

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD MARRIAGE USING EDUTAINMENT

In Indonesia, a short “edutainment” film on the costs of child marriage and the benefits of delaying marriage, both with and without alternative religious perspectives, made adolescent girls and their parents perceive child marriage more negatively.

Featuring an evaluation by Milda Irhamni and Gumilang Aryo Sahadewo

Despite improvements in girls' educational access and socioeconomic development, child marriage persists in many low- and middle-income countries, with approximately 12 million girls married before the age of 18 each year.¹ There are several risks for girls associated with child marriage such as health complications, early pregnancy, divorce, losing social networks and connections, and lower educational attainment. Societal norms and perceptions that justify child marriage are some of the key reasons why the practice continues.

Information and awareness campaigns have been widely used to change popular perceptions and behaviors.^{2,3,4} However, there is inconclusive evidence as to whether these campaigns are effective at changing the perceptions and norms of child marriage.^{5,6} One increasingly popular type of information campaign to shift norms is educational entertainment, or “edutainment.” These interventions present content in a relatable, engaging, and socially acceptable manner. In addition, edutainment programs showcase alternate behaviors that audiences can aspire to emulate in real life—potentially addressing any existing harmful norms.⁷ However, few evaluations have examined the impact of edutainment on the perceptions of child marriage.

In Indonesia, Milda Irhamni (Universitas Indonesia) and Gumilang Aryo Sahadewo (Universitas Gadjah Mada) evaluated the impact of short edutainment films focused on the costs of child marriage and the benefits of delaying marriage on the perceptions of both adolescent girls and their parents around child marriage, as well as norms around women's agency and empowerment.



Photo credit: Nadia Setiabudi, J-PAL

KEY RESULTS

Adolescent girls who watched the edutainment film viewed child marriage in a less positive light. Girls who viewed the film had more progressive perceptions toward child marriage than girls who did not view it, measured by a difference of 0.113 standard deviations on the researchers' constructed perception scale. These results were driven by changes in perception of the risks and benefits of delaying child marriage.

The film that included alternative religious views also modestly impacted perceptions of child marriage. Relative to the comparison group, girls receiving the short film on alternative religious views saw child marriage in a less positive light, by 0.191 standard deviations. Further, adding the alternative religious views had a larger impact on shifting overall perceptions, especially perceptions of risks, relative to the group who saw the short film without these views.

Both edutainment films also improved parents' perceptions of child marriage. Adding alternative religious views increased parents' perception of risks more than the standard short film.

The film did not impact the perception of child marriage among adolescent boys, suggesting edutainment must be tailored to the target population to be effective.

EVALUATION

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to compare the impacts of two short films sent via WhatsApp on girls and their parents' perceptions of child marriage. The first film addressed the norms and perceptions around child marriage, while the second version of the film included additional messages on alternative religious views. Both films also included information on COVID-19 prevention. The intervention was developed and carried out in partnership with Fatayat Nahdhlatul Ulama—the female wing of Nahdhlatul Ulama (NU), which is one of the biggest voluntary religious organizations in the country—and several District Offices of Education in East and Central Java.

The intervention targeted adolescent girls in East and Central Java; however, adolescent boys and parents of both adolescent girls and boys participated. The researchers randomly assigned 261 schools in six districts in two provinces into three groups: a group that received the first version of the short film, a group that received the second version of the short film that included alternative religious views, and a comparison group. In the first group, 805 girls at 89 schools received the first version of the film via WhatsApp focused on the costs of child marriage (such as health risks, early pregnancy, divorce, and losing connections with friends) and the benefits of delaying it (such as higher educational attainment and connections with friends). Researchers collaborated with an award-winning movie director who then hired trained actors for the film. The actors followed a script to ensure cultural and contextual compatibility.

