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Azerbaijani Georgian Child Marriage through the Lens of NGO Workers

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Abstract

Child marriage is harmful practice which endures despite the best efforts of interventionists. It is also predominantly experienced by the poor and ethnically Azerbaijani in Georgia. Seen from another angle, it is also a proving ground for discourse between actors with different ideas of how to solve the problem, or whether it is a problem at all. One actor overlooked by most conceptual frameworks is the NGO sphere. Georgian NGOs, which collectively make up Georgian civil society, have met strong turbulence from the state after years of advocating for the rights of peripheralized girls. This case allows for a deeper probing into how civil society members design their interventions on child marriage, as well as how they pitch them to the state for broader implementation. Relying on concepts of power relations developed by Peter M Hall, this research attempts to explain why and how actors create interventions and policy concerning child marriage, rather than describing drivers of child marriage and prescribing solutions. Through a thematic analysis of over 70 written works, this research shows that international relations factors more into child marriage prevention than previously thought. It also improves upon a model which explains child marriage outcomes by adding information about how policy and interventions ultimately arise or sometimes fail to launch.

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Introduction

The rate of female early marriage in Georgia hovers around 14% – one of the highest rates in all of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. However, this number is eclipsed by the rate of early marriage experienced by the ethnic Azerbaijani women and girls within Georgia. Up to 40 percent of this group get married before the age of 18 (National Statistical Office of Georgia & UNICEF, 2019. p. 247).

Marriage before the age of 18 is illegal in Georgia. Through its role in law enforcement banning child marriage, the Georgian government is a clear actor in the prevention of child marriage. This research also finds that law enforcement is not the only form of government-dependent prevention. Yet, this problem persists despite the many and varied negative outcomes for girls who marry before adulthood.

Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) dedicated to preventing child marriage are also actors in this phenomenon. Since 2023, the Georgian government has acted antagonistically with NGOs – primarily through its drafting and eventual passing of its Law on the Transparency of Foreign Agents. Many Georgian NGOs have spoken out about how this law is intended to have a freezing effect on civil society (ISFED, 2024).

Azerbaijani Georgian girls get married before the age of 18 much more often than their ethnically Georgian or Armenian counterparts. In addition, the two major actors in the prevention of this phenomenon are at odds. This particular case allows for a deeper probing into the role of the state and civil society in early marriage prevention, especially because this relationship is historically overlooked in conceptual models for child marriage.

Through thematic analysis of 18 public defender reports, over 30 articles and 8 reports from NGOs, 23 posts to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia's (MIA) website, 60 articles from 4 media sites in Georgia, and five interviews with NGO workers, this research finds that NGOs and IGOs meaningfully contribute to the process of child marriage prevention in ways overlooked by current research on the subject.

This research contributes to child marriage studies, feminist studies, constructivism and constructivist power theories, and minority studies, and to a lesser extent, Europeanization studies.

Research Questions

How do the relationships between a government and the NGOs which operate within its borders affect early marriage prevention?

How can NGOs and CSOs be integrated into existing frameworks of child marriage?

Literature Review

Conceptualization

Civil Society, NGOs and Norm Diffusion

Civil society is a somewhat nebulous term with many competing definitions. Although it has roots in Ancient Greece, the present concept of civil society is often attributed to modern philosophers such as Hegel. Generally, civil society is viewed as consisting of organizations and processes which occur outside of the state as well as the market, usually aimed at bettering public welfare (Ghaus-Pasha, 2004, pp. 2-3). It is often associated with democratization, although not all activities in civil society have this aim. In her critique of modern day notions of civil society, Neera Chandhoke (2007) explains that it is erroneous to consider civil society as separate from the state. Instead, one should only consider the two in how they relate, given that they exist in a sort of power-struggle, along with their constituents, and even those who they choose to ignore (pp. 610-613). As opposed to a completely separate sector of human activity, Chandhoke envisions civil society as a “site where various groups can engage with each other in projects of all kinds [as opposed to only democratization]” (p. 613).

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are a part of civil society. Their two primary activities are “the organization of policy advocacy, and public campaigns in pursuit of social transformation,” (Lewis, 2010, p. 1057) although they are not limited to this. The terms nonprofit and civil society organization (CSO) often refer to the same thing as an NGO. Generally, the work of NGOs follow three main types: implementor, catalyst and partner. The implementor role consists of delivering services, the catalyst role consists of affecting change through campaigning and advocacy, and the partner role consists of collaboration with the government (ibid. p. 1057).

An integral part of this catalyst role is the concept of norm diffusion. Norms are defined as “a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998. p. 891). They can exist in the legal, social, or political realms. The diffusion of norms refers to how interdependence between states leads to the adoption of certain norms from one country to another. This can happen in a number of ways, but usually starts with Intergovernmental Organizations defining standards (Gilardi, 2012, pp. 453-458). As long as

coercion, or the change in behavior due to international pressure, is considered as diffusion, then the European Union Accession process is one of norm and policy diffusion (ibid., p. 461). NGOs can play the role of an intermediary in the diffusion process (ibid. p.467).

Marriage

Families are often considered the most fundamental unit of social organization (Fox, 1967, p. 37; although Fox himself considered the mother-child unit to be the fundamental unit). Families occur as a result of human procreation, generally mediated by a formal or informal marriage. Humanity's predilection towards monogamous, family-generating unions likely formed from certain evolutionary and biological facts, such as the human fetus' short gestation period resulting in a long child-rearing phase compared to other mammals (ibid. pp. 27-29). Marriage is a concept which has been studied from many different angles, and which is constantly evolving. Writing from an evolutionary-anthropological perspective, Robin Fox (1967), lays out four general rules for both the practice of marriage and its resultant kinship, or the idea of humans being related.

“Principle 1 The women have the children.

Principle 2 The men impregnate the women.

Principle 3 The men usually exercise control.

Principle 4 Primary kin do not mate with each other” (p. 31).

The first two principles are based on human biology, but the last two are not meant to be taken as absolute facts, because a minority of societies do not adhere to them. Taken in concert with Fox's idea that marriage arose as a way of providing for resource-hungry offspring, one could argue that there is a transactional element to marriage. Of course, these principles completely overlook homosexual marriages and families, so they cannot perfectly explain all marriages and family, but instead seek to explain the cultural impacts of family and kinship as they arose out of biological necessity.

Another lens of studying marriages has been through their resultant transactions. One prominent voice in these studies touches on how the variability of marriage throughout cultures creates difficulties when studying the topic. “One difficulty in analyzing and generalizing about marriage transactions is the variability of marriage practices themselves. Another is the fact that in many societies, marriage is not defined by a single event, ceremony, or one-time

economic transaction. It may be established slowly, by increments, with varying rights and complex obligations, and it may be established without any formal transfers of property” (Bossen, 1998, p. 127).

This perspective relies on a different source of human behavior to explain marriage: economics. Although the concept of markets to explain how people choose partners is not new, this idea has seen development in recent years (Chiappori, 2020, p. 548). This approach factors in human desires as well as necessities connected to material wellbeing to predict how people will partner. In this way, it can be helpful later when analysing poverty’s impact on why people choose to marry off their children. However, theories connected to marriage marketplaces were not observed in this research’s thematic analysis. Still, this theory has been employed in research concerning marriage in the Georgian context. Javakhisvili (2008) analyzed the content of classified ads in Georgia to see how people advertised themselves, and therefore what individuals thought the opposite sex wanted in a mate. She found that Georgians at the time valued strength in men, and virginity and beauty in women (pp. 515-518).

Marriage has a legal dimension as well. In fact, one feminist theorist claimed that “Marriage is, after all, a complete creation of the law, secular or ecclesiastical. Like the derivative concept of illegitimacy, for example, and unlike parenthood, it did not and does not exist without the power of the state (or some comparable social authority) to establish... regulate and restrict it” (Hunter, 2006, p. 107). This point of view defines marriage as essentially a social or legal construct, as it arises out of a social contract through a social authority. For formal marriages, this social authority is the state. However, many marriages and especially child marriages, are not facilitated through a legal authority. These would be defined as informal marriages, often but not always including cohabitation between spouses, which is especially common among muslims in countries where they are a minority (Akthar et al., 2018, p. 374). Globally the practice of informal marriage has been on the rise in muslim communities (Afary & Friedland, 2024, pp. 1068-1069) to which Azerbaijanis in Georgia belong.

As this research is primarily interested in NGO and state discourse surrounding child marriage prevention, I do not intend to strictly adhere to one lens pertaining to marriage or mating behaviour. Although, the feminist/legal perspective will end up being the most useful as it comes to state petitioning for intervention. That said, it is worth mentioning the deep and varied academic discourse related to marriage, insofar as it has been widely ignored in documents petitioning the state to implement child marriage reforms in favor for definitions supplied by Intergovernmental Organizations.

Child Marriage

Child marriage goes by many names. Sometimes called early marriage or girl child marriage as it predominantly affects girls (Efevbera & Babha, 2020, p. 7), the phenomenon is recognized by UNICEF as a violation of human rights and has labeled it as a harmful practice. It is often indicative of deep-set beliefs that girls are not as valuable as boys (UNICEF, 2023). They define it as “any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child” (ibid.). In research, it is common to include “cohabitation” as an indicator of child marriage. Consider the following two questions from the 2018 Georgian Multiple Cluster Indicator Survey (MICS) from UNICEF and the Government of Georgia:

“MA5. Have you ever been married or lived together with someone as if married?”

“MA11B. How old were you when you started living with your first (husband/partner)?”
(National Statistical Office of Georgia & UNICEF, 2019, p. 465).

Had the question only included marriage, and not cohabitation, it is likely that many informal unions would not have been identified. The results of that question produced the widely accepted statistics for child marriage in Georgia, including for the rate among Azerbaijani Georgians. As this research focuses on these populations, it follows that it should consider cohabitation as well. Furthermore, although Efevbera & Babha (2020) find that the term “girl child marriage” (p.3) is best suited for discussing this topic, this paper will use both child marriage and early marriage interchangeably. Early marriage as a semantic term is not incredibly clear, as there are different interpretations of how early is too early in terms of marriage (ibid. p. 8). However, the documents used in thematic analysis for this report never referred to girl child marriage, and used both early marriage and child marriage interchangeably, generally relying on UNICEF definitions or substantiated it through the Istanbul Convention. Thus, for the purposes of this research, the UNICEF definition will also apply to the term “early marriage.”

Impact

Negative effects of early marriage

Marriage before 18 entails a plethora of adverse health effects, although their frequency may be overstated. In a meta-analysis of 58 different articles researching the negative health impacts of child marriage mostly in Africa and South Asia, Famn & Koski (2022) found that girls who were married before 18 were less likely to have medical assistance when giving birth, and were much more likely to experience physical violence. The study found that girls who were married before 15 suffered higher rates of complications during pregnancy. It also seems plausible that child marriage leads to worse mental health outcomes for the brides, but some of the studies which covered this topic didn't cover the the entire range of ages at which child marriage occurs or failed to establish a causal link. Beyond these these outcomes, the meta-analysis provided mixed results as to whether child marriage contributes to miscarriages or risk of death to the mother. The authors warned that every single article they used on this matter had either a serious or critical risk of bias, and that the approach most articles used to determine impacts on fertility were heavily flawed (pp. 5 - 14).

Another meta-analysis by Burgess et al. (2022) focused solely on mental health outcomes of child marriages, analyzing 21 papers which mostly gathered data in the global south. They found a less tenuous relationship between child marriage and negative mental health outcomes, predominately depression, but also other disorders such as anxiety, substance abuse and personality disorders. They identified several intermediary causes of these outcomes, including "Intimate partner violence, poverty, challenges in childbirth and isolation" (p. 1). These factors themselves serve as negative effects of child marriages as well. Authors of both analyses called for further research into the domain of negative health effects caused by child marriage.

Economic effects of child marriage are less disputed. Girls married before 18 generally have less decision-making power in the household. This, as well as earlier child-rearing, often leads to them attaining lower levels of education. Lower levels of education affect job opportunities, which combined with expectations to stay home and raise a family, lower the rates of participation in labor markets among these wives. This is true even well after they become adults. Given that participation in labor markets have significant downstream economic effects for people's communities and countries, this phenomena can lower the standard of living for more than just the families who practice child marriage (Parsons et al., 2010, pp. 13-16).

Factors associated with early marriage

There are many factors which have been identified to contribute to the likelihood of early marriage. In a metaanalysis of 48 articles on child marriage, Pourtaheri et. al (2023) found 18 different common trends among girls who marry before adulthood and their families. Although they are deemed “determinants” these are mostly correlated factors as opposed to strictly causes of child marriage. These fall into four different social ecological levels: Individual, Relationship, Community and Societal. Using a social ecological model is standard in research on child marriage, as Heise (1998) encouraged the use of such models in the field of violence against women.

Within the individual level, they found girls who are uneducated, unemployed, unaware of the negative consequences of early marriage, and those who have sex before adulthood are more likely to get married young. Of course, whether or not these individual-level “determinants” are actually causes is a matter of debate. Each one could easily be a consequence of early marriage as well. For instance, A girl married before 16 may have sex after getting married but before turning 18. Thus, getting married early might mean having children early, which would impact her chances of higher education. On the other hand, if the lack of education is due to “insurgency and armed conflict” (Pourtaheri et. al. 2023 p. 11), then it could function as a cause. In this case, this would impact nearly everybody in the state or province, however, and it may be best to consider it as a societal/community level determinant.

Factors in the relationship level include attributes of both the girl’s husband and the girl’s immediate family. Girls are more likely to marry men who have lower education, work in the agricultural sector, and who are related to them. Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to have parents who are uneducated, to be from “nuclear and extended families” (Ibid, p. 11), and to have little autonomy within their families. Although the fact that consanguineous marriages are more common with early marriages likely does not constitute a reason for young marriage, it does give insight into the norms which may actually drive early marriage.

