

# EXPLORING HARMFUL PRACTICES OF EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE AND FGM/C IN GEORGIA



## FINAL REPORT 2017



UN JOINT PROGRAMME  
FOR GENDER EQUALITY



საქართველოს პრეზიდენტის ბიზნესი  
საერთაშორისო სტანდარტების  
პროექტი  
NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
DISEASE CONTROL AND  
PUBLIC HEALTH





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**FINAL REPORT**

2017

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The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNFPA, UNICEF and the Government of Sweden.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Until recently, early/child marriage has been notably absent from public rhetoric and policies in Georgia, a country where 14 percent of women marry before the age of 18<sup>1</sup>, constituting one of Europe's highest rates of early/child marriage. Early/child marriage - defined as a union, whether formal or informal, involving at least one person who is below 18 years of age - is a phenomenon that affects the lives of both girls and boys. Yet, it is also gendered since it affects disproportionately the lives of girls in their childhood and adolescent years, with lifelong implications and violations of their rights. The lack of recognition of early/child marriage as a human rights issue that merits resources and attention in the form of policies and services has led to major gaps in research on the issue. In recent years, however, a confluence of small-scale, yet informative efforts, has brought an increased understanding of early/child marriage in Georgia as occurring across the country. The practice reflects broad trends of gender inequality rather than being solely confined to traditions of ethnic minorities as suggested by some initial perceptions. Despite these advancements, there is much to be done with regards to the enforcement of recent policies and fuller political commitment is required. Few civil society actors and other government departments have focused on the issue specifically, and there remain crucial gaps in terms of research, with a far less understanding of the practice across the country and in the majority population of Georgia. The present study thus comes as a timely opportunity to research early/child marriage with greater rigor and depth, and across a wider scope in terms of

geography (on a national scale) and population (a larger and broader sample).

As part of a broader effort to understand the complexities of early/child marriage as related to inequitable gender norms in Georgia, UNFPA Georgia, in cooperation with UNICEF Georgia, commissioned a nationwide study in partnership with Promundo. The purpose of this study, conducted over the course of 2017, is to understand how and why attitudes, norms, and practices related to early/child marriage and FGM/C persist in Georgia, exploring risks and protective factors in order to identify opportunities to tackle the phenomenon. The study also explores similarities and differences across regions, urban vs rural contexts, ethnic groups, language, and religion, while tackling the following research questions:

- ▶ What are root drivers and implications of early/child marriage in Georgia?
- ▶ What attitudes, beliefs, social norms, and practices surround early/child marriage – and how do they operate?
- ▶ What are risk and protective factors related to the practice in the country?
- ▶ What is the nature of FGM/C practices in Georgia?

**Methodology.** Qualitative data collection took place in urban and rural areas of 10 regions and the capital of Georgia: Tbilisi, Ajara, Guria, Imereti, Kakheti, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Kvemo Kartli, Racha-Lechkhumi Kvemo Svaneti, Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Shida Qartli.

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<sup>1</sup> Reproductive Health Survey, 2010.

This distribution sought to cover the three main languages and majority population/ethnic groups represented in the country – Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani; data collectors were also native speakers of these languages. As a preliminary mapping, an initial twelve key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted in order to develop the qualitative protocols. The research protocols were then finalized based on inputs from all research team partners as well as feedback from data collectors, which included a piloting study of the instruments. Separate qualitative protocols were created for each group included in the sample:

- (1) Married girls/young women, ages 12-17, 18-24, 25-34
- (2) unmarried girls/young women, ages 12-17
- (3) married boys/young men, ages 12-17, 18-24, 25-34
- (4) unmarried boys/young men, ages 12-17
- (5) family members of married couples, and
- (6) other stakeholders (teachers, doctors, school psychologists, social workers), policymakers, and local community and religious leaders.

The final sample consisted of 342 participants across 99 in-depth interviews, 35 focus group discussions, and 12 key informant interviews. Of the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions participants, there are 213 females and 117 males. The majority of the participants are from Tbilisi (n = 86), followed by Ajara (n = 46) and Kvemo Kartli (n = 43). There were four ethnic groups represented in the sample. The largest ethnic group identified themselves as Georgian (n=221), followed by Azerbaijani (n=52), Armenian (n =36), Avar (n=14) and Qisti (n= 7). The age distribution in the sample indicates that the largest number of interviewees were 15-17 years (n= 100).

## KEY FINDINGS

**Extent of Early/Child Marriage.** The findings indicated that early/child marriage was common and frequent across the country, including in the capital, Tbilisi. While some participants and key informants perceived that early/child marriage only occurs in rural sites or among ethnic minorities, our findings found this perception to be biased and could be attributed to the fact that there were more mentions of earlier age of marriage of girls in certain ethnic minority groups (i.e., at ages 13, 14, 15) compared to the general population, which had more mentions of marriage at 16 or 17 years. There was also evidence of marriage by abduction in some of the sites. Despite being a common occurrence, participants expressed strong disapproval for early/child marriage, reiterating that marriage that entails force which was understood as a marriage where the child's views, consent, and opinions are not considered, was something that occurred in the past. Gender differences emerged whereby the disapproval for early/child marriage was stronger when it involved boys rather than girls. Overall, while early/child marriage persists in the country, there remain several misconceptions about it, such as that it is only prevalent in rural sites or that only if a child is not consulted in the decision making, it can be called early/child marriage.

**Role of Adolescent Agency.** Girls and boys indicated that there have been historical shifts in the nature of early/child marriage, where presently, both girls and boys perceived that they had more choice and say in the choice of their partners, especially if they were in a relationship. This, however, was truer for boys than girls, since some girls felt pressured to marry, despite already being in a relationship and since family norms were more supportive of boys telling parents of their choice for a partner than girls.

Though the findings were mixed across the sites about the importance and power of parental approval, there was a consensus that newly married adolescents were highly likely to live with the parents, especially if they were from difficult socio-economic backgrounds. Fathers played a more powerful role in decision-making around marriage, especially for girls, than mothers, whose perspective was considered an opinion instead of a decision. The complex role of agency – in its nuances as well as along the concepts of choice and consent - requires further research to understand its implications and variations in the Georgian context, especially to understand the pressures and influences that girls may experience amid limited opportunities and alternatives.

**Transitions to Adulthood: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C).** Across the region, the interviewees remarked that transition to adulthood is not marked by any specific rituals, though, in muslim communities, boys get circumcised between the ages of 7-12 years. There was consensus among the respondents that girls did not experience FGM/C, even though most of them had heard of the practice, either through television and the internet. Older women in Avar all share that they have undergone FGM/C, particularly that which is classified as Type Ia: removal of the clitoral hood or prepuce only. However, key informant interviews indicated that though they themselves do not know of any FGM/C cases, the perceived reduction of FGM/C was only a result of legal penalties which may have driven the practice underground. Indeed, there was one key informant interview with a journalist who reported that she had heard of one FGM/C case. Others note that FGM/C has declined but only because the woman who would do the cutting in the village has died.

It is hard to disentangle from the data whether the participants' answers are influenced by social desirability given that they have had many people come and talk to them about the harmful effects of FGM/C – elements that should be considering when designing future research on the topic in the country. Given a large Muslim population and the belief that FGM/C is an important religious ritual, it is critical to note the paucity in data related to the practice in Georgia. Participants either denied that the harmful practice continues or indicated that FGM/C was done in the past and is no longer practiced in the country, but it is likely that the practice has gone underground.

**Pathways to Union.** While most marriages started with an engagement, there were several cases of marriages without any engagement as well. Where an engagement takes place, it almost inevitably leads to marriage. In the cases when the engagement was broken, there was some evidence of stigmatization against the couple, possibly explaining why there was pressure on engaged couples to get married quickly after their engagement. A strong consensus across the participants and key informants was that the age difference between the couples indicated that, on average, brides were at least 2-3 years younger than grooms – irrespective of forced (lack of consent from child) or consensual marriage. Norms around fertility of younger women and men's need to be able to financially provide for their family were noted as the underlying reasons for these age differences, calling for *programmatic action to address inequitable norms that reinforce the role of men exclusively as providers and the role of girls as caregivers. Additionally, further research is needed to better assess whether and in which ways marriage may differ between communities across Georgia given that marriage ceremonies can be a way to enhance social standing in the community - as often seen in other settings where early/child marriage is prevalent.*

**Drivers of Early/Child Marriage.** Several drivers of early/child marriage in Georgia emerged from the qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. An often-mentioned factor was the fact that adolescents who were in ‘love’ sought to get married early, with respondents attributing this phenomenon to the greater freedom given to adolescents in this generation. However, a closer analysis indicated that several other factors should be considered. First, norms that restrict adolescents from meeting freely were contributing to adolescents marrying as a way to do away with seeking permission to meet their boy/girlfriends. Second, strict norms that consider pre-marital sex as taboo ensured that getting married is an acceptable alternative that will allow adolescents to explore their sexuality without being stigmatized. Third, norms of masculinity that promote men as sexual beings contributed to boys wanting to have sexual relations during adolescence. Fourth, the increased use of technology and the limited spaces for leisure in some sites had created a context whereby adolescents were engaging with their peers only through social media and were seeking meaningful connections in real life. Fifth, economic challenges, aggravated by the high levels of unemployment, led to marriage being the only suitable financial option available to families. Sixth, social pressures and norms that stigmatize unmarried girls in their 30s played a role in driving early or early/child marriage. Co-residence with in-laws also created a context where mothers-in-law desired younger daughters-in-law so that the latter could be more easily trained. Finally, bodily appearance decided when a girl became to be considered a woman, and often if she looked mature or experienced puberty early, then she was more at-risk for early/child marriage. The intersecting nature of these factors created a context of limited opportunities and options for adolescents, which resulted in a perception that adolescents are “choosing” to marry early – albeit in a context

of constrained agency. As a result, *institutional responses to early/child marriage require an integrated approach centered on expanding girls’ opportunities along with their aspirations, while also changing the harmful norms that influence not only their lives, but also the lives of their male peers and future husbands.*

**Resisting Early/Child Marriage.** Examples of adolescents resisting early/child marriage were limited in this study, though there were many examples of unmarried girls with plans for their future that did not involve marriage. It was evident from the findings that society had often seen marriage vs education and employment as mutually exclusive choices, especially for girls. Yet, cases of some couples being in relationships or married and studying or working showed that there was an increasing perception that both are possible, and *future interventions should consider the potential to enhance educational and livelihood opportunities to girls before and during marriage. Interventions should also leverage positive deviants, such as family members, girls themselves, men who encourage girls’ aspirations and waiting for marriage, and educators who advocate for girls to stay in school.*

**Impact of Early/Child Marriage on Education.** Education and marriage were generally seen by respondents as two opposite ends of a continuum, with many girls leaving school if they married early. Part of the reason for this juxtaposition was a challenge of balancing the roles and responsibilities expected from young girls after marriage. Secondary or higher education for boys was privileged over education for girls, and often poverty and financial challenges acted as barriers against girls’ secondary or higher education. Approval for girls’ continued education post-marriage often rested in the hands of their husbands or their mothers/fathers-in-law. Most respondents agreed that education was important for girls, but mainly in relation to

being able to raise children well. Yet, some girls and women had a more empowered narrative and suggested that education is important for girls' themselves. The narratives highlight that in cases when girls and important people in their family and broader social network supported girls' continued education, it served as a reason to delay marriage, or as a reason to improve the lives of married women and girls. Findings suggest the *importance of promoting girls' access to education and school retention by questioning norms that prioritize boys' education at the expense of girls', as well as those that frame girls exclusively as caregivers. To this aim, it is important to promote an equitable redistribution of the care work starting by tackling the ways in which boys and girls are socialized into fulfilling stereotypical gendered roles. Simultaneously, interventions should also expand girls' aspirations by offering access to quality education leading to meaningful employment opportunities, while also supporting girls' access to the labor market by tackling gender norms that value women primarily, if not exclusively, as caregivers.*

**Impact of Early/Child Marriage on Health.** Girls' marital status strongly influenced the kinds of health risks they faced and their access to health services. Most participants agreed and showed awareness of the health consequences of early/child marriage, ranging from complications with child birth at a young age to psychological distress as a result of early/child marriage. While participants did not explicitly discuss post-partum mental health, several shared that young girls are unprepared for the stresses of a family life and childbirth. There were also mentions of negative consequences on children of young adolescent mothers, given the stresses adolescent mothers undergo. The findings showed that girls were more likely to access sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services only if they were married, largely due to the strict norms that shamed girls for engaging in sexual activity pre-marriage.

Interestingly, many participants - such as young men and women and religious leaders - were not actually opposed to girls accessing SRH services prior to marriage, but rather acknowledged its relevance. There were mixed responses on whether family members, especially husbands, accompany girls to gynaecology visits—sometimes mentioning embarrassment as a reason for not doing so. This highlights the *importance of ensuring that quality health services – not only around maternal and child health, but around sexual and reproductive health and rights more broadly - are more accessible to unmarried girls as well as to husbands of married girls. To this aim, it is important for interventions to work not only on promoting demand of health services by de-stigmatizing health-seeking behaviors, but also on transforming the attitudes of health providers towards unmarried girls, boys as well as husbands of married girls.*

**Impact of Early/Child Marriage on Girls' Mobility.**

Gender norms were a driving force for the way in which girls experienced married life. While before marriage girls reported high use of technology (such as cell phones or the internet), there was a consensus that their usage was drastically reduced after marriage, often at the hands of their husbands. Similarly, girls found themselves increasingly restricted in their mobility by both their husband and husband's parents after marriage. Reasons for such behaviors were rooted in gender norms that dictate what is appropriate behavior for girls and were enhanced in marriages where the age gap between the bride and groom is greater, given that there was a higher chance of more defined gender roles in that relationship. These findings indicated that gender socialization of societal norms was internalized by both boys and girls, producing strongly limited choices and constrained mobility for girls after marriage, and highlighting the *importance of providing girls and boys with safe spaces of socialization where they can develop and maintain meaningful*

*friendships*. The lack of these friendships not only reduces exposure to other life experiences, relationships and aspirations during formative phases, but also provides fewer potential sources of emotional support and help in the event of intimate partner violence, a health problem, or a marital separation.

**Impact of Early/Child Marriage on Roles and Responsibilities.** Roles and responsibilities after marriage were predominantly distributed along gendered lines. Decision-making around household finances, continued education, and family planning were often in the hands of husbands or the husband's parents. Responsibilities for women were rooted in norms around women seen predominantly as caregivers expected to take care of their children's daily needs. Fathers were more likely to be involved in education, and mothers were blamed when children behaved inappropriately. It should be noted, however, that there were a few examples of more egalitarian attitudes. Many young adolescents agreed that family planning should be and was in the hands of the couple. Moreover, several participants explained that child rearing was mutually divided between the father and mother. *This suggests the importance of conducting targeted qualitative research on positive deviants to inform future programming strategy, to better capture variations around gender roles and leverage promising entry points to question harmful gender norms.*

**Impact of Early/Child Marriage on Domestic Violence.** The stigma against domestic violence ensured that it remained in the private sphere, which was perhaps the driving reason why respondents denied domestic violence. However, a closer analysis revealed that violence, in the form of controlling behaviors, was in fact reported, often perpetrated by the marital family. Moreover, the marital family was often an instigator of intimate partner violence. Children

of couples in conflict were both witnesses as well as victims of violence. As a result, *qualitative research on intimate partner violence and family violence needs to be further examined in Georgia, beyond indicators of whether violence occurs or not, given the respondents' tendency to deny its occurrence.*

**Impact of Early/Child Marriage on Separation and Divorce.** Leaving marriage, either through separation or divorce was common, though not fully accepted in the Georgian society. This was especially true for women, who continued to be stigmatized if they were divorced and often had limited options post-divorce for their livelihoods and re-marriage. Respondents agreed that early/child marriages were more likely to end in divorce because adolescents were too young to fully understand what marriage entails. Moreover, conflicts between the marital family and the bride were also reasons cited for divorce. While divorce was said to be common, it is clear that there continue to be challenges with divorce for women – especially as, following separation, girls and young women are left with limited education and employment prospects and limited social networks - suggesting that perhaps many women remain in difficult marriages. Additionally, girls who marry before 18 are more likely to marry informally, and therefore lack legal protection when the couple separates.

**Institutional Response to Early/Child Marriage.** In-depth interviews and focus groups agreed that for most adolescents, there were no institutions or programmatic efforts that systematically provide information about marriage, thereby creating a context where adolescents obtain information from their peers, parents, or the internet. However key informant interviewees stated that there were several initiatives in place, including those aimed at awareness-raising with parents and those aimed to improve data on early/child marriage in the country. All participants agreed

that there was a presence of police officers and health practitioners who young people could rely on, even though adolescents do not access these services. Language as well as infrastructure barriers were cited by several participants as a major challenge for ethnic minorities and those living in remote/rural sites to access services easily. Other rural and urban differences included more discussion of customs and dowry in rural settings than in urban settings. There were no meaningful patterns that differed between rural and urban settings with respect to the extent of early/child marriage.

In terms of legal responses, there was high awareness of the law prohibiting early/child marriage, though low awareness of the recent amendment to the law. Cultural and religious laws often contradicted and confused people's knowledge of the law, and enforcement remained weak. Registration of marriages was poor, given that couples chose to register their marriage only after they turned 18 years even when they married before 18. Health services responses indicated that health service providers (e.g., gynecologists) were themselves entrenched in harmful gender norms, often bringing in their biases about pre-marital sex in conversations with young girls. This explained why girls themselves were hesitant to seek out health services. Similarly, social conventions made it challenging for health practitioners to approach the topic of

early/child marriage, given that it was generally considered a private family affair. Additionally, mental health and psychosocial wellbeing were overlooked as important components of health services, particularly for young married women. Moreover, though medical service providers share data on adolescent pregnancy with the relevant ministry within 24 hours to obtain birth certificates, there is no mention of whether there is any legal follow-up for early/child marriage as indicated by the data. Educational institutions responses were similarly hindered by teachers who held negative view on pre-marital sex. Moreover, a lack of education on reproductive health and rights issues as part of the healthy lifestyle education curriculum was identified as a critical gap. There was also little evidence that schools were monitoring and reporting early/child marriage cases to the relevant ministry personnel in an appropriate manner. Finally, religious institutions' response indicated that while religious leaders were, for the most part, against early/child marriage, there was uneven awareness of minimum age law. To address such gaps, this research highlights *the need for integrated legal and policy action – especially around enforcement of marriage legislation as well as protection, education and health services – accompanied by gender-transformative interventions aimed at changing inequitable gender norms that uphold early/child marriage.*

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, we propose several recommendations for policy, programming, and research. Cross-cutting across all domains is the need to address and challenge

social norms that perpetuate unequal gender relations and reinforce drivers of early/child marriage discussed above.

