

KEY FINDINGS OF THE MIDLINE SURVEY OF THE MTBA PROGRAMME 'MARRIAGE: NO CHILD'S PLAY' (April 2019)

Globally, rates of child marriage are declining. During the past decade, the total number of young women who married before age 18 decreased from 1 in 4 to nearly 1 in 5. About 25 million child marriages have been prevented in the same timeframe (UNICEF, 2018), showing that focused international attention and investments are having a positive effect. There remains, however, a real need to step up global efforts on this front.

The practice still affects over 650 million girls and young women today (UNICEF, 2018). Declines in child marriage vary greatly across and within countries, with strong improvements for girls in some geographic areas but few or none in others. Furthermore, while poverty and gender inequality remain key causes of child marriage, we are increasingly witnessing the hazardous interaction between these drivers and forces such as extreme weather, protracted conflict, increased migration and the rise of religious extremism all of which translate to harsh living conditions that threaten families and communities, create risks, and increase vulnerability for girls in particular.

THE MORE THAN BRIDES ALLIANCE (MBTA) PLACES GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN AT THE HEART OF ITS EFFORTS TO HELP ERADICATE EARLY MARRIAGES.

Our work is multi-thematic and grassroots-driven. We partner with and rely on the expertise, initiative and insight of many local civil society organizations. We work in places where there is great need – such as Niger, which has the highest global proportion of girls married before the age of 18 (76%) and India, which is home to more than 15 million child brides (the largest number in the world). Through our programme 'Marriage: No Child's Play' we contribute to advancing at least six Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's)

SDG 3	Good health and well-being	SDG 8	Decent work and economic growth
SDG 4	Quality education	SDG 10	Reduced inequalities
SDG 5	Gender equality	SDG 17	Partnerships for the goals

Using survey data from over 10,600 girls between 12 and 19 years old, we have assessed the impact of our work on girls thus far. Our midline survey compares data from girls in communities participating in our programme, with data from girls in communities not participating. We complement survey data with qualitative data gathered directly from girls, parents and community members in order to shed light on contextual factors associated with child marriage and to elevate girls' voices in describing their own lives and experience with marriage in these settings.

This document presents key findings to date related to our key strategies working on informed decisions, alternative pathways and an enabling environment. Results tell us what works, indicating our **successes**, and what may not yet be working, providing **learnings**. They give us direction on what action needs to be intensified or refined to further empower girls and ensure their voices are heard. Overall, the results push us to reflect and learn in order to strengthen the work MTBA is determined to continue alongside others and to increase the body of knowledge on what works for delaying marriage. For seizing the current gains for girls, as a global community of actors we must step up our efforts on child marriage to eliminate this harmful practice by 2030 (Sustainable Development Goal 5.3).

INFORMED DECISIONS

We build girls' knowledge of sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and their confidence so they can make informed decisions about their sexuality.

Successes

The MBTA intervention has been shown to **significantly increase knowledge** on early marriage and SRHR. Generally speaking, we see increased knowledge about the legal age of marriage and the adverse effects of getting married as a child among adolescent girls in intervention areas. These girls also have more comprehensive knowledge of modern contraceptive methods and HIV than their counterparts in comparison villages not participating in the program. In programme communities in Niger and Malawi, we saw increases in modern contraceptive knowledge of 33 and 29 per cent, respectively from baseline to midline. In comparison communities, knowledge either declined (by 3% in Niger) or increased only slightly (by 3% in Malawi). To be able to make informed decisions, decision making power is critical. MTBA is employing several strategies to empower girls and women. In Pakistan this has led to an increase in self-esteem of 12% among girls participating in the programme.

Learnings

Knowledge alone is not enough, for knowledge and adherence to laws may not reflect improved beliefs about a girl's value or rights – as we witness, for instance, in India. Knowledge of child marriage laws may even drive people to hide illegal marriages, or worsen girls' living situation by pulling them out of already established marriages (both of which are occurring in Malawi). These findings underline the importance of our efforts to bring about an enabling environment to facilitate the behavioral changes that are needed.

ALTERNATIVE LIFE PATHS

We help young women and girls pursue viable alternative life paths to child marriage, asserting that education and their ability to provide for their livelihoods are crucial.

