

Why campaigns to stop child marriage can backfire

By Ragnhild L. Muriaas, Vibeke Wang,
Lindsay Benstead, Boniface Dulani and
Lise Rakner

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The #MeToo movement has helped create a global spotlight on campaigns to end sexual harassment and assault, human trafficking and child marriage. These movements add to a growing emphasis on girls' rights, highlighted by the recent trip of first lady Melania Trump to Africa — including a stop in Malawi, where she brought attention to children's welfare.

But we find in our research that human rights campaigns can actually make child marriage worse. These efforts can backfire, causing decreased support for banning child marriage.

How we did our research

We conducted a survey experiment in Malawi in 2016 with a team of researchers at the Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD). Part of the larger Local Governance Performance Index (LGPI), the study included 1,381 Malawians who were randomly assigned to one of five groups. Each of the first four groups heard a different statement against child marriage. The fifth group heard no such message.

Each of the four messages had a different messenger advocating against child marriage:

- A male traditional authority, also sometimes referred to as a chief.
- A female traditional authority. In Malawi, 10 percent of traditional leaders are women. Female traditional authorities exist where matrilineality is practiced, a custom in which property and inheritance pass through the mother's line; in patrilineal societies, in contrast,

property and inheritance pass through the father's family. Other African and Asian ethnic groups practice matrilineality as well.

- A male member of parliament (MP).
- A female MP.

Here's an example of the statement and subsequent question participants in the Malawi study heard: "A female traditional authority is supporting the new law that sets the minimum age of marriage at 18. What do you think of the law? Do you strongly support it, support it, not support it or strongly not support it?"

The messenger mattered, in this study

In a recently published [article](#), we found most Malawians (76 percent) strongly supported a law restricting marriage for individuals under 18 years of age, while 10 percent supported the concept. Only 15 percent did not support it. Support for the law was not significantly higher among women than men — but was higher in matrilineal areas and among those who support gender equality.

Our survey experiment allowed us to see whether certain messengers were more effective at promoting campaigns to end child marriage. We found that messages from a female traditional authority were the most effective overall. Support for the reform was slightly higher when endorsed by one of the female messengers than by either of the male messengers: 75 percent strongly supported the reform when advocated by a female MP, while 78 percent strongly supported the reform when advocated by a female traditional authority. If the advocate was male, only 74 percent (male MP) and 72 percent (male traditional authority), respectively, strongly supported the reform.

But, the female traditional authority endorsement was no more effective than having no endorsement at all — the control group. We found 80 percent supported the law when there was no endorsement. When the message came from a male authority figure — either a male traditional authority or MP — there was a backfire effect relative to the control. Female MPs also produced a backfire effect relative to the control.

Why are women chiefs most effective in advocating against child marriage?

We believe that Malawians' high trust in traditional authorities — coupled with their perceptions that women are competent on gender-based issues — make female traditional authorities the most effective endorsers. According to a 2014 [Afrobarometer](#) survey, Malawians are more likely to approve of the performance of traditional authorities than MPs.

The Afrobarometer survey revealed 47 percent of men and 59 percent of women trust "parliament," while 66 percent of men and 79 percent of women

The Afrobarometer survey revealed 47 percent of men and 53 percent of women trust parliament, while 66 percent of men and 73 percent of women trust “traditional leaders.” Another question on whether respondents approved of how Malawi leaders had performed their jobs over the past 12 months, only 30 percent of men and 35 percent of women approved of “Your MP” — but 79 percent of respondents of both genders approved of their “traditional leader.”

In in the [LGPI](#) survey as well, Malawians have higher trust in their traditional authorities than their parliamentarians: 53 percent of respondents trusted their traditional authority very much, compared to 28 percent expressing high levels of trust in their MPs.

Cultural backgrounds can make some messages backfire

All four messengers caused backfire effects among some sub-segments of the population — actually decreasing support for banning child marriage. The backlash we saw was related to kinship systems, an important cultural practice. In Malawi, different groups have different kinship systems: in matrilineal groups such as the [Yao](#), kinship follows the mother’s line; in patrilineal groups such as the [Tumbuka](#), kinship follows the father’s line.

Among people in matrilineal groups, we found male messengers caused a backfire effect — lower support for banning child marriage if a male traditional authority or male MP advocated the reform than if there was no endorsement (i.e., the control group). Among people in patrilineal groups, the most effective endorser was the male MP, who was more effective than the control. This raises concerns human rights campaigns might have limited or even negative impacts, but also shows the most effective endorser depends on the group that is hearing the message.

What do these findings mean for human rights campaigners?

Our study isn’t the first to recognize the possibility that human rights campaigns might [backfire](#) and cause those who oppose changes to become even more resistant. To be sure, this research was conducted in Malawi, and the findings may not apply in other countries in the same way. But our research shows it is important for policymakers developing programs to curb child marriage and other human rights campaigns to consider messenger effects and the potential for backlash.

More specifically, campaigners may need to look to cultural backgrounds and other population characteristics in identifying the most effective messenger for any campaign. Tailoring programs based on this type of research may well be key to doing no harm.

Ragnhild L. Muriaas is a professor in the Department of Comparative Politics and research dean in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Bergen, Norway.

Vibeke Wang is a senior researcher at Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway.

Lindsay J. Benstead is a Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., and an associate professor of political science at Portland State University, where she is director of the Middle East Studies Center.

Boniface Dulani is a senior lecturer in political science at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. Follow him on Twitter @bonidulani.

Lise Rakner is professor of comparative politics at the University of Bergen, Norway, and adjunct at the Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway.

Together they are the authors of “Why the Gender of Traditional Authorities Matters: Intersectionality and Women’s Rights Advocacy in Malawi” (Comparative Political Studies, 2018).