The community level encompasses factors felt by the entire family and often their neighbors. Poverty, living in rural areas, certain ethnicities, and poor access to media are associated factors with high rates of early marriage. Pourtaheri et. al explain these specific factors generally with material means, writing that. “Poverty is exacerbated in areas prone to natural disasters, making it difficult for the poor to pay their dowries. In these circumstances, parents’ concern for girls’ safety increases” (ibid. p. 12). They also mention that poverty restricts education which then misinforms parents’ decisions about marrying off their children.

Lastly, the only societal factor found in this metaanalysis to contribute to early marriage is religion, with Islam majorly increasing the likelihood, but Christianity and Hinduism also doing so to a smaller degree.

The reason for Pourtaheri et al's using a Social Ecological framework was to demonstrate how many of these factors are related and influence each other. "These factors are interconnected like a network, and it is essential to perceive the intricacies of these relationships" (p. 13). Within these factors, it is possible to see overarching factors like education, wealth, urban/rural divides, and certain social norms such as lack of autonomy for daughters and marrying within families.

When pitching recommendations to the state for preventing child marriage, some of these factors are more targeted than others. In particular, there is a focus on social norms as opposed to material wellbeing.

Conceptual frameworks for explaining child marriage and the literature gap

This research's goal is to integrate the efforts of NGOs and civil society into conceptual frameworks of child marriage. In order to do so, I will examine three widely-used frameworks which don't include NGOs or civil society as actors, giving a critique of each one.

Social Norms Perspective

Pourtaheri et al's work provides some explanatory value in the form of correlated factors, but this alone does not elucidate the mechanisms by which early marriage materializes. For this, a framework for explaining why these associated factors contribute to child marriage is needed. More and more, social norms have been integrated into the study of child marriage as a way of explaining why parents would marry off their young daughters (Taylor et al, 2019; Cislighi & Heise, 2018).

In a draft report for UNICEF, Bicchieri et al. (2014) lay out an theoretical framework which relies on norms and individual behavior to explain child marriage. Within this framework, they describe drivers for individuals' decision to marry off their child daughters as being either "self-regarding" or "other-regarding" as well as being constrained by "available courses of action" (ibid, pp. 6-7). They also contend that parents not only behave due to considerations about themselves and their daughters, but also their communities. Additionally, they separate beliefs into four types: Factual, Personal Normative, Empirical Expectations and Normative Expectations. Each of these four types falls is classified by two dichotomies: Nonsocial vs Social and Non-normative vs. Normative. For example, a factual belief is a non-normative, nonsocial belief. Moreover, factual beliefs are those "about reality other than about people's behavior and thought" (ibid. p. 9). In Bicchieri et al's framework, human behavior is explained through these four different kinds of beliefs as well as the power to make decisions on one's own, which they call autonomy. Still, which people's behavior and autonomy actual impact an individual case of child marriage?

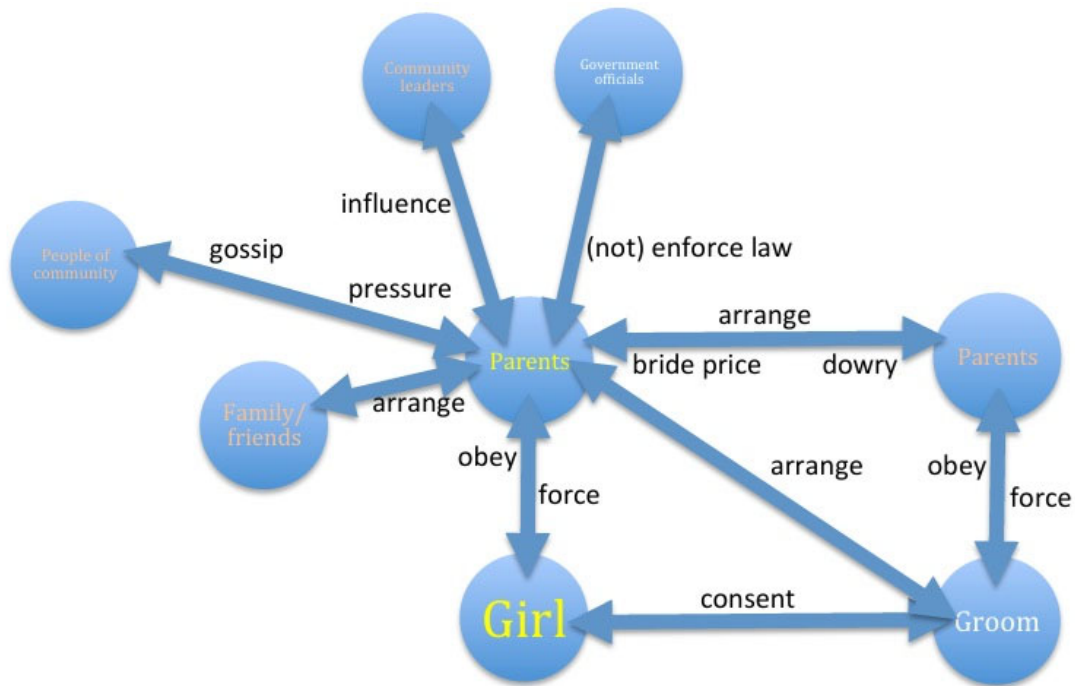


Figure 2. Different people (“actors”) doing different things (“behaviors”) that have an impact on child marriage (the “practice”). The actors in red constitute the reference group of the parents.

Bicchieri et al's (2014) actor and behavior model of child marriage. The model is centered on the parents as final decision makers and actors in red “constitute the reference group of the parents” (ibid. p. 12).

Above are the actors which Bicchieri et al (2014) have identified as being relevant to the occurrence of a case of child marriage, as well as the behaviors those actors would take. For many cases of child marriage, the actors listed likely do act in such ways. However, it seems that certain actors are missing. For example, if people in the parents’ community are able to pressure parents toward marrying off their young daughter through gossip, shouldn’t media organizations also be able to have a similar effect? This wouldn’t be through gossip, but rather through contributing to an understanding of what is normal. Also missing are NGO and CSO workers who actively work to change norms and behavior. Additionally, can government officials only prevent child marriage through enforcing laws?

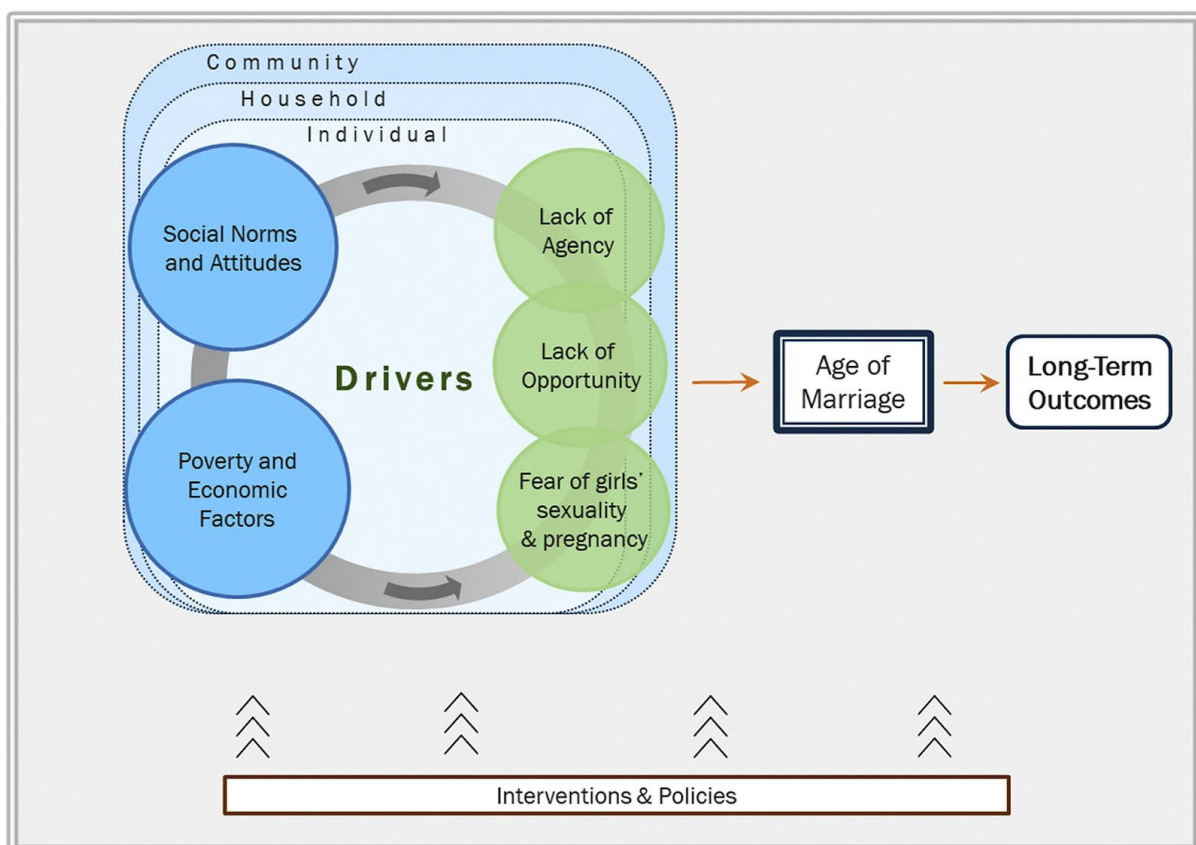
Of course, this actor/behavior model is set up to show a stereotypical case of child marriage, which isn’t necessarily to its detriment. For example, the groom’s parents may not be involved at all in a child marriage between a teenage girl and a much older man. Including the groom’s parents as actors is still reasonable, however, because there are many situations in which the grooms’ parents actually will have an impact. That said, leaving out media organizations, NGOs and proactively preventative behaviors on the side of government seems like a flaw, as

they likely affect many or most cases of child marriage. If poor access to media is a contributor to child marriage, as Pourtaheri et al (2023) found, then certainly their presence or absence should be accounted for, including what information is being disseminated.

Although it is an unpublished draft, this paper has been cited in 62 different papers according to research gate and 94 according to Google Scholar. So, this framework is considered broadly relevant to the scientific community who researches this topic.

Simplified Framework

Still, recognizing which situations lead to child marriage is still useful to the scientific community at large. Psaki et al (2021) recognized the need for a simple framework which allowed for social norms and material circumstances to influence each other and produced the below model:



Framework for age-at-marriage outcomes from Psaki et al. The larger, blue circles indicate more prominent drivers. The arrows represent the influence drivers have on each other, and could point in either direction. Finally, each driver exists on individual, household and community levels (Psaki et al, 2021, p. S17).

By analyzing cases in Bangladesh, Niger and Malawi, Psaki et al identified two major drivers – social norms and attitudes as well as poverty and economic factors – and three minor drivers

– lack of agency, lack of opportunity, and fear of girl’s sexuality & pregnancy. These drivers are present on multiple levels of analysis, including individual, household and community. These drivers not only influence the age at which a girl is married, because this also affects other outcomes, which they don’t specify. In addition, these drivers influence each other. Finally, interventions and policies can target whichever of these drivers are most prominent in the community in question, or even the relationships between these drivers (ibid. Pp. S14-S16).

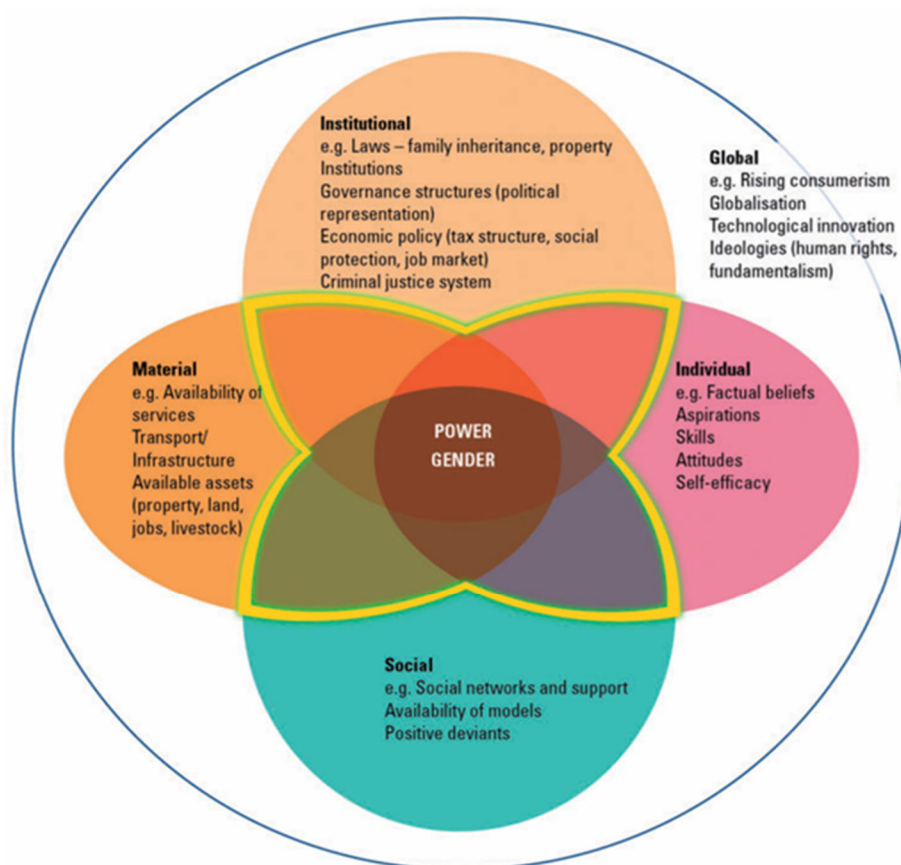
Psaki et al then identify five different categories of interventions that can address some of these drivers. These are as follows: “1. empowerment programs, which aim to increase girls’ agency... 2. Community engagement programs which aim to address social norms... 3. education interventions which encourage... education as an alternative to marriage; 4. Economic support programs, which aim to alleviate economic pressures.. 5. Legal or policy interventions, which aim to... make child marriage more difficult” (ibid. p. S15). These interventions are often most useful in concert, however, and the evidence for any one being broadly applicable to many different communities is weak, they write. As a result, they stress the need for more clarity about each approach without specifically endorsing any of them (ibid. pp. S16 & S20).