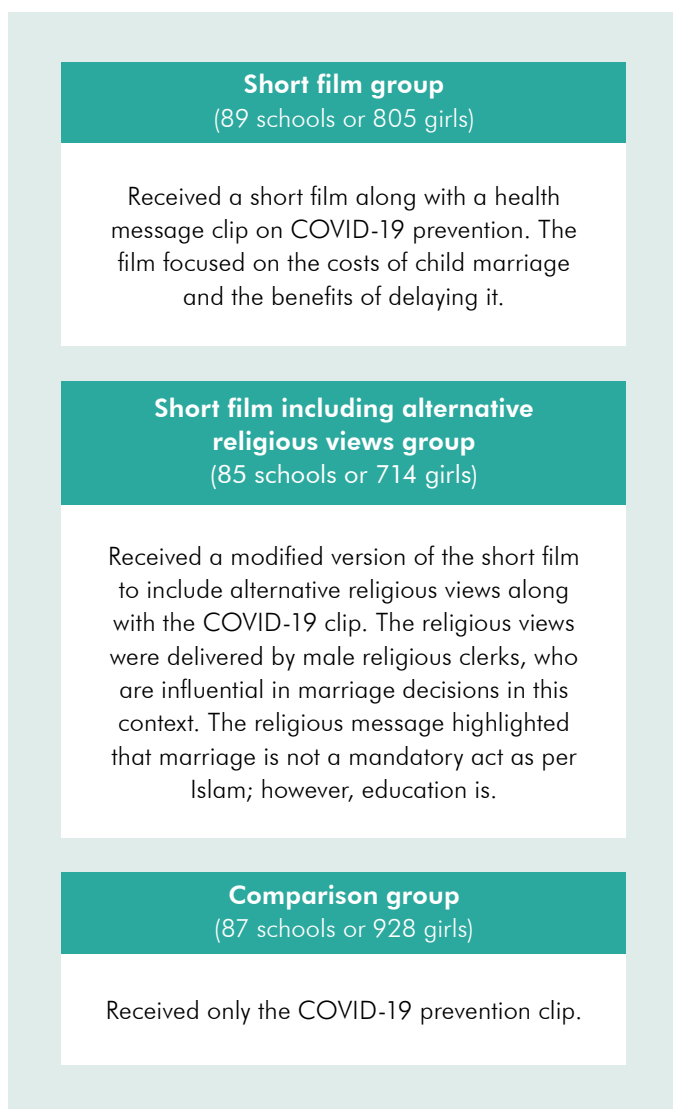
In the second group, 714 girls from 85 schools received a second version of the original short film that included messages about alternative religious views. These messages were delivered by male religious clerks, who are influential in marriage decisions in this context. The clerks highlighted that marriage is not a mandatory act as per Islam, while education is. This was an important message to help emphasize that religion does not advocate for child marriage to prevent sexual activity or zina, and the religious obligation to attain education precedes any marriage obligation.⁸ Girls in the comparison group received only the message about COVID-19 prevention, common across all groups.

The research team and partners interviewed community stakeholders, the local government, and religious organizations, girls, and their parents. Researchers measured the impact on perceptions related to child marriage by asking the participants to respond to statements related to the benefits of child marriage, risks of child marriage, and benefits of delaying marriage. They also confirmed whether the participants had completed watching the film and whether they watched it alone.



Photo credit: Nadia Setiabudi, J-PAL

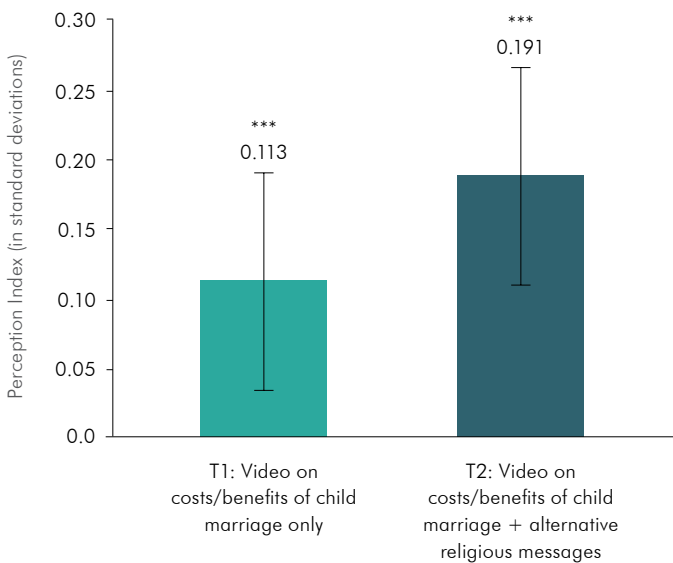
Figure 1. Study design



RESULTS

Adolescent girls who watched the edutainment films viewed child marriage in a less positive light. Girls receiving the short film without alternative religious views had more progressive perceptions toward child marriage, measured by a difference of 0.113 standard deviations on the researchers' constructed perception scale than girls in the comparison group. These results were driven by changes in perception of the risks of and benefits of delaying child marriage. Girls who received the alternative religious views film improved their perceptions toward child marriage by 0.191 standard deviations relative to the comparison group.

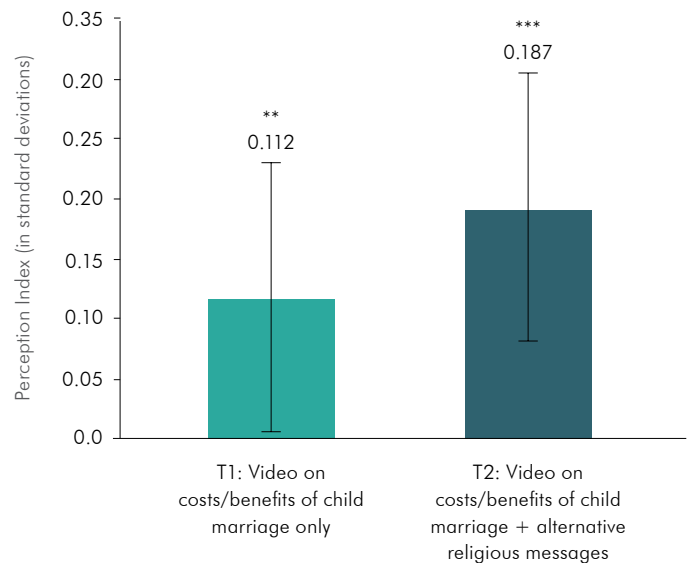
Figure 2. Effects of Edutainment Program on girls' perception of child marriage



