

What was the research question/what does this brief explore?

This brief explores how pregnancy leads to child marriage in Malawi.

What data does this brief use?

This brief draws on qualitative data collected in 2018 in Mangochi and Nkhata Bay, Malawi, through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and community observations as part of the More than Brides Alliance's *Marriage: No Child's Play* project.

Additionally, we include data collected through in-depth interviews with implementers working on programmes related to child marriage and adolescent wellbeing in Malawi, collected as a part of the *Making the Most of What We Know* collaborative learning project.

What evidence did we find?

Through group discussions, in-depth interviews, and community observations, a consensus emerged that pregnancy is often the root cause of child marriage in Malawi. This consensus complements findings from previous research conducted in Malawi. For example, Steinhaus et al. (2019) found that *"more than four in five respondents (84.9%) reported that child marriage might happen because of pregnancy in their community,"* while Ansell et al. (2018) observed that among young men in Southern Malawi, some report having *"had to marry when their girlfriends became pregnant"* and *"some regretted this as they would have preferred a different partner, but felt bound by duty."*

In qualitative data collected through the MTBA project, parents and girls frequently reported pregnancy leading to child marriage in their communities. They explained that premarital sexual activity is common and contraceptive use among adolescent girls is inconsistent. When a girl becomes pregnant, her parents may take her to the man or family of the boy with the expectation that marriage will follow.

They [adolescent girls] engage in a sexual relationship. When they have done that, the girl gets impregnated, and the parents of the girl give that child to the man responsible for the pregnancy.

-In-depth interview, 17-year-old unmarried female from Mangochi

As one currently separated adolescent girl reported, her marriage was a direct response to her pregnancy:

I got married because I was pregnant. When I got pregnant, I informed my parents about that. Then I told my uncle. After that, we arranged a traditional wedding.

- In-depth interview, separated adolescent girl from Mangochi

Although both quotes above are from research participants in Mangochi, the same results were found in Nkhata Bay. A key informant noted that ‘these days,’ marriages were often due to pregnancy:

Of course, most of the marriages we have these days are due to early pregnancies. We barely have church weddings.

- Key informant from Nkhata Bay

Interviews with programme implementers revealed the reality that girls often engage in sexual relationships to meet their material needs, leading to premarital pregnancy and child marriage. The leader of a non-governmental youth-led organisation in Malawi explained:

As they grow and their needs increase, girls resort to sexual relationships for money. With the absence of contraceptives and misconceptions around it, most end up being pregnant and getting married.

GNB (Forum for Concerned Young People—FOCOYOPE) - Lemos Manase, Malawi

Further interviews with practitioners showed that engagement in transactional sex might range from the exchange of sex for gifts with a known partner to more overt sex work. MacPherson et al. (2012) describe this spectrum of behaviours.

Most girls—as young as 13 years old—engage in prostitution with older men who frequent drinking places in trading centres. Girls engage in the practice mainly to meet basic needs. As evening approaches, one starts to notice long queues of girls around lodges or drinking places waiting for male customers. In such processes, girls find themselves pregnant, and some are forced into child marriages.

Marcel Chisi, AYISE, Malawi

Programme implementer interviews revealed that girls who engage in sexual activity often have insufficient knowledge or access to services to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies. One practitioner explained how misinformation about the effects of contraceptives lead girls to avoid using them, resulting in unwanted pregnancies and marriages:

Coupled with community misconceptions that girls could become barren if they use contraceptives before marriage, most girls end up shunning the very services that could have improved their health and wellbeing and dive into unwanted pregnancies and child marriages.

Agatha Njunga, NYD, Malawi

Implications for child marriage programming

Understanding pregnancy as a child marriage driver reveals the direct connection between adolescent sexuality and child marriage. In this case, evidence gathered from research with adolescent girls and their parents and from interviews conducted with programme implementers demonstrate that premarital sex is not uncommon among adolescent girls in Malawi, and resulting pregnancies often lead to child marriage. Evidence shows that sexually active adolescent girls in Malawi may not use contraceptives out of fear that they might cause infertility or other problems. Additionally, evidence shows that girls may feel increasingly pressured into transactional sexual relationships to provide for their material needs. When pregnancy occurs, there is an expectation that girls will be brought to the man responsible for the pregnancy and that marriage will follow. Evidence suggests that preventing premarital pregnancies and subsequent child marriage in Malawi requires investment in SRHR awareness and wider access to livelihood alternatives.

Further reading:

Ansell et al.

["My happiest time" or "my saddest time"? The spatial and generational construction of marriage among youth in rural Malawi and Lesotho \(wiley.com\)](#)

Steinhaus et al.

[Measuring Social Norms Related to Child Marriage Among Adult Decision-Makers of Young Girls in Phalombe and Thyolo, Malawi](#)

MacPherson et al.

[Transactional sex and HIV: understanding the gendered structural drivers of HIV in fishing communities in Southern Malawi - MacPherson - 2012 - Journal of the International AIDS Society - Wiley Online Library](#)