	Recommendation	How?
<b>Policy</b>	Enforce existing laws, while offering higher quality, inclusive services and creating opportunities for youth's futures.	<p>As early/child marriage is a cross-cutting issue, provide adequate funding and establish cooperation across sectors to ensure change happens, especially around the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen enforcement of existing laws by training relevant officials – such as judges, civil registrars, and child protection representatives - to better monitor minimum age law and report early/child marriage cases;</li> <li>• Ensure provision of high quality, inclusive services to youngsters. Offer youth-friendly and accessible health services (esp. SRHR), addressing health professionals' attitudes and practices, and developing innovative ways to overcome barriers to reach the country's most marginalized populations (geographically, linguistically, and culturally);</li> <li>• Strengthen work in the direction of the Regional Development, as regional level is the most effective level for planning various interventions and creating opportunities for adolescents' and youth development;</li> <li>• Allocate relevant financial resources for adolescents and youth programmes in the local budgets for supporting their development and empowerment, such as non-formal educational programs, youth/adolescents' clubs, trainings, etc;</li> <li>• Support youth and women's engagement in the local self-government to enable them to advocate for programs and mobilize resources for combating harmful practices;</li> <li>• Ensure that legal penalties on FGM go alongside preventive and protective measures. Ideally, legal measures would also ensure access to comprehensive support services, including medical, psychological and legal assistance for survivors.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Operation</b></p>	<p>Target social norms through gender-transformative approaches, engaging key actors, creating meaningful spaces for adolescents to socialize, and empowering girls.</p>	<p>In addition to laws that specify protection from early/child marriage, in order for girls to be able to fully express their agency, it is necessary to address the underpinning gender norms, which affect their lives and those of the key people with authority. To this aim:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support young people’s education on sexual and reproductive health and rights and related issues;</li> <li>• Develop a non-formal education system as the means of informing and empowering adolescents and youth, including on their rights and health, including SRH issues. It is imperative to create a safe space for girls where they can obtain evidence-based information, share their opinions and engage in socialization;</li> <li>• Integrate information on the harmful practices, as well as on challenging gender stereotypes in the formal education system; it is important to create learning resources, and train teachers on these issues. It is also recommended to elaborate a dedicated module on harmful practices that will be integrated in the teachers’ continuous education and development scheme;</li> <li>• To ensure sustainability, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia elaborates and approves a special program on the prevention of harmful practice of early/child marriage. The informal education as well as parents’ education components could be integrated in this comprehensive programme, as parents are frequently the key decision-makers in regards to the marriage of their adolescent children;</li> <li>• Strengthen outreach to adolescents in early marriage. It is imperative to support their reintegration in the education system. It is also critical to ensure that public childcare services are available and accessible for them to leave their kids safely while being at school;</li> <li>• Engage key decision-makers with an influence on girls’ lives – especially fathers, mothers, mothers-in-law, religious leaders, health and education providers, and boys and men (as future and current husbands) to promote gender equality and non-violence in their relationships to girls and women;</li> <li>• Challenge social norms that perpetuate traditional gender roles at home and in the community;</li> <li>• Highlight positive deviants as roles models in the community, and leverage their influence as entry points for programmatic action;</li> <li>• Provide evidence-based training for the public health professionals to provide confidential information and counseling to FGM/C survivors (for example, a 24-hour helpline may encourage disclosure);</li> <li>• Support education about the harmful practice of FGM/C and its consequences for individuals and communities at schools, as well as for law enforcement and healthcare professionals;</li> <li>• Provide specific trainings to SRH service providers to ask about or address FGM/C.</li> </ul>
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<b>Research</b>	Build more ground-up data on early/child marriages.	<p>As this is the first study of its kind in Georgia, there is potential to conduct additional research in greater depth to drive evidence-based policies and programming and contribute to better measures of tracking progress toward change. To this aim, along with including early/child marriage indicators in annual household surveys, future research efforts should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen data accumulation in Georgia on the harmful practices of child/early marriage (including in the educational institutions) and FGM/C for enabling evidence-based policy advocacy and programming, to facilitate measuring the progress, if any;</li> <li>• Elaborate the monitoring mechanism of the early/child marriage incidents;</li> <li>• Explore the links between early/child marriage and urban poverty, and rural poverty, as this research suggests that the practice does not happen only in rural areas or areas only inhabited by ethnic minorities;</li> <li>• Explore the role of positive deviants – such as fathers who invest in girls’ education - and how they could be leveraged for as promising entry points for programmatic action;</li> <li>• Tease out the ways in which current conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity contribute to sustain the practice of early/child marriage;</li> <li>• Further investigate girls’ agency and aspirations in a context of limited educational and economic opportunities, given how most girls seem to “choose” to enter early/child marriage in Georgia;</li> <li>• Strengthen national databases on early/child marriage indicators through mixed method research designs, ensuring both male and female perspectives are captured. Triangulate with existing national data collection, such as MICS indicators.</li> </ul>
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE IN GEORGIA

In recent years, research, programming, and advocacy efforts have increased the visibility of early/child marriage – defined as a union, whether formal or informal, involving at least one person who is below 18 years of age. According to the Istanbul Convention, any person under 18 is considered to be a child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child defines child as *“every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier”*. Globally, numerous studies have demonstrated that eliminating early/child marriage is central to achieving development goals. In fact, as per a recent report by Girls Not Brides (2017), ending early/

child marriage is critical to achieving half of the Sustainable Development Goals, including the promotion of gender equality, ending poverty, bringing economic growth, improving health and wellbeing. It is also essential to protecting child and human rights.

This report aims at exploring the practice of early/child marriage in Georgia (see box 1 for country background), intended as a gendered phenomenon that, while disproportionately affecting girls, is a phenomenon that affects the lives of both girls and boys, albeit in different ways. In Georgia, an estimated 14 percent of women marry before the age of 18, constituting one of Europe’s highest rates of early/child marriage (NCDC, 2010; 2005).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The term “early/child marriage” is most often used among researchers and practitioners in the field and is based on international legal frameworks. The Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes a child as a person below the age of 18 “unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” Other terms used are early marriage, and early, child and forced marriage (ECFM).

### BOX1: GEORGIA: COUNTRY BACKGROUND

This study takes place in Georgia, a country with population of approximately 3.7 million (Geostat, 2014). While a majority of the country identifies as Orthodox Christians (83.4%), other religious groups also live in the country; 10.7% Muslims, 2.6% Armenian apostolic. The Human Development Index for Georgia is 0.76, ranking it 70th out of 188 countries (Jahan et al. 2016). According to recent statistics from UNDP (2016), approximately 15.2% of the population is categorized as working poor (at PPP \$3.10/day), with the unemployment rate in Georgia being high at 12% in 2015.

The importance of recognizing inequitable gender norms as perpetuating early/child marriage is a crucial conceptual underpinning of this research. Norms

around maintaining the family's honor, protecting girls' virtue, fostering kinship networks, and norms that increase son preference have been shown to influence early/child marriage practices (Jones et al., 2014; UNICEF, 2014). Gender-based indicators, such as the Social Institutions and Gender Index, categorize Georgia's gender-data in the 'medium' category, and the 2016 population indicators by the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat) find that 52% of the population is female (N= 3,717,000). Statistics reveal that in 2016, the marriage rate was 6.7 per 1,000 persons. Adolescent births rate is also high, with 48.6 girls aged 15-19 years per 1,000 giving live births in 2015 (NCDC, 2016), and the maternal mortality ratio is 32 per 100,000 live births. The abortion rate was 9.2 per 1,000 reproductive age women (National Statistics Office, 2016). In 2016, the total population aged 16-19 were 220,400 (male:116,600 and female:103,800).

#### 1.1.1 WHY RESEARCH CHILD MARRIAGE? LOCAL AND GLOBAL TRENDS

**Prevalence** - The overall prevalence of early/child marriage in Europe is lower than in other regions of the world, such as Southeast Asia and Africa. Despite a decline in prevalence rates - from 17.2 percent (MICS 2005 in UNFPA, 2012) to 14 percent (Reproductive Health Survey-Georgia, 2010), and an overall steady decline from 2000 (NCDC, 2000) - Georgia's rates are still among the highest within Europe and most similar to rates of Moldova (19 percent) and Turkey (14 percent) - surpassing those of neighboring Armenia (7 percent) and Azerbaijan (12 percent) (UNFPA, 2012). The data suggests that nearly twice as many early/child marriages take place in rural compared to urban settings, with girls less likely to marry before the age of 18 when having a higher level of education and living in wealthier households (MICS 2005 in UNFPA 2012). Of the over 200,000 population aged 16-19 years, a total of 2.7% was married in 2015, with females marrying five times more than males (Geostat, 2017).

**Limits of Existing Data** - Even though several sources and key informants interviewed suggested that the practice of early/child marriage became more common after the fall of the Soviet Union, it should be noted that prevalence rates are inconsistently collected and often outdated. As a result, understanding the scale of the problem and addressing it is challenging. To begin, it is likely that the prevalence of early/child marriage in Georgia is higher than current estimates because of the informal nature (i.e. not legally registered) of most unions – as seen in other settings where the practice is prevalent. Early/child marriage prevalence estimates also vary depending on approaches to data collection. For instance, birth registration data from parents who were below age 18 at the time of the birth registration often suggests significantly higher rates of early/child marriage based on this data (PDO, 2016).

In addition, religious marriages tend not to be registered, while civil ones are. Another challenge is that data on early/child marriage and youth often include ages 18 and 19, making

it difficult to disaggregate marriages including age 17 and below, i.e., of minors according to the international legal norms. Table 1 below provides disaggregated data for early/child marriage. The

table indicates a clear gender difference in the number of girls who face early/child marriage vs. boys.

**Table 1. Total number of registered marriages in 2014-2016 for 16-19 years old girls and boys**

	2014	2015	2016
<b>Girls</b>			
16 years old	237	223	NA
17 years old	411	370	5
18 years old	1635	1403	1238
19 years old	1701	1527	1302
<b>Boys</b>			
16 years old	6	7	NA
17 years old	21	26	1
18 years old	281	241	143
19 years old	468	445	314

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (2017)

Finally, available data does not capture the complex realities of minority communities across the region. While complete data on early/child marriages are not available, the public defender's office report from 2016 suggests that the prevalence of early/child marriages – if informal unions are included – may be much higher than 14%, which is similar to trends in other European countries (Hotchkiss et al. 2016), where data suggests that the prevalence of early/child marriage may be higher among ethnic minorities in Georgia. A UN Women study conducted in a region dominated by ethnic minority groups in Georgia (Azeri, Armenian, ethnic Russians) found that 32 percent of married women married before turning 18 years old (UN Women, 2014).

### 1.1.2 HISTORICAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND LEGAL DEVELOPMENTS IN RECENT YEARS IN GEORGIA

Target 5.3 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation”. Several indicators are used to monitor the progress of the SDGs, including “whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex” (5.1.1.). Similarly, the Istanbul Convention's Article 37<sup>3</sup> stipulates that:

- “Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the intentional conduct of forcing an adult or a child to enter into a marriage is criminalized”

<sup>3</sup> Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Council of Europe Treaty Series - No. 210, n.d. Retrieved from: <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>

- *“Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the intentional conduct of luring an adult or a child to the territory of a Party or State other than the one she or he resides in with the purpose of forcing this adult or child to enter into a marriage is criminalized”.*

In the light of these global calls underscoring the importance of legal responses to early/child marriage, this section discusses the state of both international and national legislation that pertain to early/child marriage in Georgia. In 1994, Georgia ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Nationally, the Civil Code, Criminal Code, and the Law on Elimination of Domestic Violence, Protection, and Assistance of Domestic Violence Victims (2006) set forth protections in the case of early/child marriage (according to the Georgian Civil Code, Article 1108, an individual is legally considered a child until the age of 18). Based on the signed declarations of the Istanbul Convention in 2014, the National Action Plan 2016-2017 on the Measures to be Implemented for Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims/Survivors included broader elements of gender-based violence, such as criminalization of forced marriage and amendments to the law on imprisonment.

Although legislation is not consistently enforced, Georgia’s approach to early/child marriage has undergone three sets of noteworthy developments in recent years. First, the legal obligations toward early/child marriage have undergone a shift in terms of the consent required for the marriage of minors aged 16 and 17. Since 2015, Art. 1108 was amended to abolish parental consent, allowing only the court to permit marriage of a child at the age of 16 or 17. There is also a new amendment as of 2017 to

set the minimum age for marriage at 18 without exception.

Second, a criminal law framework has been added to tackle the practice. Article 140 of the Criminal Code specifies that cohabitation with a child under 16 is punishable by jail term of up to three years. In 2014, Article 150 – Coercion of Marriage – was added to the Criminal Code of Georgia

Finally, the addition of the Ombudsman’s Office (also referred to as the Public Defender’s Office) in the Gender Equality Department has brought unprecedented attention to early/child marriage, intended as a matter of gender inequality. As part of these efforts, in 2015 the Gender Equality Department published a report dedicated to early/child marriage in Georgia, not only constituting a contribution to data collection on the issue but also informing the Ombudsman’s office awareness-raising activities.

**Early/child marriage and Gender Equality** - The focus on tackling the practice within a gender equality framework represents a significant development compared to previous public action in the country. Led by the Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Ministry of Health, Social Affairs and Labor, this was primarily framed as an issue of violence against children. Within this framework, there was a recommendation put forth for the Ministry of Education and Science to document reasons for school drop outs – including early/child marriage – offering another mechanism with which to document marriage trends in relation to education. Over recent years, however, the gender equality framework reflected in the rhetoric and actions of the Ombudsman has also been reinforced by the efforts of UNFPA Georgia, including through the organization’s support for the first review of the legislation and a small-scale formative research in 2013 - 2014. The advocacy

efforts resulted in the integration of special recommendations for addressing early/child marriage issue into the Concluding Observations of the CEDAW Committee in the combined fourth and fifth periodic reports of Georgia (2014), when the lack of the substantial research on the scale, causes and consequences of the phenomenon was also flagged. Recommendations on early/child marriage and SRH services are also among the 2015 UPR recommendations accepted by the Government. The UN Special Rapporteur on VAW included early/child marriage in her investigation of the country in 2015.

Through this confluence of small-scale, yet informative initial efforts, there is now an increased understanding of the practice of early/child marriage in Georgia as something that occurs also among the majority population, reflecting broad trends of gender inequality rather than being solely confined to traditions of ethnic minorities as suggested by prevailing perceptions. Despite these advancements, there is much to be done with enforcement of the recent policies and fuller political commitment. Few NGO and civil society actors and other government departments have focused on the issue specifically. The present study thus comes at timely opportunity to research early/child marriage with greater rigor and depth, and across a wider scope in terms of geography (on a national scale) and population (a larger and broader sample).

**Legal landscape for women's rights.** According to the civil code, article 1202, women and men continue to have equal decision-making authority over children following divorce and women and men can also both legally be recognized as the head of the household in Georgia (The World Bank, 2011). Additionally, while women and

men have equal rights to own and access land in Georgia, under the law 'On Ownership' (CEDAW, 2012), the SIGI review of the country finds that customary law and religious law have a strong influence on attitudes to land ownership in practice, and that these typically discriminate against women.<sup>4</sup> Regarding inheritance, women have equal rights to inheritance in Georgia, as wives and as daughters, as per the Constitution of Georgia, article 21. Domestic violence is criminalized under the Criminal Code, articles 11 and 26.

## 1.2 THE STUDY

**Rationale** - Until recent years, early/child marriage has been notably absent from public rhetoric and policies in Georgia. The lack of recognition of early/child marriage as a human-rights issue that merits resources and attention in the form of policies and services – both on the part of the government and the public – has led to major gaps in research on the issue. The literature review to date yielded no published journal articles specific to early/child marriage in Georgia. However, the increase in reports in Georgia in recent years offers data on reproductive health (NCDC, 2012), violence against children (UNICEF, 2008), and the situation of ethnic minorities and especially women (Peinhopf, 2014; UN Women, 2014; ECMI, 2014). There is, however, far less understanding of the practice across the country as a whole, and the majority Georgian population.

As part of a broader effort to understand the complexities of early/child marriage as related to inequitable gender norms in Georgia, UNFPA Georgia and UNICEF Georgia, commissioned this nation-wide study in early 2017 in cooperation with the Inter-Agency Commission on Gender

<sup>4</sup> Social Institutions & Gender Index, OECD Development Center, n.d. Georgia. Retrieved from: <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/GE.pdf>

Equality, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. The purpose of this study is to understand how and why attitudes, norms, and practices related to early/child marriage persist in Georgia, exploring risk and protective factors in order to identify opportunities to tackle the phenomenon. This study also serves as a foundation for developing targeted interventions and further research, raising awareness, and sharing policy implications in Georgia. These include gender-transformative interventions and advocacy, as well as potential community-based campaigns. The study intends to contribute to building the evidence around the practice while contributing to policy dialogue. The research also aims to contribute to analysis of the current and potential roles of men in mitigating early/child marriages, roles that have been largely underexplored in efforts to combat early/child marriage globally. Finally, this study also enables researchers and policymakers to situate the implications of early/child marriage in Georgia within global research about the consequences of the practice in the lives of girls, their spouses, children, and communities.

The research was led by Promundo, an applied research center that works globally to promote gender justice, in collaboration with the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC), Georgia's leading public health agency. Within this context, this study intends to provide the evidence base for implementing policies and programming to address the practice.

In order to complement quantitative findings from the MICS6 national household survey (planned in 2018), Promundo – with inputs from NCDC, UNFPA and UNICEF - designed a qualitative study in order to understand attitudes, beliefs, and practices around early/child marriage as well as explore its risk and protective factors, drivers and implications in the Georgian context. NCDC led the data collection efforts across Georgia.

Building on the study findings, recommendations are designed to inform future policy dialogue as well as to direct future targeted interventions across regions and population groups, including but not limited to awareness-raising campaigns. Most notably, given that government's response to the issue is relatively recent – since 2013 – the findings can serve to inform the evidence-based policy efforts. Recommendations will also highlight areas for future research on the topic given the current knowledge gaps.

### 1.2.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Along with Georgian studies, global literature on early/child marriage also informed the conceptual framework used to design the research and interpret the findings (see for example, Svanemyr et al, 2015; ICRW, 2015; Jain & Kurtz, 2007; Raj, 2010) and as related to social norms theory (Bicchieri, Jiang & Lindemans, 2014); and decision-making around marriage (Hotchkiss et al. 2016).

Based on the research, key informant interviews, and discussions among Georgian partners, the following research questions were identified:

- ▶ What are root drivers and implications of early/child marriage in Georgia?
- ▶ What attitudes, beliefs, social norms, and practices surround early/child marriage – and how do they operate?
- ▶ What are the risk and protective factors related to the practice in the country?
- ▶ What is the nature of FGM/C in the country?

The study also explores similarities and differences across regions, urban vs. rural contexts, ethnic groups, language, and religion.

In the next section, the report discusses the methodology used to collect data across 11 sites in Georgia. Following the methodology section, the report shares the findings that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the interviews. Finally, the report concludes with recommendations for policy, programming, and research that can be drawn from this study.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 RESEARCH SETTING

Data collection took place in urban and rural areas of 11 sites of Georgia, i.e., 10 regions and a capital: Tbilisi, Ajara, Guria, Imereti, Kakheti, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Kvemo Kartli, Racha-Lechkhumi Kvemo Svaneti, Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Shida Kartli (see Figure 1). It was carried out in Georgian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian languages by local interviewers who are native speakers of each language. These languages also correspond to the three main ethnic groups represented in Georgia, but any members of ethnic groups speaking those

languages were included. As such, the distribution sought to cover the three main languages and majority population/ethnic groups represented in the country – Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani, with a higher representation of IDIs and FGDs conducted in Georgian as it represents a greater proportion of the population. Initially, the literature review identified other studies focused on ethnic minority groups in Georgia; further research was thus needed to understand a) early/child marriage experiences within the majority population and dominant ethnic groups, and b) attitudes and practices across diverse regions of the country.

