

MORE THAN BRIDES ALLIANCE

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM MALAWI

BACKGROUND

Child marriage, or marriage before age 18, is common in Malawi. Results from national surveys suggest that nearly half of all women age 20-24 (49.6%) report being married by age 18, with higher proportions in Southern Malawi (55.5% of 20- to 24-year-olds married by age 18). Baseline studies conducted as part of the More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) project found that 31.0% of adolescents 15-19 were ever married, with a median age at marriage of 16.4 years in Mangochi and 17.2 years in Nkhata Bay. In addition to early marriage, sexual initiation begins early in Malawi, where 59.7% of women 20-24 report having had sex by age 18, and 16.6% by age 15. Unlike some other MTBA contexts, where child marriage is high yet sexual initiation occurs almost exclusively within marriage (e.g. Niger, India), in Malawi, premarital sex is not uncommon. Biddlecom and colleagues (2008) found that in Malawi, among girls 18-19 who had completed primary school, 27.0% reporting having had premarital sex while still in school. The MTBA Baseline study also found that about 1 in 5 married girls (21.6%) reported being forced into marriage by pregnancy.

METHODS

This research was nested within a larger study examining the impact of the MTBA intervention. MTBA is a holistic program to address early marriage through multiple strategies, including: empowering girls by building life skills, increasing access to sexual and reproductive health services, expanding livelihoods opportunities, promoting girls' education, fostering community engagement to address social norms, and creating a favorable legal and policy environment. Qualitative data were collected as part of this study in April 2018; data collection focused on exploring adolescent social life, the marital process, girls' education and livelihoods experiences in-depth,

following up on findings from the baseline survey.

Qualitative data collection was carried out by an experienced social science research group, *Invest in Knowledge (IKI)*, based in Zomba. Study sites were selected using baseline data to identify areas that had a proportion of ever-married adolescents high enough to support focus groups with married girls. We recruited individuals who met selection criteria for participation in one of the following data collection activities:

- Focus group discussions (FGDs) with parents of adolescent girls ages 12-19, with mother and father groups conducted separately;
- FGDs with adolescent girls ages 12-19 themselves, with separate groups for unmarried girls and for married or engaged girls;
- In-depth interviews (IDIs) with married girls ages 15-19;
- IDIs with unmarried girls ages 12-19 (including unmarried girls some of whom were engaged and/or mothers); and
- IDIs with key informants, including local government officials, NGO workers and teachers.

Data were analyzed in Dedoose using a grounded theory approach.

RESULTS

Pregnancy: We find that pregnancy is frequently mentioned as an important factor driving marriage of girls before age 18. Pregnancy, or the threat of pregnancy, pushes girls and/or their families to arrange marriages quickly to avoid both the shame of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and to ensure some financial security for girls and their future children. We find that in Malawi, pregnancy is a critical event that often leads to marriage, but also that girls' feelings about pregnancy are varied. For some, pre-marital pregnancy is a shameful and adverse outcome to be avoided, while for others, this may be seen as a pathway through which a girl is able to select her preferred husband. A male teacher noted how pre-marital pregnancy,

including the threat of pregnancy, influences marriage in his community:

It happens when the girl is 10-12 years old. Sometimes, parents, they are afraid that their girls will get pregnant. As the result, they just arrange marriage for them. Sometimes when a girl is pregnant, a parent forces her child to get married, sometimes they arrange marriage for their girls when they see them that they are physically matured...Parents they feel ashamed when their daughters are pregnant.

One girl who was married at age 17 described her marriage as a choice, explaining that she chose to enter into a sexual relationship with her partner and then to marry him following her pregnancy:

- I: Who made a decision for you to get married?
R. I made it myself.
I. You made it yourself?
R. Yes.
I. Why were you married? Why did you decide to get married?
R. I got pregnant.
I. What else?
R. That is all.
I. Why did you decide to get into a relationship resulting to you getting pregnant?
R. I chose so.
I. You chose?
R. Yes.
I. How did you choose to marry him?
R. Because he impregnated me.

Contraceptive Use: In this context, we were interested to explore contraceptive use among adolescents, to better understand efforts to prevent pregnancy in this group. Girls in focus groups reported various reasons for girls to use contraceptives:

- I: What influences young women to use contraceptives?
R1: They take contraceptives for the sake of child spacing.
R2: They take contraceptives if the husband is not supportive materially and financially but in producing so the woman goes for contraceptives to have few children.
-Focus group with unmarried girls

Transactional Sex: In line with previous research on conducted in Malawi, we find that transactional sex is a factor that contributes to pre-marital pregnancy and early marriage in these communities. As we did not ask about transactional sex in our instrument, we were especially surprised to see how frequently this was mentioned by all participant types in response to questions about marriage, livelihoods, and youth culture more broadly. Transactional sex was mentioned in 52.5% of our transcripts. Similar to

work by Ranganathan et al (2017), MacPherson et al (2012), and Poulin (2007) we also find that the sexual transactions described by participants fall on a spectrum, ranging from gift-giving within relationships to commercial sex work.

Relationships, gift giving and pregnancy

When I am in a relationship we will be able to have sex, he will also be able to give me money as well as love then I will say that we have to marry each other.

-Focus group with (married) girls

CONCLUSIONS

We found that while pre-marital pregnancy is often considered to be risky and/or shameful, it is, at the same time also viewed as a common event on the pathway to early marriage. We found that girls were somewhat ambivalent about premarital pregnancy and about contraceptive use when speaking of relationships with partners of their choice. Contraceptive use was primarily associated with the need for birth spacing or limiting one's number of children, while little reference was made to its use for preventing pre-marital pregnancy. This may be due in part to misconceptions about contraception having a negative impact on future fertility.

We were surprised at how frequently transactional sex was mentioned among research participants. In the absence of economic opportunities, girls may feel pressured to consider sexual activity or marriage as a livelihood strategy.

Our findings suggest that we need to more closely examine the importance of alternatives to marriage and childbearing in high early marriage settings. We speculate that settings with local markets that can support adolescent livelihoods are better positioned to delay marriage.



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