Successes

Data from Malawi and Mali suggest that our work to keep girls in school and to re-enroll those who have dropped out, is having a **positive impact on school retention rates**. For instance, in the intervention communities in Mali, the mean number of years of education that girls receive increased slightly (from 4.2 years to 4.3), while it declined significantly in comparison communities (from 3.6 years to 3.2). In Pakistan, girls participating in the programme are 35% more likely to attend primary or middle education as compared to girls not participating in the programme.

In Niger, our programme has had a positive impact when it comes to **older girls and young women earning an income**. Once girls leave school, we recognize that opportunities to earn money can be important in preventing adolescent girls from marrying early. Our qualitative data from Mali attest to this. Further, girls in Mali report the overall highest rates of engagement in work, while the country has the overall lowest percentage of child brides out of the four countries in the MTBA study¹. In our intervention communities in Mali, 45.7% of girls work or have worked for income, as opposed to 37.4% in comparison communities. Overall, the number of girls working or having worked for money in our intervention communities has increased by 14% from baseline to midline.

Learnings

Female school enrollment is not enough: the quality of education also needs significant improvement. Creating better learning outcomes may be especially important in India and Malawi where enrollment percentages are high already but the 'return on investment' from school might be low. In Mali and Niger, girls face multiple education barriers: enrollment levels are low and learning outcomes are poor. While our data will help us define how to sharpen our interventions related to girl education, a broader investment and collective efforts are needed.

Access to livelihoods opportunities for females is still limited. Where opportunities for girls do exist, the types of opportunities available are often associated with real and perceived safety risks. Examples include girls migrating, alone, to find work (Mali); sexual and physical safety threats limiting girls' ability to travel for vocational training or to work (India); and girls becoming involved in transactional sex (Malawi). Increasing opportunities for females to safely earn a living continues to demand great attention.

1 Malawi, Mali, Niger, and India

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

We help to create an enabling, supportive environment at home and in communities so girls can decide if and when to marry and can confidently pursue their SRHR.

Successes

Increasing people's knowledge of and adherence to laws on child marriage can create shifts of opinion and open up space for **hearing the voice of girls and boys on** questions related to marriage. In intervention communities in Malawi, we see more girls agreeing that boys have a right to refuse an arranged marriage. In Niger, girls in intervention communities have become less likely to agree that women should tolerate violence to keep their families together. Also, we see positive changes in married girls' abilities to exercise choice when it comes to marriage dissolution (Malawi) and even divorce (Niger), while in Pakistan, girls perceive an **increased freedom of women to move** in their community.

Learnings

Bringing about an enabling environment is vital: without it, increased knowledge and adherence to laws will not facilitate the behavioral changes needed to end child marriage.

Parental and community **anxieties around premarital sex and girls' sexuality are important drivers of child marriage**. This manifests differently in different contexts. In Malawi, premarital sex is common. Here, we find that pregnancy not only drives marriage but may also be a means for girls to select their preferred partner. In Mali, where premarital sex is becoming increasingly common, there are indications that child marriages persist in response to teenage pregnancies and fear of out-of-wedlock births. There is a clear need to bolster girls' knowledge of contraceptives, to increase girls' access to them, and to change attitudes towards unmarried girls using them. While the programme has led to increased movement of women and girls within the communities, there is still much more to be done about mobility and safety. In Pakistan one third of girls surveyed do not feel safe on the road to school. The threat to family honor and the risk for gender-based violence affects parents' decision to send their daughters to school.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Focused international attention and investments have helped to reduce the harmful practice of child marriage. In the first two years of MTBA's programme early marriages decreased by 29% in Niger and 47% in Mali. Still, important questions about how to counter its drivers remain, and much work needs to be done to advance gender equality worldwide. Moreover, global trends that increase girls' vulnerability, like extreme weather conditions and displacement, are threatening to limit gains or even to reverse them.

To help girls delay marriage, MTBA must strengthen its focus on expanding viable alternatives for girls within the realities of each context. We also need to step up our emphasis on addressing deeply entrenched gender norms and anxieties relating to girls' sexuality and amplifying the voices of girls. We will continue to seek strong partnerships with allies, decision-makers and duty-bearers to make lasting change for girls.