**Figure 1. Map of Georgia: data collection took place in urban and rural sites in each of 10 sites and 1 capital**



## 2.2 QUALITATIVE PROTOCOL

As a preliminary mapping, an initial twelve key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted in order to develop the qualitative protocols (Annex 1 includes a full list of KIIs). The research protocols were then finalized based on inputs from all research team partners as well as feedback from data collectors, which included a piloting study of the instruments. The pilot study took place during the same week of the qualitative training and orientation for data collectors.

Separate qualitative protocols were created for each group included in the sample:

- (1) Married girls/young women, ages 12-17, 18-24, 25-34
- (2) unmarried girls/young women, ages 12-17
- (3) married boys/young men, ages 12-17, 18-24, 25-34

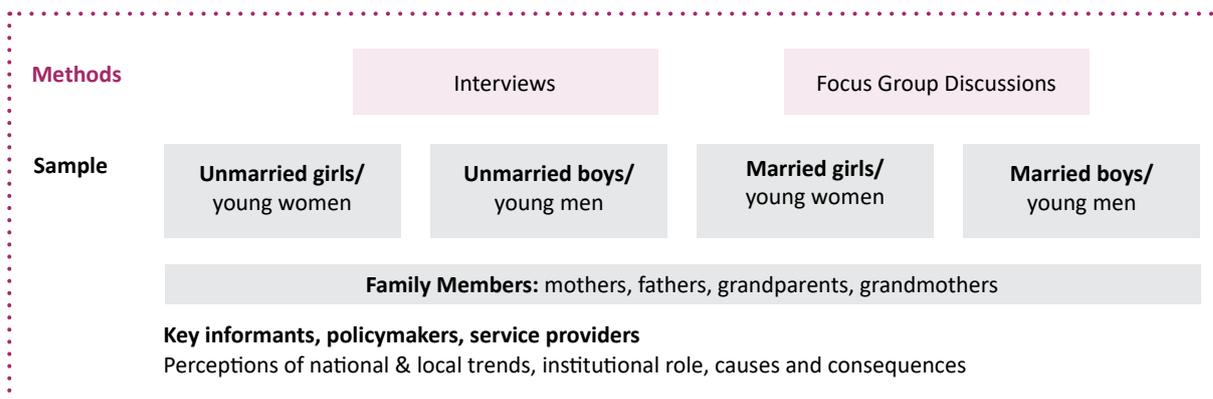
- (4) unmarried boys/young men, ages 12-17
- (5) family members of married couples
- (6) other stakeholders (teachers, doctors, school psychologists, social workers), policy-makers, and local community and religious leaders.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the data collection process. Conducting fieldwork with diverse groups of stakeholders enabled triangulation of data, i.e., comparing the realities and life trajectories (in the case of older women) of those who have lived experiences of early/child marriages (girls, boys, family members) with those who work to address the issue. Understanding the similarities and differences in these groups' perceptions of the reality of early/child marriage constitutes a novel contribution of this study, in addition to incorporating views from men and boys in addition to women and girls.

**Figure 2. Overview of Data Collection**

**Data collection in three main national languages: Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani in the following sites (urban and rural):**

Tbilisi	Guria
Shika Kartli	Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti
Kvemo Kartli	Imereti
Kakheti	Mtskheta-Mtianeti
Samtskhe-Javakheti	Racha-Lechkhumi – Kvemo Svaneti
Ajara	

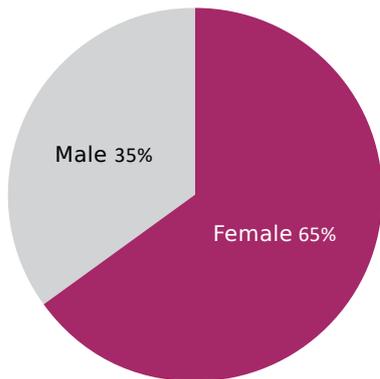


### 2.3 SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The research team conducted a total of 146 interviews and focus group discussions. All interviews met the criteria of the sample, and thus were used in the analysis. These included in-depth interviews (99), interviews with key informants (12), and focus group discussions (35). The final sample consisted of 342 participants. The socio-demographic data are calculated based on 330 participants (excluding the key informants for whom we did not collect socio-demographic data). Key informants' information is available in Annex 1.

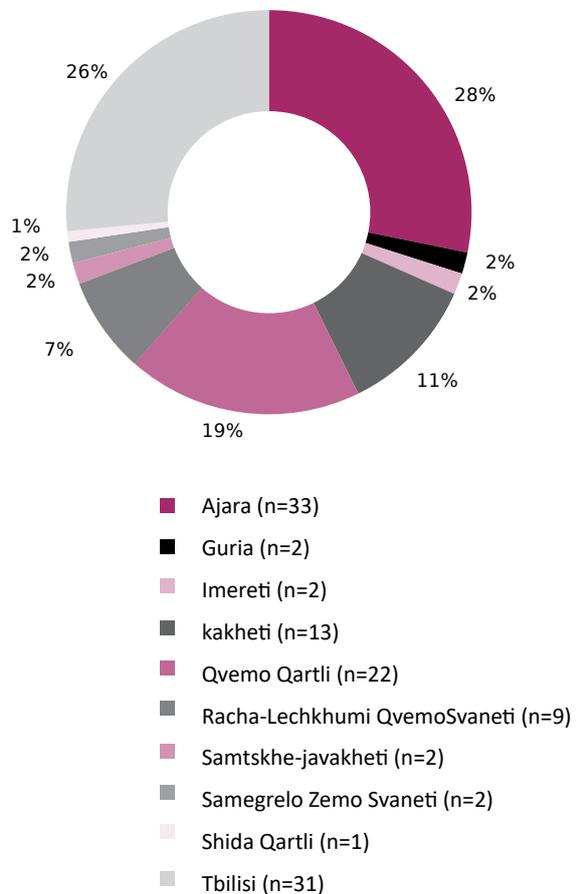
Of the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions participants, 213 identified as females and 117 as males (see Figure 3). There were four ethnic groups represented in the sample, and information was available for 289 respondents. The largest ethnic group identified themselves as Georgian (n= 221), followed by Azerbaijani (n=52), Armenian (n =36), Avari (n=14) and Qisti (n= 7). The following tables offer additional characteristics of the sample, excluding Klls for which socio-demographic data were not collected.

Figure 3. Gender breakdown of the sample

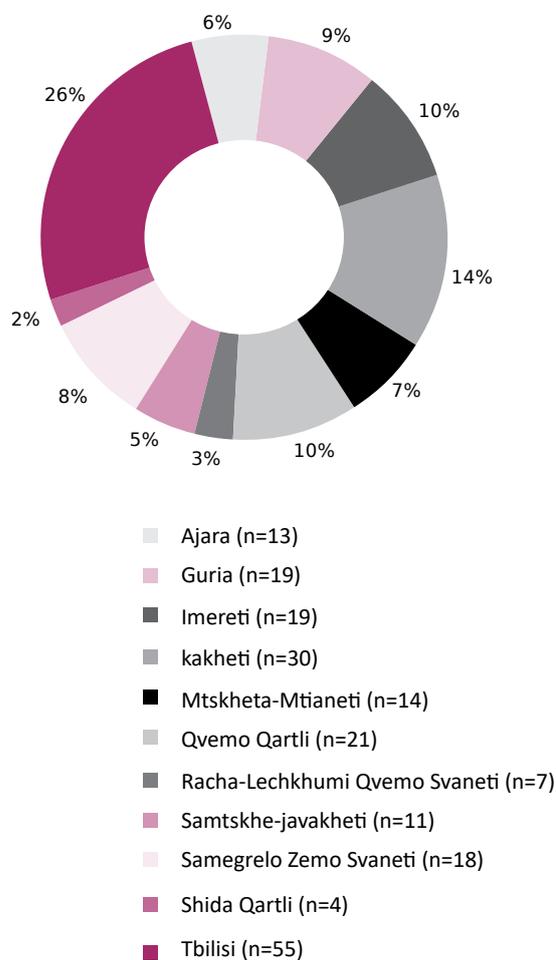


Figures 4 and 5 indicate that the majority of the participants are from Tbilisi, followed by Ajara (n = 46) and Kvemo Kartli (n = 43). This distribution was the result of convenience sampling, which focused mainly on the three main ethnicities in Georgia – i.e., Georgia, Azeri and Armenian - as well as Qisti and Avars. Given the qualitative nature of this study, it should be noted that the sampling does not intend to be representative for the whole country.

Figure 4. Male participants by region

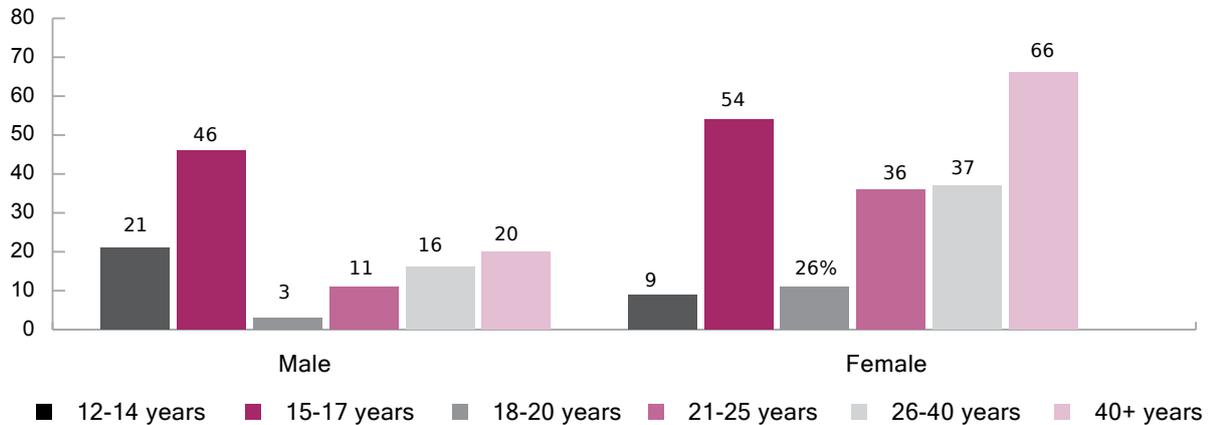


**Figure 5. Female participants by region**



The age distribution in the sample indicates among males, the largest number of interviewees were 15-17 years (n= 100). Among females, the largest group were 40+ years old (n=66), while among males the largest group were 15-17 years old (n=46).

Figure 6. Sex and age characteristics of the sample



## 2.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study was approved by the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health Institutional Review Board Ethics Committee of Georgia. Care was taken to uphold principles of ethics and confidentiality. Prior to commencing data collection, all partners and 28 data collectors participated in a week-long training in Tbilisi. This training was led by Promundo and NCDC and covered an overview and discussions of the topic, ethical guidelines (including those on safety and confidentiality), qualitative interview and focus group techniques, and data storage procedures. An NCDC coordinator oversaw and coordinated the data collection. The team was divided by region, language, and gender in order to establish contacts and conduct fieldwork in groups of two and three people per site. Men interviewed men and boys, and women interviewed girls and women.

## 2.5 ANALYSIS PLAN

The IDIs and FGDs were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. The team created a codebook using a deductive coding strategy, basing initial codes off of research questions, theory and the IDI and FGD protocols. Primarily descriptive codes were created in order to identify major themes. The team used Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, to facilitate analysis, offering online access among team members in diverse locations. Additional inductive codes were added to the codebook in order to account for themes emerging from the data.

Once the first cycle coding was completed using Dedoose, a second cycle coding was conducted in order to engage in in-depth analysis of themes and patterns identified in the first cycle (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Excel spreadsheets

were used to analyze codes and to further examine excerpts in the context of interviews and FGDs and as they co-occurred with other codes.

Validity strategies of triangulation, inter-rater reliability, and on-going discussion with the field research team in order to clarify themes were adopted. Triangulation allowed the analysis of similarities and differences in accounts from KIs and service providers for example, with perspectives of married/unmarried young women and men and family members. For inter-rater reliability, a training on first cycle coding was conducted, assessing code applications, and discussing analysis throughout with coders and the fieldwork team. Qualitative data were linked to socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, place of residence, level of education, ethnicity, religious affiliation, social-economic status, etc. This analysis provided the basis for writing the

report, which was then reviewed by all partners to ensure accuracy of representing the themes that arose from the qualitative research.

## 2.6 LIMITATIONS

The researchers took an approach to include the three majority ethnic groups in the country: Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani considering the focus of previous studies on the situation of women and girls among ethnic minority populations. The use of snowball and purposive sampling among these groups also meant that the study was not nationally representative. The design of the study sought to understand early/child marriage in these majority population groups across 11 sites, rather than gather a nationally representative sample.

# 3. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

In the following section, findings from the qualitative interviews and focus group discussions are presented. Where possible, patterns are discussed to compare across genders, regions, ethnic groups, and religious groups. Moreover, results are presented after triangulating data from those in and out of marriages, family members, and service providers. First, we describe the nature of FGM/C in the country, following by the nature of early/child marriage in Georgia, including extent of early/child marriage, the role of agency, types of marriage, and drivers of early/child marriage. We then describe resistance to early/child marriage, paying attention to the aspirations of adolescents. Following this, we discuss the impact of early/child marriage for education, health, mobility and social networks, roles and responsibilities, and conflict (including domestic violence). Finally, we discuss institutional response to early/child marriage and key informant opinions on the state and nature of early/child marriage.

## 3.1 NATURE OF FGM/C

Across the region, the interviewees remarked that transition to adulthood is not marked by any specific rituals, though in muslim communities boys get circumcised between the ages of 7-12 years. However, respondents had a consensus that girls did not experience FGM/C, even though most of them had heard of the practice. For example, one civil society representative in Ajara recounts that incidents of FGM/C are found on television or on the internet. Similarly, a focus group discussion in Imereti with female family members indicates that “...a lot of information

*was broadcasted on TV about circumcision practice particularly in one of the part of Georgia”. In Kakheti, interviews with the ethnic Avar population revealed that most of the older respondents had either gone through FGM/C themselves or heard of it. FGM/C practiced in this community was that of Type 1a where there of removal of the clitoral hood or prepuce only.*

Several older respondents note that their granddaughters are not circumcised presently. However, a focus group discussion with key informants indicated that FGM/C remains a crucial part of the Avar ethnic identity and perhaps this practice has gone underground. Respondents note that FGM/C continues to be seen as a ritual, much like baptism where one’s religious identity is closely associated with the practice. Older respondents note that in the previous days, FGM/C was done on girls as young as 5 years old as that is the age at which they can experience pain. Medical service providers in Tbilisi share that “*according to the information of the Ombudsman’s Office, in their reports they say that such cases take place in Georgia as well*”. Similarly, a key informant interview with a journalist who reported that she had heard of one FGM/C case in the Kvareli. Others note that FGM/C has declined but only because the woman who would do the cutting has died. The Avar respondents in Kakheti explain that most of the reduction in FGM/C is a result of fear of penalties as opposed to knowledge around the harmful effects of FGM/C which may explain why respondents may be reluctant to disclose any FGM/C cases.

Thus, it is hard to disentangle from the data whether the participants are giving into social desirability and stating that FGM/C does not exist anymore because of awareness that FGM/C is harmful. Indeed, in Avar, there was one respondent who noted that many people had discussed FGM/C with the community. Nonetheless, given a large Muslim population and the overlap between FGM/C and religious identity, it is critical to note the paucity in data related to FGM/C. Participants either denied that the harmful practice continues or indicated that FGM/C was done in the past and is no longer practiced in the country. A police officer in Kakheti attributes the lack of FGM/C of girls to the fact that *“local Muslims are modern and educated people”*.

## 3.2 NATURE OF EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE

### 3.2.1 EXTENT OF EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE

*Overview.* The findings indicate that early/child marriage is common and frequent across the country, including in the capital, Tbilisi. While some participants perceive that early/child marriage only occurs in rural sites or among ethnic minorities, our findings find this perception is flawed and could be attributed to the fact that there were more mentions of earlier age of marriage of the girl in ethnic minority groups (i.e., at age 13, 14, 15) compared to the general population, which had more mentions of marriage at 16 or 17 years. There was also evidence of marriage by abduction in some of the sites. Despite being a common occurrence, participants expressed strong disapproval for early/child marriage, reiterating that marriage that entails force, was something that occurred in the past. Gender differences emerge whereby a disapproval for early/child marriage is stronger for boys than girls. Overall, while early/child

marriage persists in the country, there remain several misconceptions about it, such as that it is only prevalent in rural sites or that it must only be forced to be called early/child marriage.

*Results.* The findings reveal that overall participants (parents, adolescents, and key informants) express strong disapproval for early/child marriage, with many showing awareness of legal minimum age of marriage (18 years). It was clear from the interviews that while respondents stated that early/child marriage before 18 years is wrong, the disapproval was stronger for boys than girls. For example, in Batumi, Ajara, a focus group discussion with religious leaders indicated that the community’s attitude *“towards marriage before 18 is negative...but mainly towards boys rather than girls...and parents also see marriage after 30 negatively”*.

Several participants explained that early/child marriage was something that occurred in the past, though they clarified that they are only talking about 10 years ago: *“I remember a girl who got married during the last year at the secondary school, she was pregnant during graduation ceremony and her husband came with a bunch of flowers. It happened 10-12 years ago. I have not heard about similar cases these years, though”* (Focus group with teachers in Tbilisi). Some participants, however, note that two decades ago, economic circumstances, driven mainly by shifts in the country after the fall of the Soviet Union, were a driving force for why early/child marriages took place with poverty and food shortages intersecting to increase the likelihood of marriage, since after marriage, the girl’s family would have one fewer mouth to feed. Additionally, fears that one’s daughter would be abducted for marriage were considered a reason for early/child marriage.

In the present day, however, respondents explain that there is low likelihood of girls being forced

into marriage. Many state that girls are seeking out education first (see more in section 3.5.1) before opting for marriage, albeit others noting that many factors act as obstacles against girls obtaining an education.

Nevertheless, despite some perceptions that early/child marriage was a practice of the past, evidence from the interviews clearly found that early/child marriages for girls continue to occur. Several Georgian groups and participants in Tbilisi believe that early/child marriage is particularly prevalent among the non-Georgian minority populations. Other interviews, such as a focus group with unmarried boys aged 13-15 years, also suggests that early/child marriage may be more common in *“mountainous regions, distant from the cities”*. Similarly, a focus group discussion in Tbilisi with married men indicated that they thought that among Azerbaijani ethnic groups, adolescents are married any time after 16 years of age.

That being said, the data consistently indicated that early/child marriage is prevalent across the country, largely because - as the following sections will indicate – rather than being specific to certain ethnic minorities and traditions, it is driven by inequitable gender norms and discriminatory gender relations that are prevalent across all ethnic groups across urban as well as rural sites. In other words, the practice is driven by harmful notions of masculinity (or what it means to be a man) and femininity (or what it means to be a woman), and the underpinning gendered power dynamics that accompany such conceptualizations. Perhaps the perception that early/child marriage occurs among ethnic minorities or remote villages could explain why the data indicates that though early/child marriage was prevalent across all regions, there were more mentions of earlier age of marriage of girls in ethnic minority groups (i.e., at age 13, 14, 15) compared to the general population, which

had more mentions of marriage at 16 or 17 years. A key informant in Chiatura, Imereti shared that *“lately there have been many cases of early/child marriage” and that they “get information about 5-6 early/child marriage cases every month where girls frequently get married before turning 18, when they are 16”*. The contradictory views of increased early/child marriages in the present day vis-a-vis those who believed early/child marriage occurred in the past could perhaps be explained by the fact that in the present day, early/child marriages are largely driven by the perception that adolescents are choosing to get married early (see more in section 3.2.2). Indeed, one medical service provider in Sagarejo, Kakheti recounts the story of a girl who married a boy, who was disliked by the parents, and reinforced that this incident does not count as early/child marriage since the *“parents didn’t make the girl marry the boy”*.

