schooling to concretely broaden the range of choices girls have, there needs to be a tighter coupling between their completion of secondary school and what they do afterwards (e.g. the provision of scholarships for tertiary education and/or job training and entrepreneurship programs). More comprehensive strategies of this nature will require the coordination of development efforts across sectors, considerable resources, and a longer timeframe. However these factors will ultimately be crucial in opening up new opportunities for girls and women.

Conclusion: Early Marriage and Gender Equality

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

In our research, we found girls who married early to be quite vulnerable, given how quickly they slipped into their roles as housewives and their lack of opportunity to work outside the home. In sum, early marriage, due to the heightened vulnerability of those who marry early, impedes efforts to advance gender equality. The framing and justification for efforts to prevent child marriage should be linked with the broader goal of gender equality (rather than a narrower focus on reducing teen pregnancy or total births). And curricular design should follow the same framework, focusing not on specific manifestations of gender inequality (domestic violence, labor market discrimination) but rather taking a more comprehensive view that grounds these in the overarching topic of human relations and gender equality (as is the case with the It’s All One curriculum).

Ending child marriage has become an increasingly visible goal of the international development community, spearheaded by initiatives including Girls not Brides, a global partnership of 54 countries and 311 member organizations (see www.girlsnotbrides.org). Providing girls with access to education and enhancing its quality are key components in strategies to end child marriage. However, education does not need to take place strictly within schools and should come via text-messages, radio, and other media programs and in other social settings (e.g. youth groups, church). Finally, any effort to end child marriage must incorporate strategies to identify and promote viable livelihood strategies for women so that becoming a housewife is not their only potential future.
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Works Cited


