

Child Brides in Tanzania: International Development, Anthropology and ‘Saving Children’.

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In Sub-Saharan Africa an estimated 40% of girls become “child brides” i.e. marry before the age of 18 years. In some nations the frequency is over 75% (e.g. Niger). The last five years have witnessed a dramatic increase in interest in “child marriage” by international organisations, NGOs, governments and the media. This includes the founding of ‘Girls Not Brides’ in 2011, a global partnership of over 600 civil society organisations committed to the issue, and the first global pledge to eliminate the practice under the new Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. While any effort to improve wellbeing is to be welcomed, it is alarming that the remarkable surge of interest in child marriage has taken place largely in the absence of engagement with anthropologists. Building on earlier work challenging common conceptualisations of polygynous marriage (Lawson et al. 2015), in this talk I will interrogate the current categorization of child marriage as a ‘harmful cultural practice’. Specifically, I will (1) trace out the history and extent of current interest in child marriage and the reasons for the lack of anthropological engagement; (2) identify a number of concerns about the construct validity of child marriage; and (3) propose evolutionary anthropology as a theoretical framework for guiding future research into child marriage as a ‘parental investment strategy’. As I prepare to collect relevant field data on this topic in rural Tanzania in 2017, this presentation will be an opportunity to gain constructive feedback to guide my research.

Lawson DW, James S, Ngadaya E, Ngowi B, Mfinanga SGM, Borgerhoff Mulder M (2015). [No evidence that polygynous marriage is a harmful cultural practice in northern Tanzania](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 112(45), 13827-13832.