There is also evidence of marriage by abduction though the evidence suggested it has declined in recent years, but participants did raise it as happening recently in some cases. Once kidnapped and married, girls are discouraged from returning home as explained by a 23 year-old woman in Tbilisi who was kidnapped as a child: *“We have such a rule, when a girl is kidnapped, she can not return back home”*. Similarly, in Telavi, Kakheti, one police officer explains that girls are sometimes kept out of schools to avoid marriage by abduction.

An interesting gender difference emerged: boys were much more *“free”* to make decisions around marriage (30 year-old married male in Tbilisi). Interviewees discussed that the society continues to view unmarried girls who are older than 24 years negatively (male family member in Racha-Lechkhumi Kvemo Svaneti) and are often thought of as *“disgraced”* as seen in the excerpt below from a journalist in Tbilisi:

*“I would say that on the contrary, boys marry at an older age. Girls who are late, people in the village call them “latecomers”.*

### 3.2.2 GIRLS’ AND BOYS’ AGENCY AND EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE

**Overview.** Girls and boys indicate that there are historical shifts in the nature of early/child marriage, where presently, both girls and boys perceive that they have more choices and say in choosing their partners, especially if they are in a relationship. This, however, is truer for boys than girls, since some girls feel pressured to marry, despite already being in a relationship and since family norms are more supportive of boys telling parents of their choice for a partner than girls. Though the findings are mixed across the sites about the importance and power of parental approval, there is a consensus that newly married adolescents are highly likely to live with the parents, especially if they are from difficult socio-economic backgrounds. Fathers play a more powerful role in decision-making around marriage, especially for girls than mothers, whose decision-making is considered an opinion instead of a decision. The role of agency, choice and consent in Georgian context is complex and requires further research to understand its implications and variations.

**Results. Adolescent Agency in Marriage.** A strong emergent finding is that adolescents who are already in a relationship are likely to enter unions. Global research on “agency” in early/child marriage and girls’ empowerment is contributing to a better understanding of girls’ choices, and the ways in which those choices are constrained by social norms as well as structural factors, such as poverty and available opportunities (see Murphy-Graham & Leal, 2015; Vaitla et al., 2017; Bajaj, 2009). Indeed, the majority of unions in this research in Georgia indicated that adolescents demonstrate a perceived choice, or agency to

marry the partner with whom they were already in a relationship, with several respondents agreeing that it is their decision to get married. Participants note that their decision is made as a result of a “mutual choice” between the boy and the girl, with “no pressure or force”.

The data also indicates that both boys and girls have more freedom to choose their partners in the present day, even though this freedom is clearly more available to boys than girls. For instance, female participants note that even though they were not keen to get married early, their boyfriends showed more interest in marriage than them, leading girls to “decide at last” to marry as well. Moreover, there is more stigma attached to a girl telling her parents about a boy she likes as opposed to a boy telling his parents the same. Clearly, the role of agency, choice and consent in Georgian context is one that could be explored in further research.

**Role of Parents in Early/Child Marriage.** Family arose as central to Georgians across participant groups and provinces, and thus, it is not surprising that for most adolescents, their social networks comprise mainly of family members, though some turn to their peers as well. The findings suggest that parental approval of early/child marriage for those who are in a relationship has mixed outcomes. In some cases, interviews indicate that parents had to accept their children’s decision to marry, as noted in the following exchange with a 17-year-old girl in Tbilisi:

*“In our situation marriage is already decided. We will marry in the nearest future. The final word in deciding about the marriage didn’t belong to anybody. From the very beginning we both decided to start a family. I was very young and in general it is not accepted to marry before 18. We met with each other’s parents and they had to face the fact as we told them that we loved each other”.*

In other cases, however, for example in Batumi, Ajara, interviewees state that parent approval is very important and there have been cases where parent's resistance to marriage ensured that the adolescents did not get married (e.g., as stated by a religious leader in Ajara). Similarly, in Sagarejo, Kakheti a focus group discussion with religious leaders indicates that not only is parental approval important, but those who do not obey their parents face societal criticism and *"are judged and perceived in a negative way"*.

Patriarchal norms, the position of fathers as heads of household and mothers as nurturers, ensure that approval was often required from fathers as decision makers while mothers' approval was categorized as concern. For instance, when asked who has the last word regarding marriage in the household, a father in Kvemo Kartli replied *"Of course, mine, I am the father and the leader of my family"*. Several other interviewees share that their fathers made the final decision regarding their marriage. For mothers, approval was masked as apprehension or worry about the suitability of the match (see more in 3.1.5). Respondents note that mothers *"have a right to ask about the match in the neighborhood"* and that mothers' *"opinions"* are important for a girl's decision. The inherent power dynamics between a mother and father in giving approval is captured in several excerpts, especially in focus group discussions with 12-15 year-old girls.

Clearly such gender differences are carried on inter-generationally, whereby girls are more likely to need approval from parents than boys:

*"Generally, girl's mother is a main person, but father says the last word, girl could be underage, but they still ask her about her opinion. In case of boys, generally they decide by themselves"* (Religious leader, Kvemo Kartli).

In addition to parental approval, the interviews indicate that when adolescents choose to get married at a young age, parents provide the crucial financial support to the newlyweds. Indeed, some participants suggest that early/child marriage can be avoided, as long as the parents themselves teach children to become *"financially secure"* first (focus group with teachers in Tbilisi). Though there is no clear indication on what being financially secure entails, some interviewees suggest that *"being able to provide"* (journalist in Tbilisi) for others is a way to determine financial readiness for marriage.

When parents provide financial support, it includes allowing newlyweds to reside with the parents, in addition to providing them with necessary material needs. An interview with a civil society representative reveals that these living arrangements are more likely to occur in families where finances are constrained (a 20 year-old female in Imereti).

As a result of this co-habitation with parents, many interviewees state that the pressure to become financially independent before marriage is high, especially for boys. For girls, the pressure to complete an education is a driving force to delay marriage, though cases of that were limited. More often, the pressure to marry hindered girls' continuing their education. For boys, however, the interviews find that expectations around being a provider for the family are frequently passed onto adolescent boys.

### 3.2.3 TYPES OF MARRIAGE

*Overview.* While most marriages start with an engagement, there are several cases of marriage without any engagement. In marriages where engagement takes place, it almost inevitably leads to marriage, though when the

engagement is broken, there is some evidence of stigmatization against the couple. Perhaps that is why respondents share feeling pressured after engagement to get married quickly. Most notably, the age difference between the couples indicates that, on average, brides are at least 2-3 years younger than grooms – irrespective of forced or consensual marriage. Norms around fertility of younger women and men’s need to be able to financially provide for their family is noted as the underlying reasons for these age differences. It is important for future research to assess the ways in which marriage may differ between communities since often marriage ceremonies are a way to enhance social standing in the community. While this was not specifically found in our study, often programming strategies focus on reducing the connection between marriage and status in the community.

**Results. Before the union: pathways to early/child marriage.** In terms of the steps taken in the marriage ceremony, interviewees note that in the majority of the cases, there is no defined path for how marriages take place. While in the past, matchmakers would arrange marriages without allowing the boy or girl to have any say in the decision, today even after using a matchmaker (as noted in Tbilisi, Kakheti, and Kvemo Kartli), the respondents feel that both the boy and the girl must agree. The “*custom*” described in a focus group of 15-17 year-olds in Marnueli, Kvemo Kartli, is that when a boy likes a girl, the parents go to the girl’s family to “*ask for her hand in marriage*”.

The data indicated that though engagement followed by marriage is a norm, many respondents share that they did not have an engagement. In a traditional setup, however, the process is that an engagement occurs first and is often done when the adolescent (mainly the girl) is under 18 years.

*“According to our traditions, I proposed to her and then we had an engagement ritual. After that, we were engaged for 8-9 months and when I settled some matters, we got married. We had a traditional wedding ceremony”* (17 year-old married male, Lagodekhi, Kakheti).

In most cases, respondents explain that “*engagement always ends with marriage*” (31 year-old woman, Tbilisi), but there were some examples of broken engagements since “*an engagement is easier to break than marriage*” (22 year-old married female, Rustavi). Evidence was mixed on whether any stigma exists about broken engagements. When an engagement is broken, the girl and boy simply “*return back money and everything she received from each other’s family*” (23 year-old unmarried female, Tbilisi).

*“Engagement is a commonly accepted form of relationship in our community, though it is not a necessary precondition for marriage. Sometimes it happens that the engagement is cancelled. The engagement gives people opportunity to know each other better. You might be engaged for 3 months or more. During this time the person is able to learn more about his/her partner. But if you find out anything you don’t like the engagement doesn’t oblige you to marry”* (17 year-old married female in Tbilisi).

Engagement rituals include “*sending sweets to the spouse’s family after the engagement*” (Female in Marnueli, Kvemo Kartli) followed by wedding and religious ceremony. In Muslim communities, such as those in Marnueli, girls gather at the bride’s home and put henna on each other’s palms.

**Age Difference between Bride and Groom.** In a majority of the marriages across all the regions studied, girls are younger in age than the boy. An analysis of the participants’ responses indicates

that the average age gap between a girl and a boy is 2-3 years, though there were a few cases where the age gap was much larger. Indeed, one respondent explained that the big age gap between her husband and her may have contributed to her consenting to marriage since she herself was too young to know what marriage means and what it entails.

While early/child marriage also occurs with boys under 18 years, the majority of the girls were less than 18 years while their grooms were older than 18 years. Numerous examples across all age groups reveal that girls prefer older boys in marriage, while boys prefer younger girls in marriage. The respondents highlight that the prevailing stereotype is that girls should be younger than boys and that husbands should be older than wives. Reasons given for these age preferences revolve around the misconception that younger women have healthier fertility than older women, and that older men are better equipped to be providers than younger boys.

In a few cases, parents reinforce the stereotype by seeking out spouses for their children where a girl is younger than their son. One respondent explained that his mother desires a 17-18 year-old girl for his 29 year-old brother and suggests that over time his brother has also internalized the wish for a much younger bride. The social consequences of having an older daughter-in-law can be extreme as explained by the boy who says that *“My mother will kill herself if her future daughter-in-law is 25 years old”* (Focus group with teachers in Zugdidi, Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti).

### 3.3 CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE

**Overview.** There are several drivers of early/child marriage in Georgia that emerge from the qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. A strong factor is the fact that

adolescents who are *“in love”* are seeking to get married early, with respondents attributing this phenomenon to greater freedom given to adolescents in this generation. However, a closer analysis indicated that several other factors contribute to why adolescents seek to get married when they are in a relationship. First, norms that restrict adolescents from meeting freely are contributing to adolescents marrying as a way to do away with seeking permission to meet their boy/girlfriends. Second, strict norms that consider pre-marital sex as taboo ensure that getting married is an acceptable alternative that will allow adolescents to explore their sexuality. Third, norms of masculinity that promote men as sexual beings contributes to boys wanting to have sexual relations during adolescence. Fourth, the increased use of technology and the limited spaces for leisure in some sites has created a context whereby adolescents are engaging with their peers only through social media and are seeking meaningful connections in real life. Fifth, economic challenges, aggravated by the high unemployment rates, has led to marriage being the only suitable financial option available to families. Sixth, social pressures and norms that stigmatize unmarried girls in their 20s play a role in driving early/child marriage. Co-residence with in-laws also creates a context where mothers-in-law seek out younger daughters-in-law so they can be more easily trained. Finally, bodily appearance decides when a girl is considered a woman, and often if she looks mature or experiences puberty early, then she is more at-risk for early/child marriage. The intersecting nature of these factors has created a context of limited opportunities and options for adolescents, which results in a perception that adolescents are choosing to marry early.

**Results. Dating and being in love.** First, there was a strong pattern across all the sites that *“being in love”* was a contributor to adolescents seeking to marry early. Many adolescents, parents, and

key informant interviewees state that *“great love...passion”* determine adolescents’ decisions (17 year-old female, Samtskhe-Javakheti). In Sagarejo, Kakheti, one civil society representative attributes the rising phenomenon of early/child marriages in Kakheti to *“more freedom”* among the younger generation. Similarly, in Tbilisi, a teacher states that *“the modern girls make decisions on their own. They choose their partners based on their needs”* (Focus group with teachers, Tbilisi).

Within the larger context of dating, norms that restrict adolescents from meeting freely may also contribute to getting married early. When adolescents feel like they cannot date freely, they choose the path of marriage. As one interviewee in Rustavi states, *“I think by limiting those who are in love, parents also encourage them to marry”* (17 year-old girl in Kvemo Kartli). Restrictions include meeting in public for instance, stopping girls from meeting their friends, limiting girls’ *“freedom”* and *“restricting their right to independence”*.

**Sex, sexuality and marriage.** There was also evidence that early/child marriage was the only alternative for adolescents who wanted to be engaged in sexual activity before marriage given that there are strong norms prohibiting girls from pre-marital sex:

*“We know that there is high value on virginity in the Caucasus, this is not only in Georgia or Azerbaijan, this is in all the Caucasus: our tradition, and sexual life happens, as we know, in terms of marriage”* (Female family member, Tbilisi).

Despite such norms, girls did in fact have sex before marriage, and in cases, where pregnancy ensues from pre-marital sex, marriage typically follows. As a mother of a daughter in Imereti explains, restrictions on pre-marital sex are a

driver for early/child marriage given that parents will *“get crazy”* if they find out that children are having sex before marriage.

**Masculine norms supporting early/child marriage.** There is also evidence that certain practices reinforce norms that promote men as needing sex to be manly, and expectations to be providers. This evidence coincides with increasing attention to the importance of involving men and boys in ending early/child marriage (Greene et al., 2015). Their roles as religious leaders, fathers, husbands, brothers, and peers are undeniably influential in shaping marriage decisions and experiences, and given their prevalence in the findings, masculine norms must be understood and incorporated into efforts to address early/child marriage in Georgia.

One interviewee explains that a rite of passage in fathers taking teenage boys to sex workers to *“learn about sex”* (32 year-old female, Tbilisi) that strongly feeds into norms of masculinity and sexuality. In turn, young men are expected to enter marriage knowing about sex while girls are expected to be virgins. The support of men’s sex prior to marriage (yet lack of support of sexual and reproductive health services for men in general) also increases the risk of sexually transmitted infections to wives.

Perhaps the most dominant masculine norm was that men should be providers and heads of household, which ensures that boys see themselves as heads of the households and normalizes this role for them from a young age.

**Influence of technology and social media.** In places where opportunities to interact with peers and pursue recreational activities are limited, as most commonly raised in rural areas, adolescents turn to digital technology to interact with their friends and boy/girlfriends.

Both adults and adolescents see cell phones and social media as potentially contributing to adolescent relationships and entering into unions in as much as it facilitates meeting and communication among peers. Adolescent interviewees state that technology and social media play a “huge role” in today’s generation as they “depend a lot on social networks”, explaining that social media plays a role in couples meeting and falling in love.

This trend is one that has changed the nature of adolescent peer and romantic interactions worldwide, but some adolescents expressed concerns of adolescents connecting only through online social networks and when they meet in real life, they “*think that they are in love*”. Perhaps this may explain why there is a perception that divorce among couples who marry early is high (see more in section 4.2.3). Still, the findings reflect adolescents across the country seeking opportunities to connect meaningfully with peers.

**Economic pressures.** As noted in the global literature, in addition to social pressures, financial constraints are a major driver for early/child marriage. In Georgia, similar trends emerged from the data, whereby young people get married “*because the family faces financial shortage and they are running away from poverty*” (30 year-old male, Kvemo Kartli). Examples of anecdotes where adolescents got married to get “*better nutrition*” (Civil society representative, Imereti) or to escape neglect at home were scattered across the interviews (focus group with 13-17 year-old boys, Tbilisi). It was also found that often marriage is a way to escape difficult family contexts where violence is common as well.

There were several instances of mothers stating that ensuring that their daughter is in a financially secure family was an important consideration for marriage. As noted above, inherent gender

norms situate mother’s concern as a fear or apprehension, while fathers are seen more as active decision-makers.

For boys, interviewees in all sites suggest that dowry is an important factor driving marriage: “*There are a lot of cases [of early/child marriage due to economic problems]. 80% is dependent on how many and what kind of dowry is there, and what kind of economic situation the girl or boy has*” (Focus group with teachers in Zugdidi, Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti).

The marriage practices in Georgia also highlight that marriage is often seen as a union between two families. The strong kinship rules are often at the center of determining when and who children marry. Indeed, as seen in our findings, adolescents often internalized their parent’s desire for economic stability and despite being forced into early/child marriage, rationalized their parent’s decision and share that they are “*happy*”.

Participants also reveal that financial constraints hinder their ability to continue their education, termed “*financial forcing*”, which often means that those without an education have only one option, which is to get married (also discussed below). Indeed, the dire national unemployment situation and job shortages were regarded as a driver for early/child marriage. In the excerpts below, participants explain that with high levels of competition, low employment rates, and lack of vocational opportunities, marriage seems the only easy way forward.

*“I think the main reason of early marriage is financial problems. Adolescents at this age feel disappointment, do not expect anything from studying. In fact, most of them do not want to study at all. If parents see that a child has no interest in studying, they make a decision to get him or her married and the*

*thinking behind this decision is to protect them from immoral lifestyle they might have. So, they consider marriage the only appropriate way-out from such situation” (Interview with teachers, Samtskhe-Javakheti).*

**Social pressures encourage girls marrying “before it’s too late.”**

Yet another driver for early/child marriage is that of social pressures in the society that compel parents or girls to seek marriage of girls at a young age. Interviewees reveal that the society considered girls older than 22 years to be “late” in getting married or consider 26-year-old girls to be “*spinsters*” and neighbors repeatedly ask young girls when they plan to marry. There was also evidence that mothers-in-law seek out younger daughters-in-law who they feel can be taught/trained more easily than older girls.

The value placed on marriage is high as is evident by excerpts that indicate that even when a couple is engaged, they experience pressure from others to get married, as being only engaged is viewed negatively in the society. One reason for this could be attributed to the fact that “*any kind of living together in Georgia is called marriage*” (28-year-old female, Tbilisi) because of the possibility of engaging in pre-marital sex. This suggests that as a society, engaging in sexual relations before marriage is considered taboo and is a contributor to the social pressure to marry early.