The ultimate goal of this framework is to aid key decision makers on how to design proper solutions to the problem of child marriage given the particular details of their region. They list the example of high rates of premarital sex one such region, but don’t actually connect this driver to an appropriate intervention. They recognize this limitation within their research, writing “this framework does not explicitly incorporate legal or policy changes, due to both lack of evidence on their effects and an assumption that they often reflect changing norms” (ibid. p. S20). Instead, they recommend looking at current evidence for potential policies. Not integrating actual policy recommendations into the model seems to defeat the purpose of helping decision makers in specific cases, although if enough future research uses this model, it may supplement good policy.

Additionally, this framework assumes that policymakers actually want to decrease child marriage rates. It doesn’t address the fact that interventions by NGOs may be prevented by policies from the government. Politics are generally absent as a driver, whereas they were somewhat present in Bicchieri et al’s framework. So, while this framework absolutely does function as a great tool for understanding why a community may be struggling with child marriage, it does not suffice as a tool for how to approach the issue, and therefore why certain approaches are failing. Moreover, it is difficult or impossible to find NGOs’ place in child marriage prevention without factoring in these questions.

Dynamic Framework for Social Change (or the flower)

Although not strictly concerned with child marriage, Cislaghi & Heise's (2018) framework for health promotion in low and mid-income countries (LMIC), the authors do mention child marriage as being a proper problem for its use (p. 618) The purpose of the model is to integrate social norms into an socio ecological framework for more effective healthcare interventions in LMICs. The writers stressed that social norms are but a piece of a much broader puzzle, especially in LMICs, which tend to be more affected by socio-economic conditions (ibid. pp. 616-617). Here is their conceptual framework:



Cislaghi &

Heise's (2018, p. 619) framework, which operates similarly to a four-or-five-bodied venn-diagram Each circle, including the outer blue circle, represents a different level of associated factors. The yellow lines represent the space for social norms, which is at the intersection of each level of analysis. Power and Gender appear at the intersection of all four levels of analysis, as they affect each one.

This so-called dynamic framework for social change presents four basic “domains of influence” (ibid. p. 618). Individual-level factors include those which affect a single person. Social-level factors include those which affect people who interact with each other directly. Material-level factors include factors which exist in the physical realm, such as finances and infrastructure. Finally, institutional-level factors include those which define and shape the formal and informal systems within a society. All of these categories are situated within a global context (ibid. pp. 618-619).

Of particular note is this framework’s emphasis on multi-sectional analysis. For example, a government’s inability to enforce laws prohibiting child marriage could very well fit into all four domains. Weakness on the part of the police force could be institutional, while provision of their weapons could be material. A disconnect between the police and an affected community would be social, and finally the belief that the police won’t intervene could be an individual level factor. Social norms often occupy the spaces where these domains intersect, which can be seen in the previous example. An individual’s belief that the police wouldn’t intervene to prevent or punish the perpetrator of a child marriage might be informed by the social disconnect between the police and an affected community. According to the writers, it’s up to policymakers and practitioners to figure out which level or intersection (and therefore sometimes a social norm) to target, but it serves as a powerful tool for recognizing the social and material problems within a LMIC which contribute to varying health outcomes (ibid. pp. 618-619)

As a sole critique, this framework may place too much emphasis on the interactions between domains, and not enough emphasis on interactions within domains. Governmental structures can affect laws, for example, which can in turn affect downstream problems. Additionally, one global context may not be enough when there are various international institutions vying for power in a region. However, this is relatively minor. If the goal of this research were to recommend an intervention for the Azerbaijani-Georgian community, this would likely be the framework used.

Theoretical Framework

So far, this paper has listed multiple different conceptual frameworks for understanding the causes of child marriage and for choosing effective interventions. Then, it has provided critiques for each one, including arguments as to why it cannot function perfectly in this research. It bears repeating that all of these frameworks have the stated goal of helping to develop interventions, and are therefore prescriptive. As such, they leave NGOs, as the supposed audience and interveners in these cases, to define their roles in this phenomenon themselves. This research paper does not intend to provide policy or interventions into child marriage. Rather, the goal is to understand how the relationships between different overlooked actors effect the decisions made for implementing interventions. That is to say, this research seeks to explain rather than provide appropriate reactions to child marriage. Thus, it needs a different framework.

Despite each having its own place in the broader sphere of child marriage research, all three frameworks presuppose that the policymaker, NGO, or other intervening practitioner has the goal of reducing child marriage rates. In addition, they assume that such organizations are able to enact whichever policy suits the situation. However, this research needs to accommodate the fact that different relevant actors and authorities may view interventions in a different light. This could lead to governments, for example, limiting the ability for NGOs to intervene. This conceptual framework should also accommodate the possibility that NGOs or CSOs may act in ways outside of simply designing policy for curbing child marriage rates. In

fact, it could be possible that NGOs which have little to do with child marriage could affect those which make child marriage their main mission. For this reason, this research utilizes a more generalized theoretical framework which will hopefully create a conceptual framework to accommodate the previous, more specified three.

Constructivism

This research takes a Constructivist/interpretivist paradigm. Constructivism is a philosophy of education and science which provides an understanding of the human condition and people's relationship with knowledge. As opposed to realism, which presupposes an objective truth or reality, constructivists posit that any person's perception of reality is predicated upon social forces and is therefore constructed. Truth and reality, then, are intersubjective – the result of many people's shared and conflicting conceptions. In other words, "meaning cannot exist over and apart from the perceptions and understanding of individuals in interaction with one another" (McNamee & Glasser, 1987. p. 90). Social constructivism meshes well into this research's interpretivist methodological paradigm and use of qualitative data (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 103).

In order to integrate the state, civil society, and their respective relationships into Psaki et al's (2021), Cislighi & Heise's (2018) and Bicchieri's (2014) frameworks, they must be expanded. Particularly, a theory of state and organizational involvement with each other and the masses is needed. For this, Peter M. Hall's (1972; 1985 & 1997) theories on power should suffice.

Although his theories were founded on symbolic interactionism, Hall was one of the few symbolic interactionists to theorize on "the relationship between micro processes and macro structure" (McNamee & Glasser, 1987, p 93), which is exactly the kind of relationships focused on in this study. The state is clearly a macro structure, as it is the subject of Hall's first work on the subject, "A Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of Politics" (1972). The documents studied in this research also consist each of micro-processes – for example, individual instances of bargaining for better state oversight of child marriage.

This research is not truly a work of symbolic interactionism, however. Its methodology is not ethnographic, nor does the bulk of the data consist of face-to-face interactions. Still, Hall's concepts of power and social issues can be seen from the outcomes of such behind the scenes interactions as policy making and recommending – the exact data I am using for this research.

Power as Understood by Hall

First, let's discuss the ability to influence another's behavior. Max Weber (1968) deemed this ability, especially in the face of resistance, to be power (pp. 212-218). Once we understand that society is primarily socially constructed, and that collaboration is often in order to effect change, then power can be defined slightly differently. "Power, the control of others, is accomplished by getting others to accept your view and perspective. This is achieved by controlling, influencing, and sustaining your definition of the situation since, if you can get others to share your reality, you can get them to act in the manner you prescribe" (Hall, 1972, p. 51).

To illustrate, a community member who opposes child marriage, and therefore may use their voting power against a ruling party which fails to enforce anti-child marriage laws, can be dissuaded against using this power if the government sufficiently changes the definition of their situation. This could be done very simply by paying this person to vote for the ruling party. This would change the situation of voting from a citizen exercising their power to shape the society they want, into a citizen voting to reap a short-term financial reward. Interestingly enough, this prospect can even shift the voter's perspective of what their best interest is. It forces them to weigh the options of living in a society beholden to the rule of law, or increasing their standard of living, albeit temporarily. Such a dilemma could have downstream effects on norms, truly shifting the meaning of elections from shaping society to getting as much as possible out of representatives. This exact situation will be discussed in more detail later.

In any given structure for society, there are those who are more powerful and those who are less. How these groups or individuals interact is paramount for understanding social outcomes. Within a later work, Hall (1985) distinguishes between power and authority, by saying that authority is based on informed consent and mutual desire for the intended outcome. Power, on the other hand, entails a lack of consent – either through lack of knowledge or knowledgeable resistance. As such, there ends up being a paradox of sorts when power is used to induce consent, thus transforming into authority. This process is pertinent, but can also complicate the language of discourse surrounding behavior (pp. 312-314). So far, power could be defined in three ways, two of which come from Hall himself. To limit the confusion, this research will focus on the idea of power being primarily used to define situations with special regard to power processes – different ways of defining a situation.

Hall mentions three different processes of power: "the use (or threat of use) of coercion, the dispensation of conditional rewards or utilitarian exchange of material resources, and

political impression management” (ibid. p. 327). Coercion, here, is not the same as conceptualized with reference to norm diffusion, as it’s a process entails using forceful violence. In the case of popular dissent, coercion can change the definition of the situation by shifting the value judgement of protestors. Is protest worth going to prison? Displays of military might can have a similar effect, by providing symbolic evidence of the force which the state is capable of meting out (ibid. pp. 327-330).

Conditional rewards entail the uni or multi-directional exchange of material resources in order to effect obedience or some such behavior. Repeated use of this process often engenders the expectation of a continued reward, thus redefining a situation from both the top down and bottom up. This behaviour, oddly enough, matches coercion from the civil society conceptualization better. Hall writes that “this is one of the problems with behavior modification programs... the behavior is not self-sustaining and desired for its own sake” (ibid. p. 331).

Political impression management is less straightforward than the two previously mentioned power processes. This is the action of establishing a positive image for an actor, which then leads to others consenting to their actions. This generally occurs in two related ways. The first is information control, which is when an actor uses its relationships and resources in order to control the flow of information, which then limits the types of beliefs and actions a populace can have or undertake. The second is symbolic mobilization, which is “the use of symbols, both verbal and nonverbal to create, maintain and strengthen the position of actors” (ibid. p. 332). One example of this behavior from the state is propaganda.

States are not the only ones who are capable of political impression management. As we will explore later, NGOs in Georgia often stress their alignment with the EU in an effort to strengthen the association between the EU and NGOs. Given over half of the population of Georgia either fully or rather trusts the EU, and only 18 percent distrusts (The Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2024), this can be seen as a way of using a symbol to strengthen their position. I would like to stress, however, that managing a political impression is not always akin to lying or propaganda. Given the overwhelming support of EU institutions for civil society, these claims are likely well founded.

This last form of control is used widely to generate political support, but the first two are generally avoided if a less resource-intensive power behavior is likely to succeed. Persuasion, for instance, consumes less resources than coercion or transactionary processes. In Hall’s definition for joint action, he mentions persuasion, as well as intelligence as components of joint action. Both of these could possibly fit within the definition of political impression

management, but neither persuasion nor intelligence are inherently political. Thus, nonpolitical impression management will also be considered in this research. After all, the ability to manage others' impressions is nearly semantically identical to controlling the definition of a situation.

As a last example, education itself can be seen as a form of impression management. It is a way for a more powerful organization, the state, to influence its future constituents' opinions and outlook on life. Strauss (1993), who along with several other researchers coined the term negotiated order (a fundamental theory of symbolic interactionism which sadly isn't relevant to this study), wrote that "governments of some nation-states rely principally on various types of force and the threat of force, but even so they make much use of persuasion, propaganda, and education, including socialization of children." (Strauss, 1993, p. 250). When evaluating the interactions between actors related to child marriage in Georgia, all of these processes will be identified.

Political and Social Issues

The above section explored how actors can interact using their respective resources to shape public or individual perceptions of situations. But to what end? Just because an actor has the ability to wield power, doesn't mean they will. With flawless political impression management, shouldn't positive information be effective in engendering support for ruling parties and negative information be repressed to the point that no one even wants to or knows how to resist? In such a controlled environment, it may seem impossible for any social change to occur. In addition, brief mention was paid to actors' self interest, but there are clearly many actors with differing self interests. The last piece of the puzzle here are issues.

In this sense, an issue is a political or social problem that rises to prominence and demands action. Health care, crime, and inequity could all be issues. Of course, all of these social problems can only become an issue if the public's or elite's desire to solve them reaches a critical mass. This would force a response from the powers that be, thus causing what Hall calls the emergence of an issue.

"The emergence of an issue, the development of a controversy or the revelation of failure are all problematic. They may fail to occur because of ignorance, concealment, or complacency. They often require a dramatic event, staged or otherwise, to draw public attention; access to the media for prolonged discussion; and the support of established political leaders for

legitimation and nationalization of the issue... no issue really develops without some staging around a dramatic event” (Hall, 1972, p. 66).

It is important to note that the development of an issue depends on two phenomena and several processes. The first is a dramatic event. This is something which is striking enough to change the status quo. In American History, the bombing of Pearl Harbor could constitute a dramatic event which shifted public perception about entering WWII. However, this dramatic event is not enough. There must also be staging – the act of bringing this event into the public consciousness. This can be done through mass media reporting on it, or politicians campaigning around it. Of course, through staging, actors can also manipulate dramatic events to pursue goals only ostensibly related to the event. Look no further than the staging around 9/11 and the lies about weapons of mass destruction as a way to legitimize the US government’s agenda around invading Iraq (Doherty & Kiley, 2023). States and powerful interests can also limit the flow of information to prevent the emergence of an issue altogether.