Note: The error bars represent the 95% confidence interval for the edutainment effect. Statistically significant effects of edutainment are noted at the 1%(***), 5%(**), and 10%(*) level.

Adding alternative religious views to the film strengthened its impact on shifting girls' overall perceptions of child marriage and of risks but not perceptions of benefits. When comparing girls in the short film group to those in the alternative religious views group, adding alternative religious views positively impacted the overall perception and risks of child marriage among girls but not their perceptions of the benefits of child marriage and of delaying it. However, more research is needed as this is the first study that examines the intersection between religion and child marriage in the Indonesian context. Importantly, researchers note that the intervention avoided backlash while discussing potentially sensitive religious issues due to extensive discussions and feedback with religious leaders during the intervention development phase.

Figure 3. Effects of Edutainment Program on parents' perception of child marriage



Note: The error bars represent the 95% confidence interval for the edutainment effect. Statistically significant effects of edutainment are noted at the 1%(***), 5%(**), and 10%(*) level.

The edutainment films also improved parents' perceptions of child marriage. Both interventions improved parents' overall perceptions of child marriage (0.112 for the short film group and 0.187 for the short film on alternative religious views group). The addition of the alternative religious component did not have different impacts on overall perceptions but had larger impacts on parents' perceptions of the risks of child marriage compared to those in the short film group. The researchers found this was due to parents' being reminded of the loss of social networks for their daughters if they married early.

Edutainment must be tailored to the target population to be effective. The researchers also evaluated the impact of the films on adolescent boys. The intervention did not change boys' overall and thematic perceptions. Given that the intervention was designed for girls and their parents, the lack of impact on boys was not surprising and suggests a need for tailored information for different groups.

POLICY LESSONS

Using narrative or storytelling can effectively change people's attitudes and behavior around child marriage, especially if the content incorporates existing norms, culture, and values. The edutainment campaign did not change the perceptions of adolescent boys, suggesting the content in an edutainment campaign must be tailored to the needs of the target audience and the narrative should target specific changes in perceptions and behaviors.

Having religious leaders convey alternative religious views on child marriage can increase the likelihood of progressive views being widely accepted by local communities. Before incorporating the message into edutainment programming, it is essential to ensure the credibility and cultural relevance of the message by consulting religious leaders due to the sensitive nature of religious topics. Additional research should continue to examine the role of religion and religious leaders in child marriage practices.

Programs on the benefits and costs of child marriage can benefit from using same-age networks, with interventions demonstrating the potential of diffusing messages among peers. The intervention was implemented through schools, presenting a new opportunity for using them as a suitable platform for delivering edutainment interventions. Moreover, the intervention is easily scalable due to its digital delivery via WhatsApp.

Additional research is needed to evaluate whether a change in perception toward child marriage translates into a decrease in the rates of child marriage over time. Moreover, while this study directly addressed the perceptions of girls and their parents, further research is needed to identify effective approaches to changing boys' or other groups' perceptions and attitudes around child marriage.

¹ UNICEF. 2023. "Child Marriage." <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>.

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- ³ Hussam, Reshmaan, Kailash Pandey, Abu Shonchoy, and Chikako Yamauchi. "Translating Information into Action." *American Economic Review*, Working Paper, February 2023.
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- ⁶ Dhar, Diva, Tarun Jain, and Seema Jayachandran. 2022. "Reshaping Adolescents' Gender Attitudes: Evidence from a School-Based Experiment in India." *American Economic Review* 112, no. 3: 899–927.
- ⁷ Banerjee, Abhijeet, Eliana La Ferrara, and Victor H. Orozco-Olvera. 2019. "The Entertaining Way to Behavioral Change: Fighting HIV with MTV." NBER Working Paper No. 26096, July 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w26096>.
- ⁸ "Zina is an Islamic concept of out-of-marriage interaction between different genders, encompassing light physical touches to sexual activities. Zina is one of the most serious sins in the Islamic tradition. In the context of Indonesia, avoiding zina is one of the main drivers of child marriage" (Irhamni and Sahadewo 2023).

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a network of affiliated researchers around the world who are united by their use of randomized evaluations to answer questions critical to poverty alleviation. J-PAL's mission is to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence.

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