**Transitioning to adulthood.** One other driver for early/child marriage is that adolescent girls’ transition to puberty make them *appear* ready to marry in the eyes of men and other adults. Both age and appearance are considered adequate markers and respondents note that some girls exhibit these markers earlier than other girls:

*“In our community, it is very easy to become a woman and to marry. If she looks like a woman by her appearance and her age, she*

*can marry easily. More additional barriers for her don’t exist” (Focus group with religious leaders, Kvemo Kartli).*

*“For some, puberty starts at an early age. This is one of the reasons [for early/child marriage]” (Female member, Tbilisi).*

Indeed, findings reveal that “*maturity*”, defined often by girls’ appearance was a key approach to determining readiness for marriage. Moreover, participants note that girls mature earlier than boys, perhaps explaining why girls are marrying at earlier age than boys:

*“Of course, there is a difference between girls and boys in terms of adolescence period, because girls are growing and maturing earlier. As I have mentioned before, 9-10-11-12 years are end of the childhood” (Focus group with religious leaders, Kvemo Kartli).*

In one interview, it was revealed that in Batumi, Ajara a day before a marriage, the couple’s mothers take sweets to the Mosque leader, *imam*, and a process called *akht*, takes place where they decide to transform the girl to a woman – though this only takes place through a conversation. The lack of rituals suggest that adolescents are considered children before marriage and adults after marriage, suggesting that marriage itself is a marker that transitions children to adulthood. Indeed, several participants report that a boy is considered a man when he has “*responsibilities*” and “*has to take care of his family*” (Focus group with 13-17 year-old boys, Tbilisi).

*“If a girl looks like she is mature and ready for marriage then we let her marry. We don’t have circumcision or something similar and it won’t be in the future. It is important that girl was 17-18 years old and was ready for marriage, which is enough” (Female family member, Kvemo Kartli).*

### 3.4 RESISTING EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE

**Overview.** Examples of adolescents resisting early/child marriage are limited in this study, though there are many examples of unmarried girls stating that they have plans for their future that does not involve marriage. It is evident from the findings that society has often seen marriage and education and employment as mutually exclusive choices, especially for girls. Cases of some couples being in relationships or married and studying or working show that there is an increasing perception that both are possible. Interventions have the potential to enhance educational and livelihood opportunities to girls before and during marriage.

**Results.** Evidence from the interviews indicates that there are limited cases of adolescents resisting early/child marriage when forced by parents. There was a consensus that girls are more “compelled” to get married than boys and have fewer rights to be able to refuse a marriage that they do not want. In an interview in Gurjaani, an anecdote is shared to describe that even when girls may be resistant to marriage, their parents’ wishes often take precedent:

*“I haven’t heard about boys that they do not want to marry and somebody forced them. But I can tell you one example. My cousin wanted to marry this girl but the girl didn’t want to marry him. Eventually though her parents forced the girl to marry him” (17 year-old married male in Kakheti).*

That being said, there are also several positive examples of adolescent girls who are prioritizing education and employment, even when they are in a relationship. In one example, a media journalist shared that there was a story of a young girl who was being forced to marry but was

able to seek out help by applying to NGOs and resisting early/child marriage. A young unmarried woman from Tbilisi described that most of the time women can choose whether or not they marry, describing marrying by force or marriage by abduction as the circumstances in which a girl could not choose. Several adolescents themselves gave examples of wanting to have a career before getting married (more in section 3.5.1):

*“I personally, have always had plans and think that marriage might interfere with my education. Who knows, I might change my ideas” (Focus group 15-17 years unmarried males, Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti).*

### 3.5 IMPACT OF EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE

#### 3.5.1 EDUCATION AND CHILD MARRIAGE

**Overview.** The research team asked participants across Georgia about how they see marriage in relation to education. Education and marriage are generally seen as two opposite ends of a continuum, with many girls leaving education if they marry early. Part of the reason for this juxtaposition is the challenges with balancing the roles and responsibilities expected from young girls after marriage and education. Secondary or higher education for boys is privileged over education for girls, and often poverty and financial challenges acts as barriers against girls’ secondary or higher education. Approval for girls’ continued education post-marriage often rests in the hands of their husbands or their mothers/fathers-in-law. Most respondents agree that education is important for girls, but mainly in relation to being able to raise children well. Yet some girls and women have a more empowered narrative and suggest that education is important for girls’ themselves. The narratives highlight

that in cases when girls and important people in their family and broader network support girls' continued education, it can serve as a reason to delay marriage, or as a reason to improve the lives of married women and girls. Findings about the importance of broader well-being and aspirations girls have offer useful implications for policies and program interventions.

**Results. Linkages between early/child marriage and aspirations.** The interplay of education and early/child marriage, which is well-established in the global literature, plays a role in Georgia as well. While a few participants thought that education and marriage are unrelated, many made a clear link between marrying early and leaving school. A focus group with teachers in Tbilisi indicated that there are two groups of girls in Georgia: *“those who get married after school graduation and those who get married after university graduation”*.

There are examples of girls and women who noted that marriage *“changed their plans”* for the future. For instance, a 17-year-old married female explains that *“if I had not married, I would have good profession and a job”*. Such sentiments are described several times across the interviews, mostly by girls. Even when girls and women are able to work post-marriage, they struggle to navigate norms that expected them to behave as good girls and ideal women:

*“There are more obstacles for us women. First of all, elementarily that we really call double burden, that means to be a director, manage people at work and be very cool and to be good, patient, lovely at home. You should play, take care, wash, feed and be in good mood and not get angry. You should behave this way too, it is required of you to be like this. In other words, the standard is high and at any rate, in my personal experience, I can't afford to drop this standard - neither*

*at work and nor at home, or the standard is one and the same, high, and who is pressed? Me”* (Civil society worker in Tbilisi).

For boys, there are fewer examples of lost dreams and aspirations due to marriage, though at the same time, this may be because boys' aspirations are defined by normative masculine expectations of being a provider for the family, which they are able to fulfil just by getting married in the first place. A 17 year-old male in Tbilisi explains his aspiration of being able to become a provider in the following quote:

*“It depends on a boy: many dream about having lots of money, a nice car, nice apartment, etc. For me, a good life means my family's well-being; to be honest, I do not want to be a billionaire, and I just want to have enough money in order to take care of my family”*.

**Lack of support for adolescent education – especially that of girls.** Although some men were outwardly opposed to women and girls' education, research participants tended to describe a more nuanced set of attitudes toward education. Namely, they generally supported women and girls' education in the abstract, but felt that their education was difficult, if not impossible, to balance with their duties as wives, and, especially, as mothers. Similarly, they suggested that education is secondary when girls are expected to do housework and care for children. There was greater nuance in terms of support of girls' continued education in some cases, with frequent discussion of husbands', family members' and religious and other community leaders' support for girls' education.

Across diverse regions and groups within the sample, there were consistent narratives that society-at-large privileges the education of boys and men over that of women and girls. Most

agreed on primary schooling for girls but were less likely to support women's secondary schooling and much less likely to support higher education. In contrast, participants more often felt that men should marry while in or upon graduating from the university. By doing so, men would fulfil the expectations of manhood to become a provider for the household.

*"I think a boy should not marry as long as he doesn't have a house of his own, money, when he does not depend on his family and does not ask money to his dad. Personally, one should be embarrassed to ask for things when you get married, a boy has to consider lots of things before getting married. Girls too, it is not just about boys. Of course, the male is the leader in the family, it has always been so, but girls have their obligations, there should be mutual understanding and girls, like boys, should have things on their own, like employment, car, house, independence. Neither girls should hurry. She has to study, build a career, until then it is not at all desirable to get married"* (Focus group with 10-15 year-old girls).

**Women's and girls' continued schooling is seen as depending on financial and other forms of family support.** As noted above, despite the general acceptance and support for education through primary school, participants often framed the ability of women to continue into secondary, and especially, higher education (e.g., university) in terms of financial and familial support.

Diverse groups, i.e., married women, unmarried men, and medical specialists – described families' lack of financial means or struggling to survive, as reasons a girl might not continue education, but that otherwise it was possible. It should be noted that, even though secondary education is technically free of charge in Georgia, families'

lack of support for girls' secondary education may be influenced by the other responsibilities that girls are expected to take on once they reach puberty and reproductive age, and which may be perceived by families as more compelling than ensuring girls' continued access to education.

Participants in focus group of married women in Kakheti, unmarried boys in Tbilisi and religious leaders in Samtskhe-Javakheti reasoned that if man's income is high enough, the wife doesn't need to work or be educated. In another focus group with unmarried men in Tbilisi, they similarly reasoned that boys needed education to gain better chances of income. Teachers agreed that youth should continue studying after marriage *"if they can afford it"* (Teacher, Imereti). Religious leaders who participated in a focus group in a mosque of Tbilisi, also reinforced the notion that both in the couple are able to continue studying when the parents support the couple and their marriage:

*"I think that children require a lot of attention, but if couple's parent will support them, they will manage to do everything, but if they don't, then couple should give up one of them (Focus group with religious leaders, Tbilisi).*

Whereas there was less doubt about the need for girls to complete primary and even secondary education, several participants, from both rural and urban sites, conveyed greater reservations about whether young women would or could continue education at higher levels. Participants described youth continuing education if certain circumstances were in place: especially in the case of women and girls, if the father has money, or if the mother-in-law supports it. Offering support to one another in a focus group in Kutaisi, mothers and female family members described being invested in their daughter's education and

stated that it is “horrible” when parents do not reach that goal of educating their daughters.

**Married girls are discouraged from attending school.** A teacher who worked in Georgian and Azerbaijani schools described administrators and parents alike prohibiting married girls from being in the classroom, arguing that once they had married, they would “spoil” other girls. Schools even offered overlooking absences and issuing diplomas in order to keep married girls away (see more in 3.3.3). This teacher explained that the reason was that married girls had moved on to another phase of life as “women” and could, thus, be understood to be sexually active and no longer appropriate to be peers for unmarried girls. Female family members also reinforced the idea that a married woman should not be in school because she should be taking care of her family.

Referring to certain communities in Karajala, there was a mention of girls not being allowed to go to school so they would not be kidnapped for marriage. While marriage by abduction remains a far less common practice among communities that traditionally accepted it, notions of keeping girls out of school for reasons based on their marital and maternal status continue and should be considered in policy and program intervention strategies.

**Husbands who advocated for girls’ schooling often determined whether girls continued with their education.** A young husband from a village in the Gardabani district in Kvemo Kartli region advocated for his wife’s continued schooling, even though he explained that she did not want to continue her education:

*“... In my opinion, it is better and necessary for a girl to continue education. As I mentioned I wanted my spouse to continue education, but*

*she did not want and left the school, I even had some quarrel with her. Higher education is of the same importance for a boy and a girl. Marriage didn’t much affect our family, for example my spouse did not want herself to go on with her education, my parents advised me to take spiritual education and this was not related to the marriage.”*

The interview with this husband was illustrative of the complexity of social norms and individuals’ and couples’ experiences in negotiating marriage, health (pregnancy and having children), and education. He acknowledged that in the community, girls’ education was not seen as important. Yet he valued education and aspired to be a teacher, which may explain supporting his wife’s education. The closeness in age of the couple (he married at 17, she at 16) would not necessarily determine a more equitable relationship in terms of gender roles but may have contributed to a more equitable partnership compared to if the same 16-year-old girl had married a much older man, for example. Finally, the narrative of the same husband in Gardabani indicated a strong social norm in his community that *women/girls should have a child within the first year of marriage* (not doing so would result in gossip, he explained). Thus, it is possible that she refused going to school in order to abide by the community’s expectation of her to be a wife and mother (over continuing her own schooling, even despite her husband’s support). Further research could explore these dynamics and girls’ and women’s weighing of educational decisions in the context of marital and motherhood expectations.

In a similar situation, a married young woman from Pankisi in Kakheti described how a religious leader took his wife to the university and would wait for his wife outside the university until she finished her study though a participant in the same focus group commented that such situations were rare.

Married men's views were mixed (e.g., focus group with boys 15-17 years, Marnueli, Kvemo Kartli), generally favoring secondary education with some variation across communities following that:

*“Generally, the education of the girls is not a priority, their education is not acceptable. Everybody thinks it is not necessary for them to study, anyway in the middle of the study process she will marry somebody, why we should spend energy in the nonsense, that's why they do not educate the girls.*

- *Mainly the girls are taken from school after the 9th grade.*
- *The situation is not similar everywhere,, they educate both, boys and girls.*
- *There is not exactly the same situation in our community, there is category who educate the girls too, and there is also the category who does not, it is mixed”.*

Most of the young married men in a focus group in Kvemo Kartli, however, also described education positively, stating that boys are keen to get married to educated girls, despite the perception marriage imposes upon studying. For instance, they noted that boys “*dream*” of an educated girl and that many families want an “*educated girl as a daughter-in-law*”. Married men in Racha - Lechkumi - Kvemo Svaneti also expressed being aware of disadvantages and restrictions women face in continuing to study after marriage if they wish to do so.

Young married women (ages 18-24) who participated in a focus group in Kakheti described that men's education levels contributed toward their more equitable views: “*those [men] who are studying have different ideas.*” They also explained that husbands who are studying can also help their wives study.

**“Girls must know everything”: Women's and girls' education, for whom?** Women and girls' education was sometimes discussed and justified in terms of benefits for their children, i.e., girls need to eventually raise and educate their children, and for their husbands. Some men, such as those who were married or were religious leaders, cited that education was important for mothers to raise their children well, while other men opposed education altogether, framing education in opposition to family: “*family is more important*”. An unmarried girl below the age of 18 from Kvareli mentioned a proverb: “*there is always an educated woman behind the clever and successful man,*” adding “*I don't think anybody would like to have illiterate wife, who can't bring up children*”.

Religious leaders generally supported girls' education but explained that education for girls can come at a cost, or that women should be well educated because they will be raising the children (Religious leaders in Ajara). They also cite Islam as supporting education for men and women.

A married girl (aged 12-17) from Lagodekhi, Kakheti described how her father decided her future for her by disagreeing with the school administrators and using influence in the police to help her drop-out of school. She explained that her father felt that for girls, married girls face multiple burdens of responsibility and education does not have a place in such types of responsibility.

Importantly, girls and other groups described the value of education as important for women and girls themselves, explaining that people around them see boys and girls equally and thus both should continue learning; because it is good for everyone's future; and in case the couple splits up, a woman would need to earn a living herself.

On the other hand, unmarried girls in Kakheti described themselves and community members as valuing and wanting to prioritize education, even though in some cases families discouraged it.

**Girls and young women themselves describe a complex relationship among marriage and schooling – but strong desires for education.**

Similar to the discussion of the married girl from Kakheti girls often wanted to continue studying but did not because marriage is not equated with school, and because of the challenge – mostly raised by family members and married and unmarried men - of balancing studies with family responsibilities. Other girls saw that if they were to continue with school, they would not have married. In a focus group, the facilitator asked married women aged 18-24 from Pankisi, whether marriage affected their plans or not:

*Several married women: I wanted, .....I wanted....I wanted so much....*

*Facilitator asking married woman 1: You did not want to study?*

*Married woman 1: If I wanted to study I would not have got married.*

*Facilitator: Did you get married on your own? Or someone told you to get married?*

*Married woman 1: On my own.*

*Facilitator: So, you did not want to study?*

*Married woman 1: I wanted, but I got married all the same.*

*Married woman 2: I thought they would let me to continue studying even after marriage...[...] My mother-in-law let me go to schools, I got a certificate, but I could not take exams as I could not register on time [...] After marriage I got pregnant and I said I would continue when my child was older.*

*Facilitator: So, you could continue studying but after getting pregnant you could not?*

*Married woman 2: Yes*

*Married woman 3: I always repeat that even if I am 80 I will finish my studies.*

Some girls and women returned to school after marriage and pregnancy, and one who was still below the age of 18 said she felt more motivated to study (24) – but returning to studies was less common, especially outside of Tbilisi. In Tbilisi, however, evidence of agency and aspiration indicates that even after marriage, some girls are seeking out educational opportunities. A 25-year-old female explains that she realized the importance of the higher education and a profession only after marriage.

Girls often narrate gender divides that position men as providers and heads of household and women as responsible for domestic tasks. In a focus group discussion with 15-year-old girls in Tbilisi, the participants state that women only need to be employed if the husband does not earn enough money. This indicates that girls see women's participation in the workforce as more of a necessity rather than an empowering pathway: *“If the man's income is high enough for family it isn't necessary for the wife to work.”*

**Educational aspirations and reality upon marriage are seen as different but can be joined.**

Young married boys aged 12-17, in Lagodekhi, Kakheti said that promises and reality are different:

*“When young people marry, boys promise girls that they will let them continue studying at school, they will support her to study, that boys will take them to school and so on. But in reality, it happens that boy marries a school age girl and then he forgets about his promise and as a result the girl leaves school. Of course, marriage is a barrier for studying at school and at the university (17-year-old male, Kakheti).*

In a focus group in Zugdidi, with unmarried girls ages 12 to 17, themes of planning but then abandoning further education were raised. In the

same focus group, however, an unmarried girl added that she was no longer against marrying but wanted to finish school first and did not want to be dependent on a husband, while another girl explained that she wanted to develop her sense of self before getting married.

### 3.5.2 HEALTH IMPLICATONS

Overview. Girls' marital status strongly influences the kinds of health risks they face and their access to health services. Because girls who marry as children or adolescents are more likely to give birth before their bodies are prepared to support healthy pregnancies and childbirth, evidence shows that early/child marriage increases the risk of maternal and infant morbidities and mortalities (Nove et al., 2014; Raj & Boehmer, 2013; Raj, 2010). Most participants agreed and showed awareness of the health consequences of early/child marriage, ranging from complications with childbirth at a young age to psychological distress as a result of early/child marriage. While participants did not explicitly discuss post-partum mental health, several shared that young girls are unprepared for the stresses of a family life and childbirth. There were also mentions of negative consequences on children of young/adolescent mothers, given the stresses adolescent mothers undergo. The findings show that girls are more likely to access SRHR services only if they are married, largely due to the strict norms that shame girls for engaging in sexual activity pre-marriage. Interestingly, many participants, such as young men, women and religious leaders were not actually opposed to girls' SRH services prior to marriage, but rather acknowledged its relevance. There were mixed responses on whether family members, especially husbands accompany girls to gynecology visits. This form of embarrassment may explain why maternal issues were given more importance than SRH issues.

*Results.* This study focuses on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) aspects of early/child marriage, but also explores broader themes about the implications of early/child marriage on health and well-being..

**Knowledge and awareness of health effects related to early/child marriage.** Unmarried girls, and most other groups – including religious leaders from the sample demonstrated awareness of maternal, newborn, infant and child health risks associated with marriage below the age of 18. They described that girls' bodies were too small to bear children and that complications could arise with pregnancy and childbirth, especially among young girls. However, married and unmarried girls and young women as well as health service providers indicated that girls had lacked knowledge about SRH issues, including risks and protection, such as lack of information about how one could get pregnant, pleasure, the human body, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and relationships. There was also a mention of children born to adolescent mothers being affected as noted in the following quote:

*“Early/child marriage might have negative impact on a child's health, because the mother herself is not fully developed at this age and she herself needs further development”* (Civil society representative, Samtskhe - Javakheti).

**Norms around marriage influence health seeking for gynecology visits.** Consistently, participants described the norm that girls go to a gynecologist upon marriage, or only in case of a medical “problem” or pregnancy rather than for routine visits. A medical specialist in Ajara added that only rarely would girls visit a gynecologist prior to marriage and they would try to do so without being seen. Research participants across groups

and settings in Georgia stressed that unmarried girls, in particular, face taboos when it comes to accessing SRH services. Prior to marriage, girls are not encouraged to see a gynecologist - neither alone, nor for routine visits. If they do go before marriage, they are expected to be accompanied by a parent.

Girls, family members, husbands, and health providers alike described that girls go to consultations prior to marrying to determine whether girls had *“lost their virginity,”* i.e., partners/family members requested girls’ hymens to be examined and medical records updated as a way to obtain documentation of girls’ virginity. Women and girls’ virginity is associated with desirability or eligibility to marry.