How this Applies to Child Marriage

Through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism as adapted for macro-level interactions by Hall, we can now see that child marriage is a social problem which may or may not emerge as an issue through staging around a dramatic event. Rather than the government being the sole macro-level actor, as denoted in Bicchieri et al’s conceptual framework, Civil Society and the media also act by defining the issue and/or staging. Additionally, Civil society is not a monolith. It is composed of many different CSOs and NGOs which are in turn composed of many individuals, each of whom negotiate the order of their respective organizations. Likewise, governments are composed of separate individuals on multiple levels, including central and municipal. Here too, there are negotiations, bargaining and power processes. Between each of these macrostructures (and the public at large), power relations are multidirectional, as each interaction precipitates an interpretation and response. Finally, effective intervention in reducing child marriage depends on its successful emergence as an issue and joint action between relevant actors, most likely the state, civil society and affected populations.

The rest of this paper will aim to use relevant literature, as well as content analysis of interviews, media publications, NGO-published reports, and reports from the public defender’s office to find the above processes of power which result in child marriage. Because this is but one issue that Civil Society and governments across the world may collaborate on, this research

should also assist in understanding how cooperation between CSOs, NGOs and the state succeeds or fails at large.

Case Overview

Child Marriage in Georgia by the Numbers

Georgia experiences some of the highest rates of early marriage in Europe. As of the most recent data collection in 2018, the general rate of early marriage for women between 20 and 24 years old in Georgia is 13.9 percent (UNICEF & the Georgian Government, 2019, p. 250). However, when considering only ethnically Azerbaijani women for the same age group, this number reaches 37.6 percent. Unfortunately, this second percentage is based on a sample of only 59 participants, as opposed to the 783-person total sample for this age group.

Comparing ethnic Georgians and Azerbaijanis in a much larger age range, however, shows similar statistics with a more robust sample size. Sixteen percent of ethnic Georgians aged 20 to 49 years old were married before adulthood versus 40.8 percent of ethnic Azerbaijanis. (Ibid. p. 250)

One might assume that the trends for female early marriage in Azerbaijan would reflect those of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia – especially if determinants like religion and ethnicity are prescient. Yet, this is not the case. Azerbaijan’s general rate for early marriage among women aged 20-24 is even lower than Georgia’s – 11 percent (Azerbaijan Ministry of Health, 2013, p. 41). It is important to note that the Azerbaijan data was collected in 2011 internally by the Ministry of Health of the Azerbaijani Republic, whereas the Georgian data was collected in 2018 jointly by the National Statistics Office of Georgia, UNICEF, and the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health. Clearly, the Georgian data set is more trustworthy.

Likely Determinants for this Case

If this data about Azerbaijan is even remotely accurate (which is not guaranteed), it poses an interesting question. Why would such culturally similar peoples who live directly next to each other suffer such starkly different rates of early marriage? While it is outside of the scope of this paper to answer such a question, this disparity is useful in narrowing down the possible reasons why Azerbaijani girls get married so much more often than Georgian or Armenian ones in Georgia.

There are two major differences between the experiences of Ethnic Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia and those of Azerbaijan. The first is their range of circumstances. The majority of Azerbaijani Georgians live in rural areas, and Azerbaijani Georgians are more likely than their noncoethnics to be lower class (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2024). Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is much more homogenous than Georgia. The titular ethnicity makes up 94.8 percent of Azerbaijan (Population of Azerbaijan | The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan). This means ethnic Azerbaijanis experience a much wider range of socio-economic classes and settlement types than do their coethnic Georgian citizens. The second major difference is simply their state – and therefore the government under which they live.

Relevant actors to child marriage and their power relations

Religious nationalism and the powers of the church

Nationalism is generally split into two types: ethnic – based on ethnicity – and civil – granted to any citizen regardless of ethnicity. While Georgia is the most ethnically diverse country in the South Caucasus, most consider the country’s nationalism to be of the ethnic variety. The so-called father of the Georgian Nation, Ilia Chavchavadze, named three components for creating the Georgian national idea: “Fatherland, Language, Faith (mamuli, ena, sartsmunoeba)” (Nodia, 2009, p. 88).

This first component – fatherland – best represents the ethnic basis of belonging to the Georgian nation. If Georgia is to be justified as a state by representing the people whose ancestors have lived in the area for thousands of years, then how can ethnic minorities who can trace their presence in Georgia only to only the last five or six centuries truly be recognized as Georgian? This second component lends itself toward civic nationalism. An ethnic minority who can

speak Georgian fluently immediately satisfies one of three components, thus becoming more Georgian. Lastly, faith refers specifically to the Georgian Orthodox church, and therefore introduces an additional (not exclusively) ethnic barrier to nationality (Ibid. pp. 87-92).

In fact, the Georgian Orthodox faith component has led some to deem Georgia's brand of nationalism to be neither civic nor strictly ethnic, but instead religious. This religious nationalism is closely tied to ethnicity, as the vast majority of ethnic Georgians are Orthodox Christians (Zedania, 2011, pp. 123-125). The influence of the church on shaping Georgian nationhood has been enshrined in Georgia's very constitution:

“the State shall recognise the outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia, and its independence from the State. The relationship between the state of Georgia and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia shall be determined by a constitutional agreement, which shall be in full compliance with the universally recognised principles and norms of international law in the area of human rights and freedoms” (Parliament of Georgia, 1995)

Despite the nominal separation of church and state (undermined by the fact that this very separation is determined by a constitutional agreement, showing somewhat equal footing in bargaining power between the two), the Georgian Orthodox Church routinely intervenes in state matters. After already having prepared a draft agreement with Turkey for the mutual restoration of Turkish holy buildings in Georgia and Georgian holy buildings in Turkey, the Georgian government ultimately pulled out due to public opposition, brought on by church intervention (Zedania, 2011, pp. 126-127). These Turkish holy buildings were mosques.

Lomtadze et al. (2014) through the Tolerance and Diversity Institute found several abuses of power from the side of the Georgian Orthodox Church between 2012 and 2013 which resulted in the religious discrimination of Muslims and violation of their rights. In some cases, such as the Orthodox populations of Nigvziani and Tetrtskaro villages obstructing the practice of Islam, public officials simply did nothing but issue empty statements, and even deny the presence of such conduct. An investigation into a similar case in Samstaskaro – this time including state inaction to remove blockades on roads targeting Muslims – never led to any punishment other than a warning. Finally, the case of Chela, shows public officials themselves actually participating in anti-Muslim discrimination. Here, the Revenue Service of Georgia dismantled a minaret on false pretenses of customs violations. Before this, the media propagated the disapproval of this Minaret from the Orthodox community. In addition, officials of the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs brutally shut down protests (pp. 45-49).

Through this, we can see that the Georgian Orthodox Church has the power to define who is actually Georgian and who is not. Through its ability to mobilize among core groups across Georgia, it also has the power to influence the state, whether this be because officials are themselves orthodox christians, or through the threat of upsetting key constituents. This power has clearly been used to target Muslims and limit their access to state resources, such as the protection which police provide. As such, in Georgia's case, the church should be included as a relevant actor in our conceptual framework.

Georgia's political system and the powers of state

According to one of Georgia's leading political philosophers, Ghia Nodia (2020), "Georgia has never fully fulfilled this aspiration [of becoming a democratic state] by conforming to even minimal criteria of democracy" (p. 179). Although the Georgian political system has some of the accoutrements of democracy, including functional oppositional parties, independent media, and civil society, it falls far short of achieving democratic rule. The ruling political party has incredible asymmetric power over other political parties, to the point that their advantage in elections is genuinely unfair. It always has the lionshare of parliament members, has incredible influence over municipal governments as well as the courts, and it bolsters its image through the most popular mass media organizations (Ibid. p. 179). This tightly coincides with definitions of asymmetric power as theorized by Hall.

At the moment, the ruling party is centered around Ivanishvili, who holds no public office, but leads the Georgian Dream party with a net worth in the billions of dollars (CN). In effect, it is an autocracy with democratic accoutrements, often called a hybrid democracy or competitive autocracy. This situation is not unique to the Georgian dream, either. Saakashvili's tenure as the leader of Georgia was similarly autocratic until he conceded power in 2012 (CN). So, although the individuals and political parties who serve as the state are negotiated by the electorate through elections, the ruling party is capable of exercising meta-power by framing the narratives around elections to their advantage.

It should come as no surprise, then, that ethnic minorities overwhelmingly vote for the ruling party in elections. In a statistical analysis of Georgian elections from 1992 to 2012, George (2014) found that factors such as poverty, ethnicity and education determined voter choice the most. She downplayed the role of fraud in these elections, noting that "these voter characteristics interact with the campaign narrative and the strategies and ability of political party actors to identify and attract voter support" (p. 337). She continued by writing that there

was still real pressure on Georgian voters to maintain the status quo by voting for the ruling party. So, despite the evidence for fraud being somewhat low (although not non-existent), the ruling party doesn't need to abuse their power to court the minority and rural votes. This begs the question, of course, why would the government develop economic or educational opportunities for minorities if it only stands to decrease these regions' likelihood to vote for them?

Over ten years have passed since 2012, and a new ruling party has had time to develop their power over the election system. Fraud in the last election is a very real possibility. An investigation from TV Pirveli, an opposition-affiliated media company, showed instances of fraud in the last election which took place in October 2024. This included two notable schemes present in regions with high populations of minorities. In Marneuli, a highly ethnically Azerbaijani-populated municipality in Kvemo Kartli, they found instances of carousel voting. This is when the same person votes multiple times, sometimes at different polling stations and sometimes using other peoples' IDs. In Samtskhe-Javakheti – a predominantly Armenian region of Georgia – these journalists were able to get confessions of vote buying from members of the public (Civil.ge, 2024). These votes were allegedly bought for only \$35-75. Again, why would the ruling party help develop these regions economically if it would only make it more expensive for them to bribe voters? As discussed above, this behavior, if true, could have the bottom-up reaction of changing election norms and therefore trust in democracy.

NGOs in recent Georgian History

Much of the current discourse surrounding civil society in Georgia centers around the adoption of the law “The Transparency on Foreign Influence,” also referred to as the “Foreign Agents law.” The law has been compared both to FARA in the US and a similar law in Russia which was used to crack down on dissent after the invasion of Ukraine. The legislation first entered the Georgian parliament on February 27th, 2023. (JAMnews, 2023a). This law sought to make any “civic sector entities and media outlets that receive more than 20% of their annual revenues from a "foreign power," (both foreign states and intergovernmental organizations) either through direct funding or in-kind benefits... register as agents of foreign influence and file annual financial declarations” (ISFED, 2023). Being registered as a foreign agent would necessitate disclosing financial documents and providing personal information that regular citizens would not be obligated to disclose. Many experts and NGO workers came out against the bill, saying it would limit rights to assembly and expression (ibid.).

In response to this first round of protest, the bill was pulled from Georgian Parliament. However, it was reintroduced in April 2024 and then quickly passed in May, just months before the October parliamentary elections. This led to a reignition of protests and a slew of sanctions from both the EU and the US (JAMnews, 2024). Just before the law was passed, over 100 NGOs signed a petition to stop cooperating with the Georgian government writing “Georgian Dream again plans to adopt the Russian law, which will restrict free and critical opinions in Georgia. The adoption of the bill will block the path of the people of Georgia to the European Union” (Democracy Research Institute, 2024).

Georgia observed national parliamentary elections in October 2025. The ruling party, Georgian Dream, won a majority of the vote securing its position and avoiding a split parliament. However, it did so under dubious circumstances. Georgian Dream won more votes than exit polling (which showed Georgian Dream winning only a plurality of votes) predicted. Multiple ISOs and NGOs have published reports claiming that Georgian Dream engaged in non-democratic tactics, such as vote-buying, carousel voting, and sabotaging voting anonymity among other tactics (ISFED et al. 2024).

This trend toward hybrid democracies enacting anti-civil society legislation follows a trend recognized by Gilbert & Mohseni (2018). They find that rather than political structure, it is leverages and linkages with autocratic states (particularly Russia and China) which predict the passing of such laws. Hybrid democracies with more ties to the West adopt them less frequently. Since at least some Georgian NGOs depend on financial support from Western countries (at least deductively, there would be no pretense for passing the Foreign Agents law otherwise), there are multiple international-relations considerations at play here.

Public Defender: State or Civil Society?

Much of the raw data used in the thematic analysis for this research came from the Public Defender (PD), or Ombudsman’s Office, of Georgia. Their inclusion in this research comes from the fact that they have been petitioning the government yearly to change legal norms surrounding child marriage, as well as fund preventative actions since at least 2012 in their parliamentary reports. In concert with UNFPA, they have conducted some of the most thorough research on child marriage in the region. In fact, it is difficult to find a report on child marriage which does not reference the PD’s work on this issue. In addition, they have themselves

conducted awareness campaigns both to NGOs, as well as the affected populations concerning child marriage.

Although all of this sounds like what a civil society organization would do, there is no denying that the Public Defender is a state institution. The lead Public Defender is appointed by parliament directly, after all (Public Defender of Georgia, n.d.). If one were to conceptualize civil society as only those organizations which exist outside the state, then the case is closed. It is simply a state actor. However, when looking at civil society as the relation between the state and independent organizations, which culminates in a sort of dialectic providing a space for groups to collaborate in social processes, as Chandhoke (2007, pp. 610-613) does, then it becomes clear that the Public Defender's Office exists as an entity which is simultaneously part of both the state and civil society.

Further complicating the matter is the occurrence of state officials who leave public service and then either work for NGOs or start them themselves. At least two examples of this were recognized through the thematic analysis in this research. As such, when examining the impact of state organizations like the PD, some consideration will be given toward them occupying a pseudo-civil society organization space, at least functionally.