Upon entering marriage, it is acceptable for women and girls to seek routine gynecology visits. Responses varied as to whether wives then go alone, with their mothers-in-law, or with their husbands, depending on the husbands’ preference. Some communities looked down upon husbands accompanying their wives. Young married women in a focus group in Kakheti described preferring that husbands wait outside the consult room, explaining that they would feel embarrassed should the husband come inside the room.

Unmarried and married girls’ feelings of shame and embarrassment in accessing SRH services echoed throughout interviews. Married and unmarried young men also reinforced couples’ fears of information reaching families, and that men did not belong in the health system, alone or with their wives:

*“Sometimes they think if they visit doctors, their relatives will get the information”* (17-year-old, Shida Kartli).

*“I think girls before marriage do not go to a gynecologist. I haven’t heard about it. But after marriage, when the girl becomes pregnant of course everyone goes to the gynecologist. ... Men usually don’t often visit doctors. They think they are healthy, and can overcome pain at home, without doctors.”* (Married man from Gardabani, Kvemo Kartli).

*“If a girl is unmarried, that is already a barrier [to her going to a gynecologist]”.* (Young woman in a focus group with married young women aged 18-24).

Similarly, other married young women described never hearing of unmarried women/girls going to a gynecologist. Unmarried young women aged 18 to 24 in Tbilisi who explained that married girls/women should see a gynecologist in light of a problem with childbearing. When they did go, these young women described that men would not accompany them.

A clear finding from this research was that unmarried girls face significant barriers to accessing SRH services. Diverse participants - married young women and men, civil society representatives, including religious and community leaders suggested that unmarried girls often avoided seeking health services because of taboos; i.e., family members would find out about sex or relationships outside of marriage.

Both married and unmarried girls/women, boys/ men, and other participants, such as family members described the challenge and stigma of unmarried girls’ seeking SRH services. Some were in support of girls being able to access health services, while others explained why husbands or mothers-in-law accompanied girls upon marriage; rarely did participants raise the

possibility of unmarried girls accessing SRH services (neither alone, nor accompanied). Similar to trends worldwide, children and adolescents' financial dependence on parents was also cited as a barrier to their accessing health services, i.e., for fear of disclosing to their family their reason for going to a doctor.

It is notable, however, that these same participants, such as young men and women and religious leaders who noted that unmarried girls do not go to gynecologists, did not, in fact, oppose girls' SRH services prior to marriage, but rather acknowledged the relevance of SRH services. Religious leaders also suggested attitudes that supported SRH services for women prior to marriage by stating that girls should visit gynecologist before marriage. Only rarely was religion cited as a barrier to going to gynecologists (Religious leader in Ajara).

Similarly, a religious leader in Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti responded with a question when asked if unmarried girls go to gynecologists: *"What is the difference if her heart or stomach hurts? If it is necessary, they should address the doctor; there should not be any barriers."*

Norms that underscore the notion that only married girls are sexually active, in turn, promote unmarried girls' avoidance of health services. Girls avoid health services in order to prevent family members from knowing about issues related to sex, sexuality, or relationships, and to mitigate fighting with the family – which could lead to the family splitting up the couple. A young married man from Tbilisi described this dynamic:

*"Their family will find out and she doesn't know what will happen. What if a big argument, or a "war" starts? So, parents also will break up the relationship, and when a girl realizes all this, she prefers not to visit a doctor, and will get the treatment from*

*someone and will take medicines [such as those a relative or friend might provide]."* (17-year-old female in Shida Kartli).

As a result, girls often avoided health services in situations in which they may be exposed to greater risks, i.e., upon sexual initiation, of either STIs, pregnancy, or informal health procedures. For example, participants rarely raised abortion, but when they did, married and unmarried couples and service providers alike, for example, spontaneously raised concerns of unsafe and clandestine abortions. The following quote, for example, suggests abortion may be perceived by young women as a way to avoid a marriage, given the norms that discourage both - sex and childbearing outside of marriage. Interviewees said that abortions are being done in *"basements"* and thus cannot be tracked.

A focus group with unmarried girls reinforced the themes of abortions, and accessing services:

*Unmarried girl: When I studied at the last school, girls were ashamed of visiting gynecologists. My classmate was pregnant in 9th grade, she couldn't say it to her mother and sister, and finally how it finished I don't know, the boy was in 10th grade. I think at last her aunt took her to the doctor for abortion.*

*Facilitator: What if you need some information, or consultation? is there access to visiting doctors, or school doctor, is there anybody who can give you advice?*

*- No, there isn't, we can't ask anything about this*

*- Maybe there are, but I don't have information*

*- If there were, such institution, anyway girls would prefer to hide everything*

*Facilitator: Does this situation change after 18? Are the girls accompanied by their husbands?*

- After 18 it changes, and everybody visits gynecologists (Focus group with 12-16 year-olds in Kakheti).

**Maternal and child health (MCH) are often seen as a “women’s issue” and as priorities over broader SRH.** Married women and men especially, told multiple examples of childbirths involving girls and adolescents, such as complications and poor conditions in maternity houses, hospitals, and home births. Young married women and men also talked about couples deciding together about sex, children, etc.; they discussed contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancy but almost never for STI prevention – both in the case of unmarried and married partners. Couples’ and societal acceptance of gynecologists - before considering becoming pregnant, and especially upon becoming pregnant - indicates a priority of MCH and protecting girls as mothers, over SRH services for girls prior to marriage (and perhaps after childbearing age). An unmarried young woman aged 18-24, Tbilisi described how the responsibilities for childbearing fall largely on girls:

*“After marriage, if she gets pregnant she maybe visits a gynecologist for childbirth, or maybe not. If she doesn’t get pregnant then she visits a doctor maybe one or two years after trying for a baby in order to find out why she doesn’t have a child. It is a girl’s fault if they don’t have a child, a boy doesn’t take any examination. She takes medical treatment, struggles and then it turns out that she doesn’t have any problem and everything was the boy’s fault (23-year-old female in Tbilisi).*

Similar to other interviews, when asked if husbands accompany women, she said that very often they did not. A young married man in Gardabani noted that: *“[the] daughter-in-law is always accompanied by her mother-in-law;*

*visiting a doctor with the husband is negatively perceived by community.”*

Finally, a father responded when asked if girls visit gynecologists: *“So, if she is seduced, she will hide this and won’t visit [the] doctor.”* This father alluded again to the practice that girls who have sexual relationships before marriage want to hide the relationship and thus avoid going to the doctor, and then added that married women/girls would not hesitate to seek medical attention. The involvement of men and boys in girls’ and women’s SRH and MCH may also be restricted by norms that discourage women and girls from exposing or talking about SRH, especially outside of the context of marriage but also within marriage. Matters of MCH, on the other hand, seemed to present more opportunities for men and boys, such as fathers and husbands, to be engaged in supportive and gender-equitable ways.

### 3.5.3 Mobility and social networks

*Overview.* Gender norms are a driving force for the way in which girls experience married life. Though before marriage, girls report high use of technology (such as cell phones or the internet), it is notable that after marriage, there is a consensus that their usage is drastically reduced, often at the hands of their husbands. Similarly, girls find themselves increasingly restricted in their mobility by both - the husband and husband’s parents after marriage. Reasons for such behaviors are rooted in the gender norms that dictate what is appropriate behavior for girls. These findings are enhanced in marriages where the age gap between the bride and groom is greater, given that there is a higher chance of more defined gender roles in that relationship. These findings indicate that gender socialization of societal norms is internalized by both boys and girls to produce strongly constrained contexts for girls after marriage.

*Results.* Once married, there are several changes that occur in the lives of young brides that restrict their movement and social freedom. These stem from the larger cultural norms around gender that follow stereotypical gender patterns found globally, as noted in this excerpt by a female family member in Tbilisi. She describes that the society's expectations of what it means to be a girl are often driving the way a girl can behave after marriage.

*"It depends on the context and conditions, for example here, in KvemoKartli, and usually in regions, [being] a boy means to have more freedom, rights given because of the mentalities of the society, and they have more might and power, and trust. And to be a girl means to have everything from this list less, so to have less right and freedom, as a citizen".*

Community norms dictate ways in which girls and boys should be socialized, and often this means restricting girls' mobility and deeming certain behaviors improper for girls but acceptable for boys. Often, women and girls abide by and reinforce these norms with girls thinking that restrictions are *"correct because girls acquire bad habits like bawdry, smoking or heavy drinking, etc. As for boys, it is acceptable"* (Focus group discussion with 16-year-old girls in Tbilisi).

The majority of the interviewees across sites, but especially in Tbilisi, agreed that *"very often girls are restricted in meeting and going out with friends"* after marriage, especially after they have had a baby. This includes both female and male friends, although male friends are especially forbidden.

Respondents note that often norms are reinforced by parents of the boy who use their influence on their son to restrict girls' freedom to meet friends. In Tbilisi, one girl explained that even when sons

don't live with their parents, they fear that their wives will cheat on them.

In an interesting analysis, one focus group discussion participant shares the stark way in which these rules apply differently to women and men:

*"No one will say, this husband drinks or puts the wife in bad condition, blackmails her, is being jealous. If a woman does this, it is a tragedy, but if the male does it, it is normal".* (Focus group with teachers in Zugdidi, Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti).

Indeed, a civil society representative explains that *"control is already a type of violence"* and in marriages where the age gap between the husband and wife is particularly big, the restriction is more definite given perhaps the greater gender inequality and a more dominant-submissive relationship.

Not only do young brides face restriction in their ability to meet with their support networks, but they also face high levels of control in using technology. Many participants explain that after marriage, the internet and cell phone usage significantly decreases, with one husband revealing in a focus group discussion that *"I have not charged my wife's cell with internet after marriage"* (Focus group with 22-24 year-old males, Racha - Lechkhumi - Kvemo Svaneti). Another form of internet control is that the husband and wife make joint social media accounts (17-year-old boy, Imereti).

This was validated by young wives who share that *"the only thing my husband and I argue about is when he calls and I don't answer or my phone is disconnected"* (17-year-old female, Tbilisi). Another woman shares something similar, stating that there is a difference in phone use before marriage and after marriage because her

*“husband has this stereotype that others should not see me on my phone. He thinks, ‘What will people say, that my wife is always holding the phone’”* (17-year-old female, Rustavi, Kvemo Kartli).

### 3.5.4 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

**Overview.** Roles and responsibilities after marriage fall predominantly along gendered lines. Decision-making around household finances, continued education, and family planning are often in the hands of husbands or the husband’s parents. Responsibilities for women are rooted in the norms around women as nurturers who are expected to take care of their children’s daily needs. That being said, there were a few examples of egalitarian attitudes, in mostly urban areas, as well. Many young adolescents agree that family planning should be and is in the hands of the couple. Moreover, several participants explain that childrearing is mutually divided between a father and a mother. Yet, gender differentiated roles do in fact occur where fathers are more likely to be involved in education and mothers are blamed when children misbehave. This indicates that it is important to include qualitative work in developing programming strategy, since subtle nuances and variations are only uncovered through such work.

**Results. Decision-making.** The data indicates that roles and responsibilities after marriage were mostly along gendered lines, though changing dynamics are emerging, albeit with only a few participants, with husbands reporting that they equally share their decision-making and responsibilities with their wives.

However, despite some positive deviant cases, in families where couples live with their parents, it was evident that financial decisions are made by parents or “grown-ups” for the most part. For a majority of the interviewees, “fathers or the

boy” met any financial needs that the couple has – reflecting rigid definitions of masculinity. The socialization of these norms starts in the household, as noted by a focus group discussion of 15-year-old girls who state that *“In my opinion the leading role in the family is given to a man... men are more concerned with improving the financial situation”*.

Patriarchal norms are reflected in marital families where in-laws often perpetuate controlling behaviors against their daughters-in-law. For instance, in several cases, the boy or the boy’s family makes more than just financial decisions for the girl, including education choices (more in 3.5.1). A few women, in their roles as wives, reiterate that their husbands are decision-makers in the household regarding both finances and childrearing and this starts as soon as a girl gets engaged:

*“After engagement, the boy’s family makes decisions. We had a case when they told the girl ‘you won’t go to school because you belong to us now’ and her rights had been immediately limited, although it was only engagement and nothing else.”* (Focus group with civil society representatives, Tbilisi).

That being said, some women expressed more egalitarian decision-making practiced in their household, particularly when it came to adolescents’ deciding on family planning. For instance, a 17-year-old female in Gardabani, Kvemo Kartli states that both partners decide on using contraception.

In a few households, there was evidence that newly married couples are often “encouraged” to have children based on the desires of the parents (34 year-old, religious leader, Kvemo Kartli). This pressure is mostly attributed to the husband’s parents, who desire a grandchild. Indeed, this is not surprising given that young girls’ fertility is a

strong reason for why early/child marriage takes place (see section 3.3).

**Household responsibilities.** Expectations around household responsibilities were not as progressive as childbearing decision-making, on the other hand. The expectation that a girl will fulfil her role as a daughter-in-law, which involves cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the house remains high. Even in marriages where the mother-in-law rejects antiquated notions of dowry, she expects and desires that her daughter-in-law, irrespective of her age, is able to fulfill the responsibilities of a homemaker well and learn how to make *Ghomi* and *Kachapuri* (popular dishes in Georgia).

With respect to childcare, a mixture of responses are given, where many participants share that there is an equal balance between the husband and wife, while others share that the responsibility is mostly on the wife.

*“When I am at work, he takes care of the children. We always make decisions together, we don’t have any secrets, we have never hidden anything from each other. We try to live quietly and to solve all the problems together”.* (23-year-old female, Shida Kartli)

*“Man’s role is, when a woman has a baby, she can’t work, even physically, if they don’t have a baby-sitter. When you become a dad, you have to realize that your wife and baby need care, you should provide them with everything they need, for baby’s health and for the proper upbringing. As he is your son or daughter and you should take care of him with great attention”* (17-year-old female, Tbilisi).

However, when fathers are involved, it is found that they do so along the gendered lines, whereby they are involved in their children’s education while mothers are involved in caring for the day-

to-day needs of the child. Much like in other patriarchal families, in one case, a mother shares that if her son behaves badly she will be blamed for her son’s upbringing while if her son behaves well, the credit will be given to both - the mother and the father.

### 3.5.5 CONFLICT AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**Overview.** The stigma against domestic violence ensures that it remains in the private sphere, which is perhaps the reason why respondents deny domestic violence. However, a closer analysis reveals that violence, in the form of controlling behaviors, does in fact occur, often at the hands of the marital family. Moreover, the marital family is often an instigator of intimate partner violence. Children of couples with conflict are both witnesses of violence as well as victims of it. This suggests that research into intimate partner violence and family violence needs to be further examined in Georgia, beyond indicators of whether violence occurs or not, given the tendency of people to deny its occurrence.

**Results.** Interviewees indicate that there are several reasons for conflict among married couples. Many also state that there is no physical violence that they are aware of, though given that domestic violence remains in the private family sphere, interviewees may not be aware of domestic violence cases. However, a police officer in Kvemo Kartli reveals that *“Unfortunately, yes, there were cases, when the wife was unintentionally or intentionally murdered. There were a lot of cases last year, too”.*

There were several reasons cited for why conflict, and subsequently, domestic violence occurs. The most common reason given is that since the bride is young, she is unable to fulfill her domestic responsibilities well, resulting in conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Indeed, in-laws were often suggested as instigators of

conflict who would use violence for issues such as *“not knowing how to prepare a meal, how to be a good housekeeper or because of her childish principles”* (Focus group discussion with religious leaders in Sagarejo, Kakheti).

In-laws are also known to place restrictions on their daughters-in-law, such as not allowing them to wear the clothes girls choose for themselves, which constitutes emotional abuse and controlling behavior (Interview with teacher in Tkibuli, Imereti).

That being said, conflict between the husband and wife are also common. Examples of husbands restoring to violence when household work is not completed appropriately are shared. Additionally, a civil society representative in Tbilisi shares that one girl who wanted to study and to take the state exam, registered for the exam without letting her husband know and faced physical violence when he found out. In other cases, key informant interviews suggest that “financial problem or alcoholism of husband” are causes of dispute (Police officer in Kvemo Kartli). Children of the couple often experience violence as well, where husbands “use” children against their mother in a continued cycle of abuse (Civil society representative, Chiatura, Imereti).

The stigma around domestic violence ensures that instances of abuse remain private as noted in several key informant interviews (e.g., Police officer in Kvemo Kartli) who explain that domestic violence is thought of as a private matter.

### 3.5.6 IMPLICATIONS OF SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

*Overview.* Leaving marriage, either through separation or divorce is common, though not fully accepted in the Georgian society. This is especially true for women who continue to be stigmatized if they are divorced and often

have limited options post-divorce in terms of livelihoods and re-marriage. Respondents agree that early/child marriages are more likely to end in divorce because adolescents are too young to fully understand what marriage entails. Moreover, conflicts between the marital family and the bride are also reasons cited for divorce. While divorce is said to be common, it is clear that there continue to be challenges with divorce for women, suggesting that perhaps many women remain in difficult marriages.

*Results.* The majority of the participants believed that a couple should not stay together for children’s sake, suggesting that children face further abuse and suffer more when an unhappy couple stays together. The process of getting a divorce, if it is mutual, is straightforward: *“the couple goes to a state registry office to get an official divorce. In case it is not mutual, divorce is granted by a court”* (Interview with civil society representative, Imereti).

Gender differences between divorced men vs. divorced women are apparent since divorced women are often viewed negatively in the society and blamed for the breakup of the marriage. Indeed, a civil society representative notes that *“I don’t remember a case when a boy wanted to divorce and couldn’t do it”* (Focus group with civil society representatives, Tbilisi). One interview indicates that as a divorced woman, one’s choices are limited since religious and customary laws still prohibit land rights from transferring to daughters:

*“It is perceived that a divorced woman is bad. A divorced woman is a candidate for being a prostitute, no one controls her, and she can have free sexual life, which is directly seen as a tragedy. And they also think that it is less likely that someone marries a divorced woman with a child, and because of this there is an economic factor, where does this*

*woman go, where does she live? Because the house is not inherited by a woman, and this woman becomes homeless, stays on the street. Because of being an economic problem, parents do not want to accept her back, because the house already belongs to the boy, so parents do not want to take the daughter back, and the woman has nowhere to go”* (Representative of the Azerbaijani community,, Tbilisi).

The unequal status of men and women is further evident in the case of multiple marriages. Participants agree that a girl who marries multiple times is viewed more negatively than a boy who marries multiple times:

*“As far as I know the community never evaluates negatively multiple marriages of a boy, but in regard to a girl if she decides to marry a second time she is often criticized”* (Focus group with unmarried boys, 15-16 years, in Tbilisi).

There are two main reasons given for why divorce takes place. The first is that in early/child marriages, the couples themselves are too young to understand the complexities of married life and struggle with the changes that they experience as they grow older. Another reason that emerges from the interviews is that of parent’s influence and intervention in the marriage. Indeed, one focus group with religious leaders reveals that *“the main reason for divorce are parents. They decide whether their children must divorce or not”* (Focus group with religious leaders in Sagarejo, Kakheti). In other words, if parents feel that the conflict between the children is high, they will suggest and encourage the couple to get divorced. In some cases, when a girl who faces problems in her marital family shares it with her own parents, they might encourage her to leave the marriage as well, as reported by religious leaders in Kakheti. However, one interviewee in

Kakheti, caveats this findings by sharing that she has heard of families who do not support divorce even though there is domestic violence in the couple’s home.