Marginalization of Ethnic Minorities in Georgia

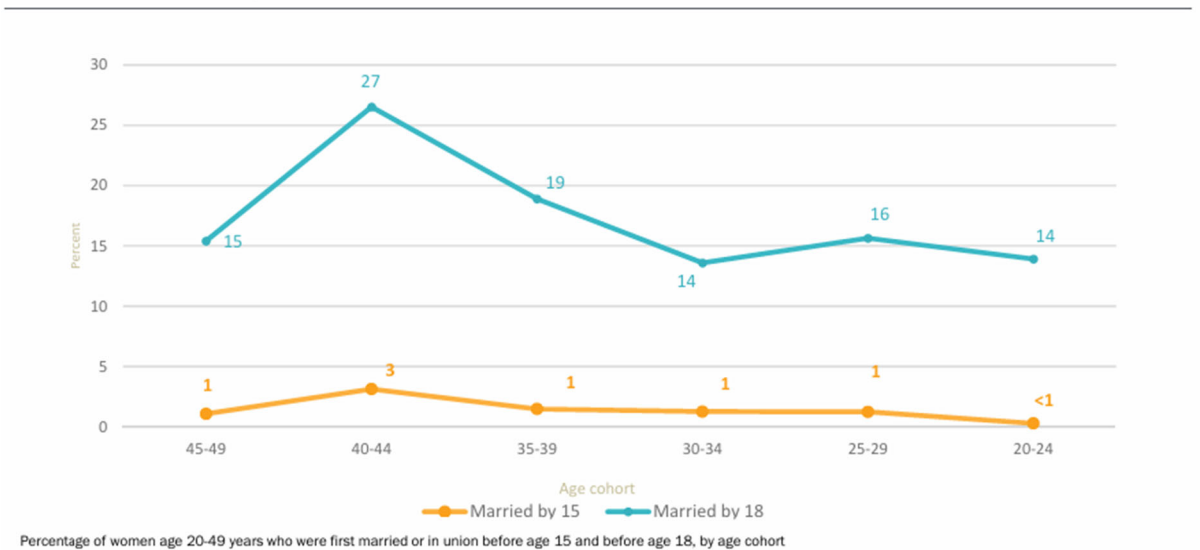
All of the above contributes to the isolation of minority communities, both ethnic and religious. One of the biggest effects of this isolation is the lack of Georgian-language acquisition among ethnic minorities. As a result of this, the majority of Azerbaijani-speakers in Kvemo Kartli prefer to watch news and entertainment produced in either Turkey or Azerbaijan (Tughushi et al., 2022, p. 5). In addition, not being able to speak Georgian negatively impacts the employment opportunities of non-ethnic Georgians. Azerbaijani Georgians who aren't fluent in Georgian will often work in the agricultural sector or service sector in villages. Given that these jobs are low-paying, Azerbaijani-Georgians are motivated to move to Tbilisi for better salaries. However, these jobs select for Georgian proficiency, and having an accent can negatively affect employment outcomes (Guthrie, 2018, pp. 8-9). To underscore the severe lack of opportunities in Kvemo Kartli, a survey conducted in 2022 found that "only 26% of the [Azerbaijani-speaking] population consider themselves employed" (Tughushi et al, 2022, p. 9).

This form of non-integration or isolation can also be understood as Marginalization, as defined as "the process through which persons are peripheralized based on their identities, associations,

experiences, and environment” (Hall et al, 1994, p. 25). Within Georgia’s patriarchal culture, women are significantly disadvantaged. Additionally, the state prioritizes Orthodox Christians and ethnic Georgians. Under these conditions, Azerbaijani women are peripheralized through poverty, nationalism and gender all at once. This manifests in their lives as limited access to healthcare, political disempowerment, and lower rates of education compared to ethnically Georgian women (Shalvashvili, 2021).

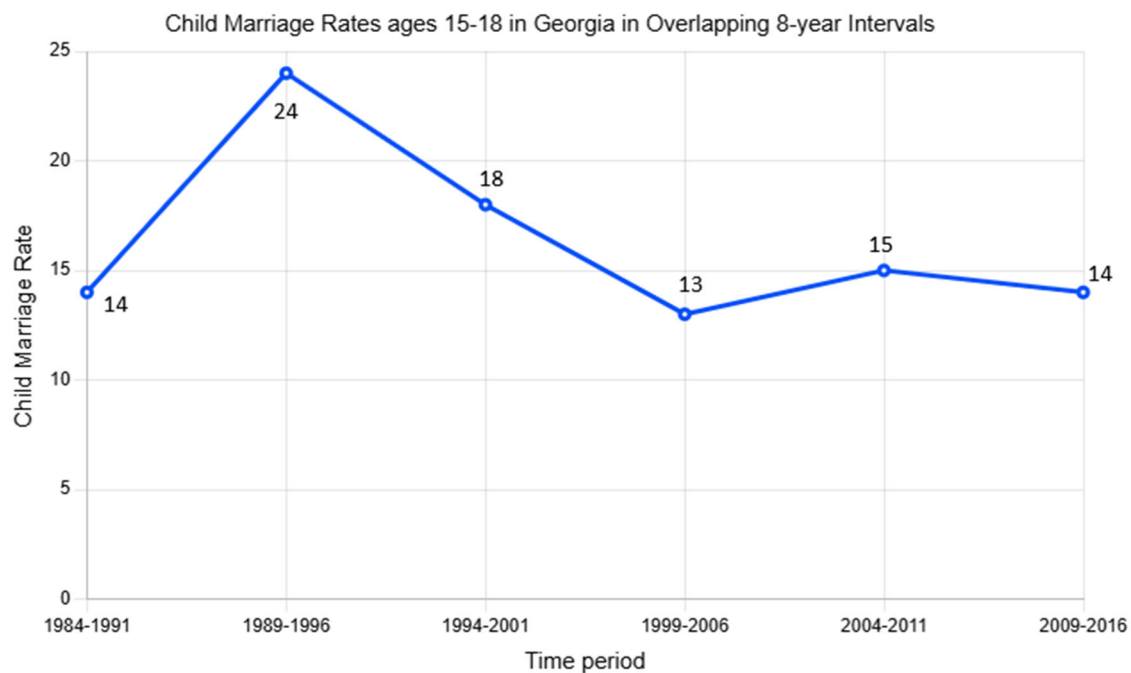
Child Marriage over Time

Trends in Child Marriage



(UNICEF & Geostat, 2018, p. 2)

The above graph shows the percentage of the general population of Georgian women married before 18 and before 15 by age of the respondent in 2018. Viewed in another light, it also shows the percentage of girls married before 18 and after 15 in overlapping eight-year intervals. For example, women who were between 40 and 44 years of age in 2018 and were married between the ages of 15 and 18, then, must have gotten married from 1989 to 1996. 1981 includes the possibility that a 44-year old in 2018 was married the day she turned 15 and 1996 includes the possibility that a 40-year old in 2018 was married the day before she turned 18. Using this information, we get the following graph.



Child Marriage between 15 and 18 years of age in overlapping 8-year intervals. Child marriage under 15 was excluded in order to decrease the year-range.

The above graph represents the exact same information as the one from UNFPA, except for removing the information about child marriage under age 15. This was done because those rates were relatively small, and removing them provided more concise time ranges for analysis. As I do not have access to the data behind this graph, this is as far as I can analyze the data without assumptions. Obviously, the fact that certain years have multiple rates for child marriage is problematic, but remember that this is simply a different way of looking at the previous data. One thing should become clear after looking at this graph. Child marriages spiked during and directly after Georgia’s exit from the Soviet Union.

This shouldn’t be a surprise, as child marriage was actually *legalized* during this period. According to an article published by Sapari, one of the NGOs included for thematic analysis, the Georgian government lowered the legal marriageable age to 16 in 1991 in order to boost demographics for the young country (Gabunia, 2019). This suggests that the state, either through its control of legal definitions and norms, or through its inability to provide for its citizens’ wellbeing during a massive transition, has a huge impact on child marriage outcomes.

Methodology

Several different types of material were used for thematic analysis. This includes documents published by NGOs, articles published by media websites, NGOs and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia (MIA), reports published by the Public Defender's office (PD) and transcriptions of semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher.

Relevant NGOs were identified using background research, and then sent interview requests using an encrypted email to maximize their workers' anonymity. Five current or former employees at several different NGOs agreed to participate in an interview. The snowball method was used to gather contact information, as well as identify other relevant NGOs. Interviews were conducted in-person in public spaces or in the interviewee's workplaces. The interviewer asked follow-up questions for examples, clarification and more information on relevant points.

Documents and articles from NGOs were found by filtering for marriage (or ქორწინება in Georgian) using the search function on the websites of previously-identified relevant NGOs. The researcher then filtered some results out that were irrelevant to child marriage. This approach was taken because of the various ways to refer to child/early/forced marriage. Some documents were also shared via email by workers themselves. In total, 8 reports (defined as document files which required a download or opened a pdf tab in google chrome), one leaflet (defined as such by the NGO) and 33 articles (defined as text being imbedded into the website itself, as opposed to necessitating an additional tab to open) from five different NGOs and two NGO collaboratives were collected and analyzed.

Articles from media organizations were sourced in a similar way. In addition to using the news site's built-in search functions to search for marriage, the researcher also searched for a murder victim's name from a prominent tragedy which will be discussed later. The researcher identified four media sites for analysis: 1TV, as it is the country's public broadcaster, Imedi, for its ties to the ruling party of Georgia, JAMnews, as the researcher had experience working there, and OC Media, given its partnership and shared values with JAMnews. This choice was intended to show a variety of viewpoints about NGOs and state institutions. In total, 29 articles from 2018 to 2024 were collected from 1TV, 18 articles from 2018 to 2024 were collected from Imedi, 7 articles from 2017-2024 were collected from JAMnews, and six articles from 2017 to 2023 were collected from OC Media. The date ranges of this data only reflects what was available on each respective website. As a final note, there were multiple posts on 1TV

which clearly came from the same broadcast of a TV program. In these cases, all related posts which came from the same broadcast were considered one article.

Documents were also sourced from two state institutions: The Public Defender’s Office of Georgia and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. The first was identified as being relevant through preliminary research and the many references to them in the interviews. The second was identified after review of the Public Defender’s documents showed multiple references to the MIA’s yearly informational campaigns about child marriage and domestic violence.

Eighteen documents were sourced from the Public Defender’s Office. Fifteen of these were yearly reports on human rights from 2010 to 2024 directed to the Parliament of Georgia, provided in English by the PD’s office. This time range was selected due to 2010 containing the first reference to child marriage.

Many documents and articles could only be found in Georgian. These were translated using Google translate, either through the functionality of Google chrome or through the Google chrome file translating feature. Larger documents were sifted through using the search function Ctrl+F for “marriage” and then the researcher identified whether or not the surrounding sections were relevant to child or early marriage. Sections identified as relevant were then collected and coded.

Codes were created both a priori and through the emergent process of reading the data. A priori codes included actors identified above as relevant to child marriage prevention: the state, NGOs, IGOs, and affected communities. These were identified through the first round of reading and coded by hand and to the researcher’s discretion. For example, any mention of the UN, European Council, or USAID was highlighted and included in the thematic analysis spreadsheet. The unit of analysis for each excerpt was on the paragraph level, although several paragraphs were included when doing so would add additional context to the quote. This was left to the researcher’s discretion. Through this first round of coding, the researcher identified trends in recommendations and opinions on the drivers of child marriage. These were then coded for by searching for recommendation sections, For the section labeled “Possible Effect of Foreign Agents’ Law on Child Marriage Discourse,” the researcher did one extra thematic analysis concerning the titles of Sapari articles from their last post about child marriage until August 15, 2025.

Links to all articles referenced, as well as a table of the Sapari article titles translated into English are available in Appendix B.

Limitations

The researcher does not speak Georgian or Azerbaijani. Therefore, all interviews were conducted in English. This could have restricted the participation of non English-speaking NGO workers.

Given the political situation in Georgia at the time of this research, NGO workers were engaged with their own organizations' survival under a hostile government. For this reason and others, the response rate to interview requests was low.

Such drastic measures to ensure anonymity severely reduce the replicability of this study. Future researchers will not have access to the interview transcripts. No state officials or representatives were interviewed for this research. Many of the state documents that were analyzed came from the Public Defender's office, which represents the public against the government, generally. This means that evidence for power processes on the government side are the stated perceptions of NGOs or public defenders. This limits the reliability of such mechanisms.

Lastly, the default methodology when studying power relations is discourse analysis. However, because discourse analysis dissects the intentional uses of nuance in language, the researcher felt that data collected in a non-native language would not be conducive to such analysis. Further research on this topic should be done in Georgian and Azerbaijani languages using discourse and ethnographic methods.

Notification of Conflict of Interest

One of the media organizations chosen for thematic analysis was JAMnews. I had served as an intern in this organization from August to December, 2024 in accordance with the internship requirement of this IMCEERES degree. My work consisted of translating articles from Russian into English. No articles which I translated were included in the thematic analysis. I have taken into consideration the bias with which my acquaintanceship with the workers of this media company may have imparted on me, and have attempted to include their work as dispassionately as possible.

Results

They say an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. A workplace injury, for instance, may entail weeks off the job and costly medical care. Luckily, industrialized society tends to be equipped with the knowledge that allows for the prevention of such injuries. Construction workers wear helmets, chemists utilize fume hoods or wear masks, and police officers wear bulletproof vests. Note that all of this behavior depends on knowing that it will prevent harm.

In October of 2023, a 14-year-old girl was murdered in Georgia. For the previous two months she had been kept in captivity, having been kidnapped and forced to marry her kidnapper. She was murdered after multiple escape attempts, one of which was nearly successful. After getting in contact with her family, however, they returned the child to her captor (civil.ge, 2023). A broken leg can be fixed, a cold can be cured. Murder can only be prevented. Even if this tragedy had not ended in death, who can return a woman's childhood after she's been married for ten years, four of those before turning 18?