Moreover, divorce is attributed to conflicts that often arise from daily tussle between mothers- and daughters-in-laws:

*“Very often mothers-in-law are the reason for divorce, because they want that their daughters-in-law to be slaves and when they don’t obey their mothers-in-law, they are doing everything to separate them”.* (30-year-old woman in Marnueli, Kvemo Kartli)

### 3.6 INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE

*Overview.* Key informant interviews agreed that for most adolescents, there are no institutions or programmatic efforts that systematically provide information about marriage thereby creating a context where adolescents obtain information from their peers, parents, or the internet. However, they agreed that there is a presence of police officers, health practitioners even though adolescents do not access these services. Language as well as infrastructure barriers place ethnic minorities and those living in remote/rural sites at a further disadvantage in terms of accessing services easily.

In terms of legal responses, there is high awareness of the law prohibiting marriage, though low awareness of the recent amendment to the law. Yet, enforcement remains weak. Furthermore, cultural and religious laws often contradict and confuse people’s knowledge of the law. Moreover, registration of marriages is poor, given that couples choose to register their

marriage only after they turn 18 years even though they have been married before they turned 18. In the health industry, findings indicate that service providers (e.g., gynecologists) are themselves driven by larger social norms, often bringing in their biases about pre-marital sex in conversations with young girls. This may explain why girls themselves are also hesitant to seek out health services. Similarly, social conventions make it challenging for health practitioners to approach the topic of early/child marriage given that it is generally considered private. Additionally, mental health and psychosocial wellbeing are overlooked as important components of health services, particularly for young married women. Moreover, though medical service providers share data on adolescent pregnancy with the relevant ministry within 24 hours to obtain birth certificates, there is no mention on whether there is any legal follow-up for early/child marriage as indicated by the data.

In education, institutional responses are similarly hindered by teachers holding negative view on pre-marital sex. Moreover, a lack of information regarding reproductive health and rights as part of the healthy lifestyle education curriculum is critically required. There is also little evidence that schools are monitoring and reporting early/child marriage cases to the relevant ministry personnel appropriately. Finally, religious institutions' response indicates that while religious leaders are for the most part against early/child marriage, there is uneven awareness of minimum age law. Overall the institutional response to early/child marriage requires programmatic and policy support.

### 3.6.1 LEGAL RESPONSES

The consensus across all interviewees was that even though there is an awareness of the minimum legal age for marriage, the law is

ineffective in preventing early/child marriages in the country. For instance, a key informant interview with a journalist reveals that laws are not enough:

*“As a journalist, I can say that the community doesn't accept early/child marriages. Everyone who surrounds me is against it. All of them think that this issue should be publicly discussed, the law must be stricter or additional regulations should be adopted. I know we have law that regulates such problems but unfortunately in regions no one pays attention to it”* (Journalist in Tbilisi).

Similarly, a focus group discussion in Tbilisi with unmarried men indicates *“Even if there is a law written, nobody cares. Sanctions are not as severe as they should be”* (Focus group with unmarried boys aged 14-15 years in Tbilisi). This is echoed in other interviews as well. Another interviewee suggests that one of the challenges with the legal system is that the penalty for early/child marriage is not high, especially when the perpetrators of early/child marriage are thought to be close to the legal age.

Another challenge identified with the legal system is that interviewees feel that people *“understand the law individually”* (34-year-old woman in Samtskhe-Javakheti). In other words, conflicting instructions that provide differing ages of marriage (e.g., religious, traditional, cultural, and state) create confusion around what is the actual age at which marriage is permitted.

Moreover, the recent amendment to the laws - made in January 2017, were known only to a few participants. A civil society representative in Atskuri, Samtskhe - Javakheti, indicates that despite having come across 5 cases of early/child marriage recently, parent permission for the marriage constituted as consent and none of the couples faced any penalties.

**Registering marriages.** Interestingly, there were many cases of people finding ways to circumvent the law. This is especially true in the case a religious marriage ceremony since couples do not have to register their marriages as they do in a civil ceremony. Interviews with adolescents and young people in Kareli, Mtskheta, and Rustavi and key informant interviews in Tbilisi, reveal that this is often the case in under-age marriages, so as to avoid any legal persecution. In fact, some couples only register their marriage after the birth of the child in order to be able to complete birth registration for the child.

### 3.6.2 HEALTH SERVICE RESPONSES

**Health providers associated sexual activity with marriage only.** A health professional described that gynecologists often ask whether girls are married in order to ascertain whether they were sexually active or not. The same health professional in Tbilisi summarized what she referred to as myths that illustrate prevailing associations of sexual activity as taking place exclusively within marriage (and therefore justifying SRH services as pertaining only to married women):

*“There is a myth that if you have not started sexual life, you do not have problems with health and do not have to visit gynecologist, and girls do not go to doctor. This is a big nonsense, because human does not need sexual life at all to have many gynecological problems. And because of this, children do not have knowledge of the problem, and they cannot go there themselves, so this is a hard situation and unknown for them. They go there if they have serious problems”* (Interview with 32-year-old woman in Tbilisi).

When discussing sexuality and relationships outside of marriage, some participants cited external influences on girls, boys, and young

couples. These ranged from the media to young men going to other post-soviet Slavic countries and returning with more “liberal” relationship ideas and norms – all influencing Georgians but not in the same way or not all parts of the country.

**Health providers raised challenges of confidentiality and of determining whether and how to intervene when faced with cases of early/child marriage.** Girls and adolescents experience accessing services as publicly exposing, rather than confidential, which also served as a barrier to their seeking services. A health professional in Tbilisi described the lack of confidential services as a norm and explained that adults do not understand the need for privacy for adolescents.

Yet, one gynecologist in Sagarejo, Kakheti explains that when adolescent girls give birth, the service providers “*send their data within 24 hours to register the birth-certificate*” to the appropriate ministry. The fact that the data is shared with the Ministry is not shared with the adolescent mother. There is no mention of any follow-up or any penalty after the data is shared.

Interestingly, health professionals also described that asking about marriage and relationships would be invading in families’ issues inappropriately and in some cases, asking such questions was disconnected from treating physical issues that they did consider their responsibilities. A doctor described taking care of girl’s (physical) health but explained that “*as a doctor I have no right to ask her why she got married.*” Similarly, another doctor in Kutaisi described not stepping in further:

*“I always ask the same question if sexual intercourse happened by using force. There was only one case when the girl told me that it was so. Even her mother did not know about this situation and I had no right to ask more.”*

In Tbilisi, another health service provider conveyed concerns that parents would blame the doctors for marital problems if they perceived that doctors are supporting certain practices, such as giving contraception to girls (married or not). Another doctor responded that she was not sure why unmarried girls did not visit gynecologists; her response, along with those of other participants indicated that the practice of women/girls only going to gynecologists upon marrying (and thus presumed to be sexually active) or if a problem arose, was generally normalized and unquestioned.

Girls' barriers to access to SRH and other health services were more often related to social norms that deter girls from utilizing services and to provider approaches, rather than to absence of such service providing institutions. Diverse participants said that *"people gossip"* if girls go to the gynecologist before marriage. Girls in a focus group laughed and said that people will laugh if the husband were to accompany his wife to the gynecologist. Given these social norms, the study highlights targeting two sets of underlying barriers to care. The first is addressing community norms that support and normalize unmarried girls going to the gynecologist, including reducing the stigma of them going on their own if they choose; and the second is addressing these norms and ultimately the attitudes and practices of health providers, including approaches to confidentiality. Moreover, it is essential to ensure that health systems adhere to special WHO standards for youth-friendly SRH services in order to provide services that are non-judgmental, confidential, and of high quality.

**Mental health and social and emotional development and well-being are overlooked in discussions of early/child marriage.** When asked about whether early/child marriage affects health in general, participants did not often discuss mental health, but when they did, the cited stress

of entering marriage and new family conflicts, issues of self-esteem, depression, and young couples' lack of emotional and psychological readiness to marry and raise children.

A civil society representative from Samtskhe-Javakheti described a similarly broad impact of early/child marriage on a girl's well-being and development:

*"Early/child marriage affects both -the physical and mental health of a person... the mother herself is not fully developed at this age and she herself needs further development."*

Another health professional in Tbilisi also reinforced the importance of developing children and adolescents' social sense of self – that places emphasis on their ability to think and grow – and is different than defining oneself in relation to their family. Women in Tbilisi note that mothers who have a strong sense of self themselves are able to raise *"healthy"* children.

### 3.6.3 EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS RESPONSES

One of the ways in which education settings play a role in reducing early/child marriage is by school personnel *"referring"* early/child marriage cases to the social agency and then have psychologists work on the case as explained by a key informant interview with a psychologist in Gori, Shida Kartli.

However, coordination between the institutional bodies that work on early/child marriage is weak as explained by a key informant, with the education settings arm being especially challenging (e.g., the schools are unable to keep good track of girls' attendance):

*"Ministry of Health and Law Enforcement organizations should have good coordination. Although, when we have cases of early/child*

*marriage, we are separately informing the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Social Agency. The school should have informed these two structures, but it turns out they don't know about the case. We also have cases when the Ministry of Internal Affairs already starts following the early/child marriage cases, but they have not informed the Social Agency, nor the school. We are facing this problem with all parties. Between these three organizations: Education, Social Agency, and Legislative, among all of them, organizations in the educational level are the weakest. Often there are cases when the school directors are misrepresenting class attendance in the class journals, and not calculating girl's absences and so on". (28-year-old female, Tbilisi)*

There is also evidence that institutions of higher education do not want to be involved in efforts to increase awareness of the problem around early/child marriage. A civil society representative in Tbilisi shares that even at university level, couples who may have had an early/child marriage are asked to keep quiet about it.

**Taboo and stigma against sexual activities are hindering educational setting response.** Much like health service response, one civil society representative in Tbilisi shares that teachers often hold the same beliefs about pre-marital sex as the society-at-large. Recounting an awareness training session, the civil society representative explains that teachers themselves feel that children who are engaging in sexual activity before marriage should get married, even if that means early/child marriage.

Clearly, information on reproductive health and rights as a core component of healthy lifestyle education arose across interviews as an intersecting issue involving both the health and education sectors of government, as well

as social welfare. Education on reproductive health and rights was often raised as a subject of taboo but one of interest, and one that is framed as focused on human anatomy more so than on relationships. Service providers especially discussed the lack of information on reproductive health and rights as a national policy, along with anecdotes of how family members, girls, and boys also had many questions and took an interest in it. Often, reproductive health and rights was discussed in terms of anatomy or "hygiene" rather than including discussions of relationships. Even in focus groups, service providers debated the relevance of this kind of information, again pointing to a lack of awareness of children and adolescents' sexuality and needs regarding information.

Taboos around sexuality mean that schools do not offer information on reproductive health and rights. There was also a perception from health providers that children and adolescents spread information among each other and it's not always accurate. Medical specialists and others also are largely in agreement around prevention/information on SRH&RR, but they differ in approaches based on political, cultural, and religious beliefs.

### 3.6.4 RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

Key informant interviews with religious leaders find that the Church and Mosques in particular play an important role in enforcing the law against early/child marriage. Several examples are found where religious leaders explicitly denied any marriage ceremony for an under-age couple:

*"Since the State has emphasized the importance of regulating early marriage, it became the problem and we refuse to wed under-age couples" (Religious leader, Lambalo, Kakheti).*

*“Couples asked me as an Imam to perform a religion ritual, but I have not performed it. Since the law forbids early marriage, we don’t perform rituals for under-age couples. We are all leaders of Muslim community in our Sagarejo [and] protect the law. I call for every Imam to take us as an example and protect the law”* (Focus group discussion with religious leaders in Kakheti).

*“Now the marriage age was raised to 18, before minimum age was 16, but with the agreement of parents. So, no religion can do something against the law”* (27 year-old male, Batumi, Ajara)

However, confusion around what is the legal age of marriage continues to be a challenge, with a religious leader in Samtskhe-Javakheti stating that adolescents above 16 are considered adults:

*“We know couples who already have got grown-up children, and when they come for church wedding, we never refuse them, because in the period of communists, church weddings were not allowed. And now these people want to be with God. We are never trying to find out when they begin to live together, we aren’t interested in it. We just register adults above 16. And one more thing - when a girl is kidnapped the church gives its blessing only with her parents’ consent, if she is already 16”.*

Legal and religious institutional responses often intersect since there is a Constitutional Treaty which stipulates that the state should recognize marriages performed by the Georgian Orthodox Church. In practice, however, only civil marriages (but not religious marriages) are registered in the office of the Civil Registry and therefore are legally recognized.

### 3.6.5 RURAL VS. URBAN DIFFERENCES

Though qualitative analysis rarely lends itself to making generalizations between groups, our analysis did find some rural vs. urban and ethnic differences. First, we found that language is a barrier for accessibility of services for non-Georgian speakers. Interviewees expressed inaccessibility to providers given that they do not speak the languages of minority populations, such as Azerbaijani and the minority population mostly does not speak Georgian or Russian.

Second, we found that while patterns of early/child marriage did not differ in meaningful ways across rural and urban sites (e.g., counter to initial interviews from this research, early/child marriage is not concentrated in villages of the Kakheti province), respondents from rural sites were more likely to discuss and follow customs and traditions than those from urban sites (e.g., in Marneuli). Similarly, mentions of dowry were more prevalent in interviews from rural sites than from urban sites (e.g., in Zugdidi, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti). There was also some evidence that norms that prohibited husbands from accompanying wives to their gynecology visits were more present in rural settings than in urban settings (e.g., in Pankisi, Kakheti), though this must be viewed with caution since such norms are likely to be prevalent in urban settings as well. In addition, we found a difference between rural and urban sites, which also predominately affects ethnic minority groups, including Azeris and Armenians. This was the challenges with access depending on urban/ rural location. For example, access to education was generally described as more difficult in rural areas compared to cities, and most restricted for female representatives of ethnic minorities. Secondary and higher education, i.e., university – were also associated with urban areas. A young married man, aged 17 years in Tbilisi, said *“to get jobs in markets or stores, one had to go to the city because there are*

*not conditions in villages like his to make a living*". Even if some health services were available in rural areas, participants described traveling to larger cities for some forms of care.

### 3.7 EXPERTS OPINIONS

Our key informant interviews with experts reveal similar patterns to the findings noted above. In this section, we focus on the interviews of experts (see Annex 1).

**Extent of early/child marriage.** All key informants agreed that there is early/child marriage in Georgia, disproportionately affecting girls, above the age of 15 years; though the perception that it is more likely to happen to ethnic minorities prevails. Yet a few experts, such as school doctors, representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science note that this perception is incorrect since early/child marriage takes place across the country.

Experts also agree that the age difference between the groom and bride is such that the groom is always older than the bride, though there is no consensus on what the age gap is.

There was a consensus that gender inequality persists and reinforces early/child marriage. For instance, in an interview with a key informant, it was found that *"usually families try to get their boys married by age 27 at the latest (unless they have migrated), ideally by age 22. The older ones – returning from migration – would look for young girls to "educate", also from a sexual perspective, increasing the chances of the girls contracting STDs"*. Similarly, one interviewee explained that while men can break off engagements, women cannot.

**Drivers of early/child marriage.** Across the expert interviewees, several factors, that parallel

the general populations' findings, emerge as contributing to early/child marriage:

- Poverty
- Lack of awareness of both laws and harmful consequences of early/child marriage
- Lack of awareness of SRHR knowledge
- Religious and cultural factors
- Limited employment options after school
- Marriage as a way to escape violent/strict home life
- Fear of marriage by abduction
- Norms around procreation and fertility of women
- Commodification of girls
- Brideprice
- Stigma against unmarried girls
- Inability of girls to resist parents' decision
- Passion and being in love
- Physical attraction
- Norms around dating
- Norms around engagement that heighten monitoring for girls to protect their reputation
- Language barriers against social integration, service access, and awareness of the law
- Decision-making regarding the marriage is either by the male head of the family, i.e., the father, grandfather, and in some cases the grandmother.

**Impact of early/child marriage.** All experts agree that early/child marriage negatively impacts girls' education and their future opportunities. One expert states that "98% of girls who are engaged will not continue to study". Girls' mobility is constrained, and they are at-risk for unpaid labor at home. They also explain that there are high levels of adolescent pregnancy, putting adolescent girls at various health risks. Moreover, experts note that domestic violence is high in early/child marriage cases since being young often leads girls to have less power in the family.

Most importantly, experts state that having undergone child marriage themselves, the cycle of getting married early is reinforced and perhaps transferred inter-generationally.

### **Institutional response to early/child marriage**

**Government response.** The institutional response to early/child marriage is largely hindered by the fact that until recently, data on early/child marriage was lacking and it was not acknowledged as a problem in the country. This was further exacerbated by people's unwillingness to register their marriages, which makes it difficult to estimate the extent of the problem. A representative in the Ministry of Health shares that there is a growing national database on early/child marriage issues now and that the last reproductive study took place in 2010, with MICS6 planning to conduct research on these indicators in 2018. Indeed, the formation of the Gender Equality Department at the Ombudsman's office was a critical step taken towards improving the situation of early/child marriage in the country. Programming is occurring as a joint initiative by the Ministry of Education in partnership with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and UN. This includes a *"parent involvement program, which aims to prevent early/child marriage in the areas where the high rates of early marriage are described. It encompasses meetings with ethnic groups, parents, and local religious leaders. We discuss human rights, health issues and education perspectives which*

*are related to this issue"* (representative of the Ministry of Education and Science). The public defender's office is also an important component for workshops on basic info (including legal) in local municipalities and schools working with teachers and pupils. Materials are distributed in 3 languages, as per the interviewee in the public defender's office. Moreover, sensitivity trainings are given to police officers on issues of domestic violence. An interviewee explains that as a result of these changes, marriages that were below 15 years of age have reduced.

**School response.** At schools, a representative at the Ministry of Education and Science explains that *"school dropout is monitored through the electronic surveillance system. Schools reports cases, when school girls and boys cut off studying due to marriage"*. Doctors at school provide health-related information to newly married girls but note that only about 1 out of 3 married girls returns to education.

**Religious response.** Experts noted that religion is strongly opposed to early/child marriage and one of the ways in which they respond to early/child marriage is by sharing excerpts from the Koran where the rights of women are described. One religious leader shares that they had awareness raising with communities in Iormugalo and Karajala, but *"the community was not happy and expressed aggression toward us when we were talking about early/child marriage"*.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

This study attempted to understand the nature and impact of early/child marriage in Georgia. Using qualitative interviews and focus group discussions across 11 sites in the country, the study found that despite awareness of the legal minimum age for marriage, and awareness of the health repercussions of early/child marriage, there was evidence that early/child marriage continues to persist with girls getting married mostly between 15-17 years of age. The interviewees believed that early/child marriage was in the past, given that it was traditionally thought of as being forced. However, recent unions where adolescents show agency and get married are no longer considered early/child marriage, despite the fact that adolescents have limited choice but to get married. What emerged from the findings was that patterns and drivers of early/child marriage in this region are rooted in rigid gender norms, are complex and require a nuanced understanding.

**The complex nature of FGM/C.** An important emergent finding was that our respondents all showed awareness of harmful practices such as FGM/C, but they were unwilling to share whether the practice continues. This was in sharp contradiction to reports by other organizations and government departments that find that FGM/C continues. A closer analysis reveals that there have been various campaigns that have raised awareness of the harmful practice of FGM/C. It is possible that as a result, respondents have learnt to give socially desirable responses in order to avoid penalties. Moreover, while older women all report being cut themselves, they explain that their daughters are not cut, but only because traditional cutters are no longer alive.