When the harm in question involves girls getting married before they could possibly be prepared for it, why are preventative measures so poorly understood and utilized? Take one failed initiative to reach out to a minority population in Georgia:

“Once, one organization organized some meetings in a Chaikhana (a tea house). And they invited women. Of course, nobody came. I (as a woman) can go to a Chaikhana because I'm not local and nobody will judge me. Inviting local women to a Chaikhana for a seminar? Nobody will come because it's culturally inappropriate for women to go to Chaikhanas. It's a place for men! Women are not going. So, you need to know what to consider while you are creating some opportunities for women to really create it for them.” (Interviewee 1)

Preventing child marriage, or at least decreasing its frequency, clearly depends on understanding the people who practice it. However, their social and political context are often ignored. For example, Georgia raised the legal minimum age for marriage to 18 in 2017. While there is no cure for the trauma caused by early marriage, at least the police could nullify the marriage and save the child. Consider a separate case from a separate interview:

“When I talked with the local authorities, one of them answered that we’re trying to make a problem out of nothing. I was talking about one case, and he told me that this young woman decided herself to get married and I was trying to destroy her young family. This girl was maybe 14-years-old and she was pregnant! She was pregnant at nine months. This 14-year-old child was pregnant and when I told this to a local governmental representative, he responded to me like I was trying to destroy a young family. Somehow I was the bad person.” (Interviewee 2).

Here, a dialogue between an NGO worker and local government took a turn for the worse because of the personal beliefs of a representative, despite a clear violation of law and human rights. But in a sense, this worker was lucky. They at least got the opportunity to communicate with a government official. Sometimes, when your last name ends in the wrong letters, they won’t even speak to you.

While one interviewee was abroad, they had the opportunity to meet a high-ranking government official. This activist wrote their name down, scheduled their meeting with an assistant and looked forward to fruitful communication. Then the cancellation came. As it turned out, the official didn’t want to talk to a non-Georgian, despite this activist in question being a Georgian citizen. Only, their last name outed them as a minority.

At some point, one must wonder if so many breakdowns in communication can be accidental. After all, “the most important independent variables that shape state behavior are distributions of power, knowledge, and formal institutional properties” (Haas, p.585). Yet, the experts on the issue of child marriage so rarely get the opportunity to share this knowledge with the most powerful institution in Georgia: the Georgian state. When they do, it often results in ineffective interventions which seem to paint the government in a good light as opposed to truly achieving results, at least according to one interviewee.

The following sections will go over the roles of IGOs, NGOs and the media in child marriage prevention – the themes of my thematic analysis. There will also be a small section about the role the state has played from the point of view of civil society, in terms of integration and political will, however this is only substantiated through interviews.

The Roles of Intergovernmental Organizations

Intergovernmental organizations appeared frequently in the Public Defender and NGO documents, serving three primary functions. First, the authors of these reports used United

Nations and European Council documents, agreements, and research in order to define child marriage, as well as put the scope of the problem in Georgia within the frames of the world and Europe. Secondly, following International Governmental Organizations guidelines being beneficial outside the realm of child marriage prevention is included in arguments in a form of bargaining. Lastly, IGOs served as sources of funding for projects undertaken by both state (Public Defender's office and MIA) programs as well as those by Nongovernmental Organizations. Of particular note are the involvement of UNFPA and USAID in the funding of research and penal mechanisms related to child marriage and domestic violence in Georgia.

The power to define

The fact that definitions of child marriage and the concepts of what constitute best practices are sourced from IGOs could mean a number of things. First, IGOs may be the source of both social and legal norms which diffuse through NGOs and civilian's rights' institutions within the state (like the ombudsman's office) and into other state apparati. Consider the following citations:

“According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, “a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” Despite this definition, and in accordance with the provisions of the Vienna Declaration, **the Committee considers that the minimum age of marriage should be 18 years for both women and men”** (Public Defender's Office of Georgia, 2022, p. 13)

“The right to marriage, based on the persons free and full consent, is protected by international human rights instruments, such as: Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 12 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 10 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Article 23 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.” (Public Defender of Georgia, 2012 p. 394)

“According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Marriage is possible only with the free consent of both parties to the marriage" There can be no free will in marriage when the person to be married is a minor, as it is assumed that the child lacks

the capacity to give informed consent. Accordingly, early marriage is considered a violation of both human rights in general and children’s rights in particular, as it is believed that every case of early marriage should be considered a forced marriage. Thus, underage marriage is considered a forced marriage because one or both parties have not expressed full, free and informed consent.” (Isakadze, 2024, p. 4).

All three of the above quotes make use of documents from Intergovernmental Organizations, chiefly the UN and European Council, in order to define what marriage, marriage rights, or childhood are. The third citation is from an NGO called the Social Justice Center. This can be interpreted in a number of ways. It is possible that IGOs are the source of these definitions, and therefore the norms surrounding marriage and childhood which these definitions entail. This would make child marriage norm diffusion akin to Europeanization, which is further reinforced by European Commission’s Georgia 2024 report containing child marriage as a challenge in its Rights of the Child section (p. 46).

Of course, claiming that these IGOs originated these norms presupposes that NGO workers and public defenders hadn’t adopted such norms before engaging with the EU or UN. There is no evidence supporting or contradicting this. Instead, this evidence proves that both NGOs and the public defender’s office extensively (and almost exclusively) use definitions from IGOs in documents communicating with state officials. Outside of a few references to domestic law, no definitions for childhood or marriage or what constituted best practices were found substantiated on anything other than IGO documents and declarations. That is, there were no academic citations or references in these documents to this effect. Thus, IGOs have had the power to literally define the situation around childhood, child marriage and best practices regarding its elimination.

IGOs’ role in the process of bargaining

In turn, The Public Defender’s office and NGOs include references to the Georgian State’s commitment to International agreements and institutions in its bargaining for policy implementation on child marriage. Consider the following examples:

“Fulfillment of Public Defender’s recommendations will not only positively impact the protection of human rights but will also facilitate Georgia’s integration into the European Union amid the current constitutional obligation for all of Georgia’s constitutional

authorities to take steps within their competences to this end, **as mandated by Article 78 of the Georgia Constitution...**

In assessing the accountability of Georgia’s administrative bodies, the European Commission relied on statistical data adduced in the above-referenced chapter of Public Defender’s parliamentary report for the previous year.” (Public Defender’s Office of Georgia, 2023 p. 280)

“This briefing paper is written from the perspectives of a group of organisations from Georgia covering key intersectional feminist human rights issues which **the European Union – and its member states – should pay close attention to in their dialogue with the Government of Georgia regarding accession and in the Georgia Country Report in the Enlargement Package.** It is crucial that the current discussions about accession for Georgia – and any future formal negotiations – fully incorporate fundamental rights and rule of law issues affecting women, LGBTI+ people, people with disabilities, and conflict-affected people” (Kvinna til Kvinna & Social Justice Center, 2024, p. 2).

The second paragraph of the first citation is a footnote. This appears in the PD’s 2023 Parliamentary report and clearly associates taking specific PD-approved actions against child marriage with accession into the European Union. This can be viewed as a notification of some kind of conditional reward. In addition, the Public defender reminds parliament that they supply statistics to the European Commission, which can be seen as a type of leverage over parliament. The PD is in a way flaunting its relationship with the people who decide Georgia’s status for accession.

The latter quote is from a report issued to the EU penned by various NGOs, including Kvinna till Kvinna and the Social Justice Center. It was published after the Foreign Agents law was re-introduced into the Georgian parliament, but before the bill was passed. This citation explains the main purpose of the document – to inform the Georgian accession decision makers of the problems which must be fixed before integrating Georgia into the EU. In other words, these NGOs are employing power to define the situation surrounding rule of law and gender issues to the EU. The report mentions the elimination of child marriage as a priority and that the state should increase resources allocated to solving the problem.

Resources from IGOs

The final role that IGOs play in child marriage prevention according to the analysis, is that of the financier. Programs from NGOs, the PD and the MIA were all funded by various IGOs, and this fact was made public through documents or articles posted by the respective receiving organizations. Interestingly, the embassies of Sweden and the Netherlands were also mentioned as a supporter of one project each.

Four articles from the MIA mentioned funding for their projects coming from either IGOs or foreign governments. This funding went toward at least two projects: awareness raising campaigns (which were funded by UNFPA and the Government of Sweden) and a program to electronically surveil perpetrators of domestic violence/violence against women (funded by the European Union and UN Women).

Financial support from IGOs appeared 12 times in 11 different articles from NGOs from 2015 to 2024. Because some of these articles covered the same projects, the number of projects stated as funded by IGOs is somewhat lower. One project by the Social Justice Center and eight projects by Sapari were funded by IGOs. Similar to the MIA, one of Sapari's projects was funded by a European embassy – the Netherlands'. Unlike the MIA's projects, NGO documents also mentioned funding from other NGOs (twice) and a state fund (four times).

However, this funding from IGOs often comes with strings attached, which can be a detriment, according to interviews.

“So in my understanding, in most of the cases, donor organizations have their agenda. Okay. We need to do like a hundred meetings in Marneuli and they do not really target these meetings to the special needs of the community in Marneuli. Maybe they have different needs. For example, once I remember I was doing some workshop for, uh, children and they said, why are you talking to me about this issue? Because I know that it's bad. Go and talk to my parents because they are forcing me to do such things. You know, it's not a 'me problem' I'm not the problem here. The problem is my family.” - Interviewee 1

Here, the interviewee was answering question 8 about improving coordination between NGOs and local communities. Their answer focused on better identifying and targeting the issues that affected communities face as well as the appropriate audiences for programs. Above, you can see how “donor organizations” may require quotas which do not match the actual best audiences for certain programs. This example of targeting awareness campaigns to children

who already understood the problematic nature of child marriage instead of parents, who did not, underscores this point.

“Donor organizations” here likely refers (at least in part) to IGOs given the previously stated evidence of these IGOs these initiatives more often than state institutions or NGOs, as well as the fact that this participant also refers to “international donors” later in the interview in the context of state responsibility for tackling child marriage.

With funding comes expectations to see results. Unfortunately, measuring results based on preconceived notions of the problem sometimes leads to misdirected action. Thus, the desire to measure outcomes which cost resources can result in wasting these very same resources on the wrong people. Increased autonomy for those workers on the ground may have resulted in the redirection of those resources towards the audience who needed it most: the parents.

“For state agencies, in most cases, for them, this problem exists only in Azerbaijani groups. But for them, it is easier to work with Georgian groups for many reasons. When they use Georgian groups, it is easier to show someone, show international organizations or people in Georgia that look, we’re fighting against child marriages.” - Interviewee 2

Interviewee 2 brought up the performative nature of the state’s response to child marriage more than once. In this quote, they talk about how state agencies are more likely to target unaffected communities despite the agents’ stereotypical notions of child marriage being exclusively an Azerbaijani problem. The reason is again the desire to demonstrate work being done, with international organizations mentioned specifically as an audience.

If we are to understand funding as a type of reward conditional on the presentation of measurable results in child marriage prevention, then we can see a negative side effect of IGO financial power based on its conditional nature. Both performative compliance as well as misguided goals can distract workers and misdirect resources.

The Roles of NGOs

The previous section presented roles that IGOs play in preventing child marriage, but each of these roles also implied an associated role for NGOs. For instance, if IGOs fund NGO projects, then NGOs clearly carry out those projects. Additionally, in using IGO definitions to conceptualize child marriage when communicating to the state, NGOs (and the PD) act in such a way as to diffuse IGO-supported norms to the state. Clearly, when IGO attention was being

used in bargaining for more resources to be allocated to child marriage prevention, it was NGOs (and also the PD) doing this bargaining. Now that this is covered, how were NGOs mentioned in these documents?

Unfortunately, not very often. In the 18 reports from the PD that were analysed, the terms “NGOs,” “nongovernmental organizations” and “civil society” only appeared 17 times. Of these references, only 11 were directly related to child marriage. Four of the remaining six were mostly in relation to LGBTQ+ rights, whose sections often appeared near the child/early marriage sections. The last two references were about PD awareness raising of NGO workers, but whether or not this was about child marriage prevention specifically is unclear.

The PD clearly views NGOs as an audience for its reports. In a report written in English going over child marriage research specifically, the PD writes:

“The aim of the present study was to examine the views of parents who supported early marriage and the in-depth reasons behind their decisions. **A proper understanding of the essential and in-depth reasons of the above group’s behavior will help government agencies, the non-governmental sector and activist groups to analyze transformational work, plan and implement further steps.** It is noteworthy that despite numerous studies on early marriage issues, **this is the first study has been conducted with such narrow focus.**” (Mamadli, 2021, p. 3)

Clearly, the PD regards NGOs as an audience for at least this report, if this research is intended to guide their policies. Note how 2021 was the first time that the PD (or anyone for that matter) surveyed parents on their attitudes and reasoning for encouraging or forcing their children to marry underaged. Later on in the report appears probably the single most important criticism that the PD levies against NGOs. No part is in bold because it is all equally important.

“It should be noted that while working on this issue, target groups such as school teachers and administration, ethnic minority girls and activist groups are often in the focus of international or local NGOs and the state. However, based on our observations, parents are often left beyond such focus. Lack of substantial understanding of the most decisive group’s positions results in demonizing of parents and hindering to understand their positions and arguments. As a result, a vicious circle is formed where local activist groups, non-governmental organizations and

government agencies focus on punishment of parents. And the parents themselves, consider the above-mentioned actors as the opposition to them.” (Mamadli, 2021, p. 2)

This quote touches on the power that interaction has on shaping what is perceived as appropriate interventions. There will be more on this later in this study. From the above quote, we can glean that the PD recognizes the efforts NGOs make in interventions, but at some point started to consider them misguided. If we are to understand the PD as a state organization (albeit one that behaves quite similarly to a CSO), then we can see mutual exchange of information and education as an action between NGOs and the state relevant to the context of child marriage prevention.