Such findings highlight the complex nature of FGM/C in the country and shed light on the need to conduct more research on FGM/C that pays attention to such nuances.

**Drivers of early/child marriage.** One of the major conclusions was that economic factors contributed to early/child marriage in the country. Despite the fact that a majority of the early/child marriages in the present day were often a result of adolescents choosing to get married as a result of being in love and in a relationship with each other, there were several underlying factors that ensure that adolescents who are in fact choosing early/child marriage, have limited agency in the first place. Challenges with economic circumstances that create obstacles for obtaining an education and consequentially employment was considered as a strong reason for “choosing” marriage as a path. The unemployment rate was evoked as a key structural factor that impacts the choice adolescents make for their future. Indeed, in the context of limited opportunities, the meaning of agency is layered with complexities. In Georgia, the importance of family as a unit was highlighted in the evidence that adolescents who married early chose to live with their parents due to their inability to live alone. Moreover, economic hardships play a role in forced early/child marriages as well, whereby parents were seeking to financially settle their children into well-to-do homes.

Another important conclusion from this study was that gender norms were a prevailing force that drives early/child marriage. Fathers were considered decision-makers while mothers were thought of as having opinions out of concern for

their child. Norms, for instance, that restrict sexual activity before marriage, which are often rooted in a need to protect girls' virtue and family's honor, were deeply intertwined with adolescents seeking out marriage at a young age. Indeed, older girls were often viewed as disgraceful if they remained unmarried. Such norms affected seeking out reproductive health services and those who did access services attempted to do so discreetly. Similarly, norms around appearance were considered as a legitimate marker of adulthood, and girls who experience puberty early were more likely to marry early. Indeed, social pressures often created contexts that positioned girls unfavorably in the society if they are older and unmarried. Perhaps the inequitable attitudes around boys' and girls' marriageability is most strongly observed in the age difference between a bride and groom, where almost unequivocally girls are younger than boys.

**Impact of early/child marriage.** Education and early/child marriage, strongly intertwined, also reflected traditional gender norms. While there were several girls who expressed aspirations for education and employment, they also noted that working is looked as a means to an end, especially in cases where the husband may not be earning enough money. Employment was not considered as a tool for empowerment, which may explain why many girls who chose to marry early, were willing to drop out of school. On the other hand, some examples of girls' continuing their education after marriage was found, albeit many of them required permission from the boy or his parents to continue their education.

Gender inequitable norms continued to play a role in the ways in which boys and girls experienced life after marriage. This was most apparent in the use of Information & Communications Technology (ICT). The role of ICT was highlighted both before and after marriage. While before marriage it helped overcome social isolation,

and in some cases contributed to marriage, post-marriage it led to controlling behaviors within the couple that reflected patriarchal values of isolating women's social networks and freedom. Such controlling behaviors are also related to domestic violence in the global literature. Domestic violence was also found in this study sample, though the private nature of domestic violence ensured that it remained hidden from legal and justice institutions. Moreover, despite the findings that decision-making around family planning was done jointly between a husband and wife, household's financial decisions were mostly taken by the husband or by father. Typical gender roles also positioned women as responsible for bringing up the children.

Gender norms played a significant role in the degree to which adolescent girls are able to access sexual and reproductive health services. Stigma and taboo against pre-marital sexual activity, rooted in strong norms around girls' purity and virtue have created a context where access to health providers remained hidden. The hidden nature of sexual activity before marriage emerged more strongly for girl than boys. The study found that boys' sexual desires were considered a rite of passage, where fathers took their sons to brothels as a form of transition to adulthood.

These strong norms around sexual activity carried over even after marriage for girls who wished to continue to study. The findings showed that girls who were married were discouraged from attending school as they were viewed as having become sexually active and therefore, not fit enough to play with same-aged peers. However, despite girls' aspiring to gain an education, the findings indicated that education and marriage were often seen as a juxtaposition because of the challenges of balancing studies with family responsibilities.

With such challenges, it is not surprising that our study found that divorces were common, even though they were not entirely accepted by the society. Often the young age of the married couple was cited as the reason for the divorce. Moreover, gender differences remained whereby a divorced woman is more likely to be stigmatized than a divorced man and criticized for multiple marriages, more than men.

**The Role of Men and Boys.** This study highlighted the strong ways in which socialization of gender norms is internalized by boys and men. For instance, patriarchal norms that position fathers as heads of households, were driving much of forced marriage decisions, with girls facing forced marriage more than boys. Mothers were unlikely to make decisions and instead their opinions were considered more as concerns and desires to ensure that the child is settled. These norms were clearly socialized in young adolescents who observed and learnt from the home and community. For instance, young boys' need to explore sexuality is normalized, while girls' virtue is prized. These contradictory expectations from boys and girls creates a situation where pre-marital sex and pre-marital pregnancy is a driving factor for early/child marriage. Gender socialization also occurs when men and boys were taught to be breadwinners and household decision makers from an early age. These norms translated into similar gender-typed divisions in household decision-making as the boys grew up. As boys become husbands, they were found to restrict their wives use of technology and their mobility, acting upon norms that women are the flag-bearers for a family's honor. Moreover, the need to protect women played a strong role for husbands who could decide whether or not their wives continued education. Domestic violence was common, and the power dynamics between a groom's family and a bride's family ensured that the groom's family had the power to inflict several types of abuse on the girl.

Nonetheless, the picture was not always so grim. The findings showed that boys were desiring wives who are educated and supporting their wives' aspirations. Additionally, they were strongly disagreeing with early/child marriage – albeit they upheld beliefs that the bride should be younger than the groom. A few male participants even shared that they were more engaged in family planning and described more egalitarian dynamics between their wives and themselves. The findings from this research support previous work demonstrating the importance of involving men and boys in various aspects of girls and women's lives (Greene et al., 2014).

#### **Institutional responses to early/child marriage.**

Though several important initiatives had been undertaken to combat early/child marriage, the study finds that there remain many challenges at both prevention and response levels. One of the barriers to reducing early/child marriage in Georgia was the poor enforcement of minimum age for marriage law. Our findings indicated that awareness about recent amendments to the law was patchy. Another barrier to reducing early/child marriage is that early/child marriage practices remained hidden. The findings indicated that those who want to marry early, have found ways to circumvent the legal checks that require age check at registration of marriage. By registering marriages after they turn 18, couples can avoid any penalties – which are often low if they are found to be married with their age being close to the 18-year mark.

Another barrier that emerged to reducing early/child marriage was the weak monitoring by the school settings who are tasked with informing the government agencies about girls and boys who miss school. Poor coordination between agencies adds to this already weak institutional response. Moreover, taboo and stigma against engaging in sexual activities before marriage lead to teachers often encouraging adolescents in a relationship

to get married. This is similarly seen in the health service response where norms around sexual activities are often ingrained in health providers' belief systems as well. Moreover, mental health and wellbeing are often overlooked as essential health-components with girls who are married early.

Another important and final barrier that emerged was that of a lack of focus on reproductive and sexual health-related knowledge in healthy lifestyle education, which intersected with both health and education sectors of government, as well as social welfare. Though key informant interviews noted the importance of teaching healthy lifestyle education to adolescents, there was an agreement that the lack of focus on sexual activity in healthy lifestyle education as a national policy was creating challenges for family

members, girls, and boys who indicated that they had many questions and took an interest in learning more about safe sexual activity.

Language barriers and poor infrastructure barriers emerged as particularly affecting ethnic and rural minorities, with girls being unable to seek out relevant services because of language and lack of easy access. Moreover, knowledge of the law remained limited given that it is not translated into minority languages.

In conclusion, this study provides an in-depth look at the nature of early/child marriage in Georgia – taking into account that gender norms play a significant role in reinforcing this harmful practice. In the next section, drawing from these findings, recommendations for policy, programming and research are put forth.

# 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The increasing attention to the practice of early/child marriage as a human rights issue in public rhetoric and policies in Georgia represents an important opportunity to build momentum for change in both policies and services. To this end, based on the findings from this study, this research proposes three sets of recommendations. Several of such recommendations were suggested by the research participants themselves.

## 5.1 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Enforcing existing laws, while offering higher quality, inclusive services and creating opportunities for youth's futures are important steps for the prevention of the harmful practices of Early/Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting. As early/child marriage is a cross-cutting issue, providing adequate funding and establishing cooperation across sectors to ensure change happens especially around the following areas:

- **Build public awareness of legal age of marriage** so that underground practices of early/child marriage are reduced, and that its negative consequences are understood not only towards boys, but also for what they imply for girls' and boy's lives. Even though many research participants expressed an awareness of the minimum legal age of marriage, interviewees also suggest that there is a need to build awareness of the penalties for breaking the law. Moreover, there is a need to enforce laws more strongly, both when couples do not register their marriages and when schools and other sources provide information about early/child marriage.
- **Strengthen the enforcement of existing laws by training relevant officials** – such as judges, civil registrars, and child protection representatives - to better monitor the minimum age law and report early/child marriage cases is imperative for the prevention of harmful practices.
- **Ensure the provision of high quality, inclusive services to youngsters.** It is important to offer youth-friendly and accessible health services (esp. SRHR), address health professionals' attitudes and practices, and develop innovative ways to overcome barriers to reach the country's most marginalized populations (geographically, linguistically, and culturally).
- **Strengthen work in the direction of the regional development.** Working on the regional level is the most effective for planning various interventions and creating opportunities for adolescents' and youth development.
- **Allocate relevant financial resources.** Relevant financial resources should be allocated for adolescents and youth programmes in the local budgets for supporting their development and empowerment, such as non-formal educational programs, youth/adolescents' clubs, trainings, etc.
- **Support youth and women's engagement.** Young people's and women's participation in the local self-government is crucial in order to enable them to advocate the programs and mobilize resources for combating harmful practices.

- **Ensure that legal penalties on FGM/C go alongside preventive and protective measures.** Ideally, legal measures would also ensure access to comprehensive support services, including medical, psychological, and legal assistance for survivors.

## 5.2 PROGRAMMING RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to laws that specify protection from early/child marriage, in order for girls to be able to fully express their agency, it is necessary to address the underpinning gender norms, which affect their lives and those of the key people with authority. Therefore, targeting social norms through gender-transformative approaches, engaging key actors, creating meaningful spaces for adolescents to socialize, and empowering girls are the areas to be strengthened. To this aim:

### Engage various key actors who are part of adolescents' networks

- **Specifically, boys and men in their roles as fathers, brothers, husbands, peers, and sons** need to be engaged in order to be sensitized to harmful gender norms that restrict girls' agency. Boys, especially when reached at a younger age, are critical to changing norms around sexual activities before marriage. Additionally, sensitizing boys as husbands to the inequitable gender roles at home is crucial to ensuring that they participate actively in childcare. Given that husbands are critical for "giving permission" to girls to attend school after marriage, the need to ensure that husbands are involved in supporting their education cannot be understated. Highlight positive deviant husbands, who support their wife's education and exhibit egalitarian decision-making at home. Similarly, fathers, mothers, mothers-in-law, and other family members should be encouraged to

support girls' education. Reaching men as fathers is also critical given that they make decisions for their children in cases of forced marriage, make financial decisions at home, and reinforce patriarchal definitions of masculinity through socialization.

- **Parents**, capitalizing on messages that support positive social norms such as "*In good families, girls do not marry girls before they turn 18*". Parents need to also be engaged to impart knowledge to adolescents on how to become financially independent. Parents of both boys and girls should be targeted, given the evidence that mothers-in-law sometimes seek out younger daughters-in-law who they feel can be taught/trained more easily than older girls. Special attention should also be devoted to fathers, primarily seen as financial providers, as messages around being a provider for the family are frequently passed onto adolescent boys, reinforcing the notion that men should marry girls in order to "prove" financial means and their responsibility as men. Conversely, notions that relegate women to be primarily nurturers who have healthier fertility at a younger age, should also be challenged.
- **Religious leaders**, to ensure they are aware of the legal age and amendments to the law as well as to discover entry points. Churches and Mosques may sometimes be the only spaces for girls to engage in peer activities, and religious leaders should initiate dialogue to empower adolescent girls to continue their education.
- **Health providers**, especially gynecologists, need to be sensitized and made aware of their biases around pre-marital sex that may reduce the likelihood of girls accessing services. Based on this research, both girls and boys especially need better information on family planning to be able to make informed decisions after obtaining the "correct information" (82). Health providers

may also contribute to perpetuating the unequal burden of care by positioning women primarily as nurturers and primary caregivers, de facto excluding and de-responsabilizing fathers from their role as engaged caregivers.

- **Positive deviants**, such as family members, girls themselves, men who encourage girls' aspirations and waiting for marriage, and educators who advocate for girls to stay in school, should also be leveraged by future initiatives.

### Targeting social norms

The importance of recognizing inequitable gender norms as perpetuating early/child marriage is a crucial conceptual underpinning of this research. Based on the findings, norms around maintaining the family's honor, protecting girls' virtue, fostering kinship networks, and norms that increase son preference (e.g., lack of inheritance rights for daughters) seem to influence early/child marriage practices in Georgia. To tackle such norms, the following actions are recommended:

- **Prioritize inclusion of information on reproductive health and rights in school and non-school settings in ways that are meaningful and non-stigmatizing to girls**, considering the strong link between education and early/child marriage. In particular, promote girls continued quality education and its linkages with employment. Even though research participants generally supported women and girls' education in the abstract, they felt that their education was difficult if not impossible to balance with duties as wives, and especially as mothers. Similarly, they suggested that education is secondary even for unmarried girls when they are expected to do housework and care for children. Along with encouraging school retention and attainment for girls through secondary and higher education, structural

factors that undermine the importance of girls' education should also be addressed, such as household conditions, pregnancy, and the disproportionate and unpaid burden of care. It is also recommended to elaborate a dedicated module on harmful practices that will be integrated in the teachers' continuous education and development scheme. To ensure sustainability, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia elaborates and approves a special program on the prevention of harmful practice of early/child marriage. The informal education as well as parents' education components could be integrated in this comprehensive programme, as parents are frequently the key decision-makers in regards to the marriage of their adolescent children.

- **Improve vocational opportunities** for both boys and girls so that they find employment and do not resort to early/child marriage as a fallback option.
- **Strengthen outreach to adolescents in early marriage.** It is imperative to support their reintegration in the education system. It is also critical to ensure that public childcare services are available and accessible for them to leave their kids safely while being at school
- **Offer youth-friendly and accessible health services, addressing health professionals' attitudes and practices:** training of service providers is needed that appropriately addresses sensitivity, and confidentiality issues in order to improve service provider's awareness and tolerance of sex out of marriage. As the research findings indicate a prioritization of maternal, newborn and child health and protection of girls as mothers, special attention and investment should be devoted to sexual and reproductive health services for girls prior to marriage (and perhaps after the childbearing age).

- **Leverage meaningful spaces of socializations** to challenge gender norms that prohibit adolescents from dating freely so that they do not feel compelled to get married in order to spend time together. This is especially important in targeting norms around sexual activities before marriage as data show that sexual initiation before marriage has almost doubled from 2005 to 2010 (NCDC, 2012). In a restricted context, SRHR knowledge is hard to obtain and with an increasing number of sexually active adolescents, social norms around constructions of sexuality become critical to address. Adolescent/youth centers can offer a variety of support services and activities – so that it is safe and confidential to seek SRH services because those services are embedded in other activities. These adolescent/youth centers can also be spaces of socialization for girls who face restriction of movement post-marriage. These services must be designed to meet the needs of youth in ways that are sensitive to gender, ethnicity, language, and income levels.
  - **Question norms that reinforce typical gender roles at home**, namely those promoting inequitable relationships and roles in which males and females are considered providers and nurturers, respectively. Using approaches that seek to transform gender norms and turn positive deviants into role models will help challenge traditional gender roles and norms that support early/child marriage.
- to be a challenge in the country and research is critically needed to describe entry points for programming efforts. Research is especially necessary to:
- **Conduct further analyses on the key qualitative findings from this study, together with findings from the household MICS survey conducted in Georgia.** Mixed method analysis is essential to ensuring an in-depth understanding of the state of early/child marriage in the country, as well as of its risk and protective factors. In particular, further research into how individuals and couples develop resistance, aspirations, and positive deviance – and ways to delay early/child marriage and sustain healthy relationships – could have valuable implications for the region. These forms of resistance must be understood in the context of structural forms of violence and inequalities that affect adolescents’ past, present, and future opportunities.
  - **Continue qualitative, ground-up research** to deeply examine adolescents’ lives. Qualitative research can specifically help to understand how parents can help adolescents learn ways to become financially secure and explore the different roles played by mothers and fathers in gender socialization and decisions related to marriage. It can also help to target programming efforts to be context specific (e.g., infrastructure limitations that hinder quality service delivery). Qualitative studies are also crucial to unpack the role of religion and the role that religious leaders play in adolescents’ lives.
  - **Explore the impact of early/child marriage on adult intimate partner violence (IPV) experiences**, and support quantitative research on early/child marriage and a wide range of IPV outcomes. Further research could also strengthen the evidence-base for what growing international research suggests may be a potentially critical

### 5.3 RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The paucity in research on early/child marriage in Georgia requires future research to focus on early/child marriage as a central focus, with related outcomes such as health and education in relation to early/child marriage. This study indicates that early/child marriage continues

moment of transition and opportunity for preventing IPV: when adolescents transition from dating to cohabitating, when couple isolation increases.

- **Prioritize indicators of early/child marriage to be included in annual national household surveys.** There is a dearth of national-level data on indicators of early/child marriage and thus, including such indicators in population surveys will provide an accurate overview of the prevalence. There is a strong need to improve prevalence data to better understand the scale of the problem and thus address it. Prevalence rates are inconsistently collected and often outdated – taking into account the often informal nature of the practice and variation in existing approaches to data collection. There is also a need to improve data on early/child marriage from impoverished regions in the country given that economic factors emerged as a strong driver of early/child marriage in this study. National and population-based surveys will allow policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers to explore patterns of early/child marriage more comprehensively.
- **Strengthen linkages between research and evidence-based policy and programing.** Findings from this qualitative research deepen the understanding of early/child marriage in Georgia and should be met with future studies and action. Research on the subject will enable designing more effective policies and interventions and gauging their progress. In doing so, governments, organizations, and adolescents themselves can take measurable steps to prevent early/child marriages and mitigate its harmful consequences, promote protective factors for equitable, nonviolent relationships throughout life.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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# ANNEX 1.

Key Informant Interviews were conducted with the following institutions and individuals:

- ✓ Union of Azerbaijani Women of Georgia
- ✓ Gender Equality Department at the Public Defender's (Ombudsman's) Office of Georgia
- ✓ Representative at Ombudsman's Office
- ✓ Anti-violence Network of Georgia, also a member of the Girls Not Brides network global network to address early/child marriage
- ✓ Religious leader (Mufti) of Georgian Muslim community Mufti
- ✓ Religious leader (Sheikh) of Azeri Muslim community
- ✓ Religious leader (Priest) of an Orthodox Church
- ✓ Representative of youth organization from Kakheti region, youth peer educator
- ✓ Representative, Ombudsman Office in the Kakheti region
- ✓ Representative from the Ministry of Education and Science
- ✓ Deputy Minister of Health
- ✓ School doctor, Kvemo Kartli region