The majority of references of NGOs in parliamentary reports occurred in 2015 and 2016, some of which concerned the formation of a gender equality board consisting of both state officials and NGO members, and two references actually relying on NGOs for information from the ground. Except, the ground wasn't entirely Georgia. The PD only relied on NGOs for substantiation of the occurrence of child marriage in occupied regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

“An Abkhazian NGO reported 23 cases of early marriage among communities in Ochamchire, Tkvarcheli and Gali in 2016.¹⁴³³ It can be assumed that the practice of early marriage is equally common throughout Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia.¹⁴³⁴ **However, the Public Defender's Office has no access to accurate information which would allow it to produce a comprehensive picture.**” (Public Defender's Office of Georgia, 2016, p. 477)

Detailing the rights of women in occupied regions – “Non-governmental organizations work with minimal resources. They mostly focus on raising public awareness and delivering legal consultations and healthcare services. There was one shelter functioning in the Gali region at one of the offices of local NGOs. This shelter could accommodate 3-15 victims at any one time. However, due to financial problems, the shelter was closed down. The same is true about the problem of early marriages.” (Public Defender of Georgia, 2015, p. 676)

These are the only two references to NGOs for statistical information or confirmation of child marriage's existence. They also happen in areas that Public Defenders wouldn't have been able to conduct their own research. In other years and when talking about unoccupied Georgia, the PD relied exclusively on their own research or references to legal cases from state agencies such as MIA or the Prosecutor's Office to substantiate the occurrence of child marriage. This

may mean that the PD prioritizes information from itself or from other agencies, and only uses NGO reports as a last resort. However, basing this claim on only two references may be relying on scant evidence and it should not be taken as an ironclad fact.

The MIA mentioned NGOs all of six times, and every time was simply a statement that members of NGOs had either attended or been invited to conventions and informative meetings. No NGO members in attendance were named, despite the fact that Lela Bakradze, head of the Georgian branch of UNFPA, was named on three separate occasions. For example, she was included by name in a 2023 “Don’t Take away Your Childhood” awareness campaign announcement, as well as over ten prominent members of state organizations. Not a single NGO worker’s name was listed. Instead, the article only briefly mentions their participation. This suggests no NGO worker who had field work presented at the event, or if they did that they were snubbed. This suggests a prioritization of state officials and IGO members at MIA forums over NGO workers.

Recommendations and Interactions with Affected Communities

The above section is actually missing the single most common action NGOs and the PD took as evidenced by their reports, and this is because it deserves its own section – offering recommendations. So far, I’ve covered some actions and roles which determine whether or not interventions would take place at all. That is, interventions cost money that IGOs supply and labor that PD officials and NGO members supply. This is a necessary condition, surely, but it offers no explanation as to which interventions are implemented, besides the fact that they must satisfy whoever donated resources to the project. One of the foundational findings of this research is that interactions with the affected communities, primarily through interventions and research, inform each respective actor’s perception of what constitutes an appropriate preventative mechanism.

The most illustrative example of this is the framing around awareness-raising in the PD reports post 2021. This was the year that the public defender released their Harmful Practices report on child marriage which found that material drivers such as poverty and poor educational opportunities contributed to the sense of hopelessness which drives child marriage in Kvemo Kartli. Additionally, they found that the state representatives in the area isolated themselves from the affected communities and held stereotypical beliefs which interfered in their efforts (if any effort was made at all) toward preventing child marriage. The PD issued the following recommendations at the end of the research:

“The state should start working on raising the awareness of public officials about the existence, culture and identity of non-dominant ethnic and religious groups and increasing their sensitivity...

The state should start thinking about promoting employment of ethnic minorities in state agencies, which, on the one hand, would increase the number of young people with higher education within the community, and on the other hand, would strengthen the knowledge and sensitivity of the agencies.” (Mamadli, 2021. p. 13)

From this point onwards, in the parliamentary reports, there is a noticeable shift in perspective in how to approach awareness raising. Before this, most recommendations for awareness raising were directed only at affected communities and teachers. Afterwards, these recommendations still exist, however some also target the state agencies themselves or include some kind of economic training as well. For example:

“Non-fulfillment of the obligation provided by law in case of detection of marriage / engagement at an early age by an entity involved in child protection referral procedures, should lead to an appropriate response and imposition of a sanction; MIA staff should be trained on an early age and child marriage / unlawful deprivation of liberty/ forced marriage, and a further evaluation document should be developed.” (Public Defender’s Office of Georgia, 2021a p. 125)

In this first example, the PD wants MIA staff themselves, not just the police to be trained, along with measurable proof that they understand. In addition, they request that people who do not follow this training (particularly by not reporting child marriage or taking it seriously) should face some kind of punishment. It is worthy to note that earlier in the report, the PD blames ethnic stereotypes on why some law enforcement agents fail to take the crime seriously. This next quote is possibly an example of integrating material wellbeing into child marriage prevention.

“Increase the number of informational meetings and training sessions on entrepreneurship for women in regions, both novice and experienced entrepreneurs, including through geographical coverage.” (Public Defender of Georgia, 2023 p. 162)

This quote is unclear as to whether or not it is intended to directly tackle child marriage, as it is not stated in the 2023 parliamentary report. However, consider this recommendation in the 2021 harmful practices report:

“Government agencies should support the employment of young people (in schools, local governments, village trustees, etc.) so that they can become formal and informal community leaders” (Mamadli, 2021, p. 15)

If the second recommendation is truly a solution to child marriage, then the first must also be. They both encourage state resources to better the financial and social situations of affected populations.

Earlier recommendations for awareness-raising surrounding child marriage looked more like this:

“Undertake preventive measures to minimize/prevent forced marriage, unlawful imprisonment and sexual intercourse with minors; in particular, it is important to support awareness raising of population and to thoroughly analyze committed offences” (Public Defender, 2019 p. 165)

“In order to prevent the incidents of early marriage/engagement, it is crucial to raise awareness of risks accompanying early marriage by integrating gender issues and vital skills/complex sex education in the system of education.” (Public Defender, 2018 p. 117)

Notice how these two recommendations are aimed at improving the public’s awareness of the detrimental effects of child marriage, as opposed to their awareness of utilizing state preventative apparatuses or the awareness of state agents on ethnic/gender issues.

Not everyone thinks awareness raising is the key to preventing child marriage, however. Interviewee 3 expressed doubts about the positive effects of awareness raising. They stated the following when explaining why other organizations favored awareness-raising or punitive means to prevent child marriage.

“When I would attend some meetings to share our findings with other organizations, organizations that work specifically on child marriage, like for example, the ones that solely

*represented women or children and defended their rights, they would mostly have encounters with the Azeri community through these cases, like horrible cases. Violent cases. For example, when a 14-year-old Azeri girl was married off to a much older guy, and then she was killed by him, which are some of the worst cases ever. So **their approach to Azeri community would also stem from these worst possible cases and encounters that they had with the Azeri community...** But I think, like, what they had not thought about, and **what they really pushed, was that it was the culture of the Azeri community to marry off young kids...** But that's a problematic understanding when we have a minority community... And **this also doesn't give you an opportunity to understand different structures that are in power, which might cause these problems to exist.**" (Interviewee 3)*

Their argument is that awareness raising is primarily an attempt at changing culture, which makes sense when practitioners consider the problem to be cultural. One NGO which studies case law and defends women/child victims is the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association. Reviewing their 2020 recommendations yields the following:

"For the Government of Georgia:

Develop a national policy and strategy document to combat early marriage and forced marriage with the participation of relevant government bodies, civil society organizations, women's groups, community leaders, or other stakeholders; When planning and implementing preventive measures against forced marriage, special attention should be focused on the Kvemo Kartli region, where the rate of launching an investigation into forced marriage is very high; **Ensure access to a comprehensive education for women and girls on gender equality, sexual and reproductive health; Provide a relevant platform for girls and young women so that they can exchange information on early and forced child marriage.**

For Ministry of Internal Affairs:

Respond effectively and promptly to all cases of forced marriage; Ensure that cases of forced marriage are investigated within reasonable timeframes.

For the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia:

Exercise effective oversight over the timely and comprehensive investigation of the facts of forced marriage; Ensure that victims of forced marriage are timely granted the victim status and criminal proceedings of cases are executed within reasonable timeframes;

Abandon the practice of concluding plea agreements with defendants charged with forced marriage” (Sakanelashvili & Chikhladze, 2020, p. 16)

Given the way that this organization interacts with the affected populations and the state, it tracks that they would focus on punitive measures, such as stopping offering plea agreements, as well as cultural ones (if interviewee 3’s argument is to be believed). One recommendation that appears here that never appeared in the PD’s reports is the inclusion of civil society in developing policy regarding child marriage. The reasoning should be self-evident. GYLA is a CSO and they work on this issue. So clearly, to them, it is appropriate that CSOs participate more.

Possible Effect of Foreign Agents’ Law on Child Marriage Discourse

One unsurprising but important finding was that NGO and state discourse about child marriage slowed down soon after the passing of the law on the Transparency of Foreign Agents. The Georgian MIA’s last mention of child marriage occurred on June 5th, 2024 with an article titled “An essay competition has been announced as part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' campaign "Don't Take Away Your Childhood.” The previous post mentioned the informational campaign which prompted this essay competition, writing that this campaign was in its fifth year. Related posts about the same campaign were made in 2023, 2022, and 2021. In 2020, the MIA posted about a similar campaign which tackled domestic violence (part of which was child/early marriage) and in 2019 the MIA posted about an essay competition about child marriage. Each post about the “Don’t Take Away Your Childhood” campaign occurred in June. As of the writing of this thesis, no such post has been made even containing the word “marriage” since June fifth, 2024.

Of course, this may not mean that the MIA has stopped this program. The researcher has found no evidence to support its continuation or cancellation. However, the cessation of publishing posts about child marriage or this informational campaign does coincide quite suspiciously with the passing of the Foreign Agents law and the subsequent backlash from the European Commission halting Georgia’s Accession process. Therefore, it is reasonable to add this to the evidence that the Foreign Agents law may have shifted the public’s attention away from child marriage and toward other things. If the MIA or Georgian Dream are complicit in doing this proactively, it would be a sure case of political impression management.

The MIA is not the only organization to cease posting about child marriage since the Foreign Agents law's passing. The Social Justice Center's last report on child marriage, titled "State Responsibilities for Preventing Child Marriage" was released in April of 2024. They also collaborated with several other NGOs to release a document titled "EU Enlargement and Georgia: Intersectional Feminist Priorities Regarding Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law" in April 2024 as well. Given that they have released a post or report about child marriage once to twice a year nearly every year since 2019, it seems out of character to not release anything on the subject since the Foreign Agents law was passed.

Likewise, the Sapari Organization has released articles on child and early marriage every year since 2014. Yet, their last article about child marriage "Sapari Training in Kvemo Kartli," which served as an overview of an awareness-raising and skills training sessions Sapari conducted in the Kvemo Kartli region, was released in July 2024.

If Sapari hasn't been covering child marriage, what has taken that reporting's place? Since their last post about child marriage, the NGO has made 40 posts exactly, 10 of them being explicitly about the state's hostility toward civil society. These include articles denouncing the Constitutional Court of Georgia for not repealing the Foreign Agents law, an article about organizing a march in support of the Megobari Act (US sanctions on the Georgian Dream in reaction to the Foreign Agents law) and a number of articles detailing Sapari's own struggles with protecting their clients' privacy during a lawsuit with the state pursuant to the Foreign Agents law. Considering that six of the 40 articles are vacancy announcements, a large plurality of their recent posts dealing with social issues have been about deteriorating state-civil society relations.

Of course, discourse hasn't completely stopped about this issue, and there will be more to say about this in the media section below. The public broadcaster, for instance, made a facebook post about child marriage in 2025, although this is still far less than what they've posted in previous years.

This alone is not enough to conclude that the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence is to blame for the dearth of NGO and state coverage on child marriage. However, this *was* one of the only topics that all five interviewees unanimously agreed on.

"At this moment, we do not have a government per se, which is legally elected. So there is no communication at all with the civil society of the government. And I have not heard any platform of cooperation with the government or CSOs, uh, last two years. And, uh, there is no such communication and coordination at this moment, which is, which is very problematic, of

course. And, um, what can be done, like, like state should go in the, in the, in the field of democracy as it is, it was used to be and not an autocrat regime. So when we don't have a regime in Georgia, then we can talk about cooperation and communication. At this moment, all the communication platforms are canceled...

“We could still work with them [government officials] before the parliamentary election. Let's say we could still work with local municipalities because they were not part of this legislation initiative [foreign agent law], et cetera. But after the parliamentary elections, it's impossible to also work with local municipalities.” (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 1 explained that central government officials became harder to work with after the first introduction of the foreign agent law in 2023. However, there was some time even after the passing of the bill in 2024 that municipal authorities were willing to collaborate with NGO workers. This stopped being the case after the October 2024 parliamentary elections, when even municipal authorities were brought into the fold. This interviewee expressed uncertainty about how NGOs would ever be able to collaborate with this government, stating that likely there would be a new party in power for collaboration to start again. Interviewee 2 and 3 expressed the same sentiment in their interviews as well.

“When you go to a region and try to explain about child rights, and in this village, everyone thinks that the non-governmental organization is bad, no one wants to listen to you. When TV media, for example...spreads that NGOs are bad, NGOs try to fight against the government, try to get some kind of bad, negative effect on the government and on the country, of course these people want to stand far from you. So when you go to talk with them, no one wants to talk with you. Nowadays, it definitely has a negative effect on non-governmental organization.” (Interviewee 2)

“When NGOs are completely demonized, then you don't really have another choice. Like nowadays I don't know what can be done to improve. I don't have any answers, but I feel like initially what we did was a good approach.” (Interviewee 3)

“I video chat with them [affected community members] and work to increase their knowledge. Now we don't have face-to-face relationships because it is very hard now. Our current government is aggressive against NGOs and also they are spreading disinformation and they want to show that ngos are not good people. They are our country's enemy. They

wanted to destroy Georgia. And you know, people who live in regions, they don't have quality education. They're afraid." (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees 2, 3 and 4 stressed the importance of state media in the dissemination of negative propaganda about NGOs. They described how this results in less trust and therefore more difficulty conducting field work. Given that many of the articles posted by NGOs were about field work they had conducted, this could contribute to the lack of reporting about this issue in the past year.

"Generally speaking, um, there's a negative public interaction cycle [concerning NGOs], which the government engages in as part of politics. Privately they're quite interested in research and developing public policy, understanding that our research is actually quite good and useful for them... but yeah, the authorities are very publicly cantankerous towards nonprofits, and privately generally interested in what most of them are doing." (Interviewee 5)

Throughout the entire interview, Interviewee 5 underscored political motivations for the state engaging with or ignoring policy affecting child marriage. This quote is no different. Here, they blame an outward hostility toward NGOs as being politically motivating despite the fact that state officials depend on their research in order to understand their populations and create policy.

Through these interviews, the lack of Civil Society discourse surrounding child marriage recently can be attributed not only to the hostile environment from the state, but also from media interaction with affected populations which was inspired by the framing of the political narrative around NGOs through the foreign agents bill.

The Role of the Media

The same trend of diminishing discourse around child marriage continues when looking at prominent media sites. Of the media sites reviewed, only one has posted about child marriage in 2025: 1TV, Georgia's state-owned public broadcaster. Even considering this, 1TV has only

posted once in 2025 and once in 2024 about this issue. Both JAMNews and OC Media, independent media organizations which largely support NGO rights, haven't posted about this issue since the Spring of 2024. Imedi, a media organization which used to be co-owned by one of Bidzina Ivanishvili's business partners (civil.ge, 2021), posted about a case related to child marriage in Feb 2024, but hasn't posted anything about the topic in a more general sense since July 2022 when they released a video about the MIA's yearly informational campaign about child marriage.

Some smaller media organizations have posted about child marriage in the last year, including Marao, a women's interests-oriented news website which features serialized novels, and Studio Monitori, a primarily investigative journalism site which released a piece on child marriage in May, 2025. However, the amount of coverage of child marriage pales compared to previous years, especially in 2023 and 2019. Of the 29 posts about child marriage released by 1TV since 2018, eight were published in 2018 (but only six were about Georgia), six were published in 2019, one was published in 2020, three in 2021, two in 2022, six in 2023 and three in 2024. The most in depth coverage was found in 2019, as the articles featured many parts split by different interviewees who participated in broadcasts on a 1TV television program. If each of these articles stemming from the same broadcast were counted, the number could get up to 11. As for Imedi, the bulk of its programming on child marriage occurred in 2023 and early 2024. JAMnews has released one article about child marriage per year since 2017, save for 2019 and 2022, when they released zero and 2023, when they released two. OC Media has only released five articles on child marriage in Georgia (although they've released more about Azerbaijan), with the majority released in 2017.

The years with the most coverage – 2019 and 2023 – coincide with two tragedies that shook the Georgian public and generated a lot of news. 1TV's first post about child marriage on May 23rd, 2019 is titled "Tamar Chugoshvili - The tragedy in Aghayan has shown the dire consequences that early marriage can lead to." Tamar Chugoshvili was the Vice Speaker of the Georgian parliament at the time, and the story covered her response to the titular tragedy. The article never states exactly what the tragedy even was, but notes that a suspect was arrested on "charges of premeditated murder committed under aggravating circumstances."

Shortly afterward, on July 10th, 1TV released an article featuring Azerbaijani community activists, then four days later had five experts on a televised broadcast. Posts occurred pretty regularly this year until October 26th, after which there was over a year with no mention of the topic.

2023 featured another unfortunate event when a 14-year-old girl was murdered by her husband who forcibly married her two months before the incident. This saw another bout of coverage, not just of the crime but of child marriage as an issue. That is, at least by all news sites besides Imedi. Imedi covered the resultant court cases extensively, but released no news about child marriage after the crime. In total, they released ten posts, each with a video component, about the trial from October 2023 to July 2024. Each of these posts contains strictly the facts of the case, and without any mention directly to early marriage. Of the three mentions of marriage, all are about court proceedings to determine if the marriage was forced.

“The main question is whether the family forced the minor into a marriage that ended in a brutal murder.” (Imedi, 2024a)

“The trial of the 14-year-old Aitaj Shakhmarova, regarding the forced marriage and cover-up of the crime, continues. The sisters of the murder suspect, Alim Sadikov, testified at the Rustavi City Court's daily hearing.” (Kirimlishvili, 2024)

“The trial of the mother and uncle, who were arrested on charges of forced marriage and failure to report the crime, is underway in the Rustavi City Court in the case of the premeditated murder of 14-year-old Aitaj Shakhmarova.”(Imedi, 2024b)

The close proximity of the victim’s age to the crime of forced marriage makes it clear that it was also an early marriage, but it is never outright stated, nor is child marriage ever discussed as an issue facing Georgia. Contrast that to the following excerpts from articles about this tragedy by the other media organizations analyzed:

“Although legislation has been tightened in recent years, **early marriage remains an acute and unresolved problem in Georgia.**

A married schoolgirl burdened with multiple family problems is not an uncommon phenomenon, especially in the Kvemo Kartli region, where many Azeris live.” (JAMnews, 2023b)

“A few days ago, another girl in Georgia tragically ended her life [sic] – a 14-year-old girl was killed by a 28-year-old man who had kidnapped her with the intention of marrying her.

The perpetrator has been arrested. The girl's mother and uncle have been arrested - they have been charged with forced marriage and failure to report a crime.

Londa Toloraia, head of the Rule of Law Center, does not share the widespread opinion that underage marriage is only characteristic of a specific national minority community.” (Chikovani, T. 2023)

“A Georgian court has charged the mother and uncle of 14-year-old Aitaj Shakhmarova, who was murdered in early October, with **forced marriage of a minor...**

Early marriage is a longstanding issue in Georgia which remains prevalent, particularly in rural communities.” (Shoshiasvili, 2023).

The other three media organizations included sections on how child marriage is a larger problem outside of this one incident. These three articles also referenced IGOs or NGO members, while the Imedi one did not. All four media sites covered the same dramatic event, but only the last three, the ones not directly related to the Georgian Dream, provided staging around this tragedy which could redirect the public’s attention from the tragedy to the root problems which must be fixed. Throughout this process, they also used IGO and NGO voices, suggesting that their substantiation plays a role in legitimizing this staging.

In fact, an analysis of the sources used in 1TV’s reporting on child marriage shows that members of civil society organizations and independent activists serve as the second most common source of information about child marriage. In a total of 43 instances of sourcing across 22 articles (not all 30 included sourcing), 10 sources were from NGO members of Civil activists. State representatives made up the plurality of references, with 18. Six were determined to be members of IGOs and nine were determined to be civilians (mostly psychologists) without explicit ties to NGOs. Four of the instances of sourcing from the state was from the Public Defender’s Office as well, which as stated earlier is functionally quite similar to civil society organizations despite not formally being one.

This last analysis proves that NGOs play a role in shaping public perceptions of child marriage through their appearances in media. Also, the 1TV articles which featured activists and NGO members tended to grapple with the issue of child marriage more broadly, while state agencies and officials were often used to source statistical information.

Political Will

The previous explanation showed that NGOs contribute to the media discourse surrounding dramatic events in order to frame them in the context of the larger picture, but why do they do this? According to one respondent:

“Basically you have your primary audience being policy makers, um, and your secondary audience being the public, um, with the goal of the secondary audience influencing the primary audience... No one's actively thinking this, but what you in practice want is your secondary audience to actually be Vake, the neighborhood in Tbilisi. And the reason why is that's where lots of the political elites live, that's where lots of the chattering class live, and so if you get the children of the MP asking their dad why something is some way and why doesn't he do something about it, you've just won.” (Interviewee 5)

Interviewee 5 explained that policy makers are the most important audience, which makes sense with NGOs' catalyst functionality. However, in order to actually inspire them to action, oftentimes NGOs need to agitate the masses – even better if the reader happens to be in Vake, where the political elite live. This is a clear statement of trying to generate political will, which was repeated time and time again by NGO workers as one of the barriers to state implementation of proper intervention and policies.

“It might be challenging for them, not enough political will, not caring about ethnic minorities also. And yeah, this is a continuation of exclusion policy, like not integration policy, but the exclusion policy we have in Georgia somehow, unfortunately.” (Interviewee 1)

Here, the respondent was answering a followup question about why the state hasn't done the specific interventions that the interviewee had mentioned. They brought up exclusion and integration, tying its policy implicitly with political will. But this interviewee wasn't the only one to bring up exclusion in concert with political will.

“Each problem needs political will, especially that kind of problem. So, when you want, when you have a region – I mean Kvemo Kartli, this is a very, very specific region. You must know that if you cannot solve this problem... today this is child marriage problem, but tomorrow it may be a different problem. For example, they could separate, because ‘we are not Georgian, we don't know Georgian, we don't take education in Georgia, we don't understand Georgian, so we don't want to be in Georgia.’ So it is, of course, the very, very high level of

this very big problem tree, but you must try to solve from the beginning and then you can achieve a very, very good future. But you need this political will.” (Interviewee 2)

In this quote, the respondent is talking about how the unchecked problem of child marriage and nonintegration can evolve into a different kind of problem – one of the separatist variety. Again, the respondent mentions the necessity for political will, and by virtue of the state’s lack of implementation, also a present lack of this political will. The strong association here with child marriage, exclusionary practices and political will in both quotes suggest that the three of them may be linked. Interviewee five says it explicitly when answering a similar question about why reforms aren’t taking place.

“Electoral politics. So, the simple answer is, every government since Shevardnadze has had, basically, a deal with both ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis that, in geographically concentrated areas, that you vote for, whoever’s in power and we leave you alone. It’s common knowledge, and it shows up on the voting map.” (Interviewee 5)

This quote hardly needs interpretation. It is an assertion that the political forces in Georgia maintain a non-interventionist approach when dealing with citizens of their own country in exchange for votes. This is a win-win for the Georgian government, as it assures the leading party will get enough votes to keep up the appearance of a democracy, as well as monetary resources which could go back to ethnic Georgians, or politicians loyal to the party. Additionally, if this is indeed the case, it can be seen as the clearest example of a conditional reward which goes on and creates negative precedents in terms of the social and political norms between peripheralized minorities and the Georgian government.

Unfortunately, given the sensitivity of these sorts of accusations, there was no mention of electoral interference when criticizing the government for its policies in either the PD or NGO reports. Still, it was a significant enough thread through the five interviews that it was worth mentioning as one of the issues between state and minority interaction from the point of view of NGO workers.

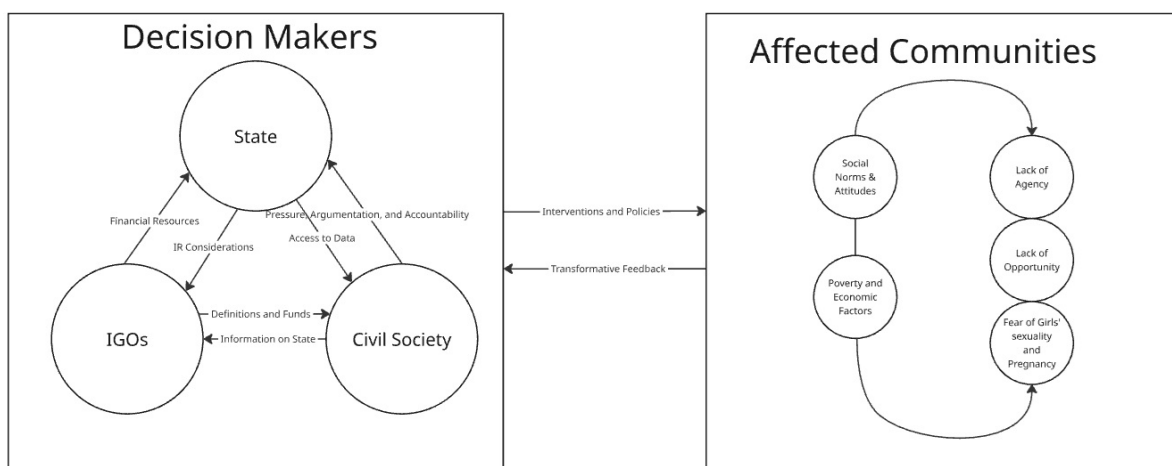
Discussion

The thematic analysis conducted in this research shows that interventions and policies cannot be taken for granted. Previous models of child marriage and child marriage prevention focused on drivers of child marriage while including space for reforms. However, the implementation of these reforms through interventions and policies is subject to cooperation and bargaining between the state, NGOs, and IGOs. In addition, which interventions these actors advocate for are often informed by their respective experience dealing with the issue, as well as outside considerations, such as measuring impact for donors.

The roles of IGOs and foreign embassies in child marriage interventions and bargaining in the Georgian case suggests that international relations may play a more important role in materializing reform than previous studies found. The Transparency of Foreign Agents Law’s passing likely negatively impacted NGOs’ ability to work on this issue and caused IGOs related to the European Union accession process to stop cooperating with Georgia. As such, domestic laws which seem unrelated to child marriage can have major effects due to how they affect international relations and civil society.

Hall’s concepts of power as it relates to politics explain that most social issues need dramatic events and staging for them to arise. State officials, NGO workers and IGO members all contribute to the media cycle around dramatic events related to child marriage which provide the political will necessary to effect change.

Below is a conceptual model adapted from Psaki et al’s simplified framework which includes the actors and processes of designing and employing interventions, the culmination of this thematic analysis. Transformative feedback now comes from affected communities to represent how interaction with them changes the kinds of interventions proposed by decision makers. The left side replaces Psaki et al’s box which simply says “interventions and policies.” Now, different types of bargaining and rewards between the state, civil society and IGOs are shown which result in creating (or failing to create) interventions.



As stated before, unlike the majority of research on child marriage, this study is not intended to give policy proposals or give insight on which interventions to carry out. Instead, this research shows that NGOs and IGOs play an integral role in shaping these interventions,

even when they are carried out by the state. Further research should implement the full power of the symbolic interactionist lens of sociological research by conducting ethnographic research concerning interaction among NGO workers and between the state and civil society as it pertains to child marriage prevention.

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