



## Why focus on sex? Linking & Learning opportunities about Child marriage and female adolescent sexuality.

The More Than Brides Alliance – Making the Most of What we Know project focuses on learning about the links between adolescent female sexuality and child marriage. We have chosen this area of focus both because gender inequality and concerns related to female sexuality are consistently powerful drivers of child marriage across different contexts settings, and because the ways in which dimensions of sexuality relate to marriage practices differ from one context to the next. At the same time social norms and taboos are often quoted as the most difficult barriers to overcome. While no two contexts are the same, there are similarities across geographies from which we can learn how to influence norms around female sexuality to minimize child marriage. The aim of the learning intervention is to lay a more solid base so that organizations can implement and advocate for interventions that are grounded in promising practice and empirical evidence.

**Sexuality** is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.

### Child marriage & adolescent female sexuality

Gender inequality and norms about female sexuality drive child marriage in various ways; For instance, in many societies high value is placed on the virginity of girls before marriage. Therefore, pre-marital pregnancy is perceived as a potential risk for the reputation of girls, their families and their community. In communities with bride price or dowry practices, the risk of premarital pregnancies also implies significant economic risks for the family. Early marriage practices can be further stimulated by norms about the importance of high fertility of women. In other cases, especially in conflict affected areas, parents might see marriage as a strategy to protect their child from sexual violence.

### Focus on ‘marriageability’ of girls and risks of pre-marital pregnancies

In order to ensure that the learning trajectory focuses on the most relevant challenges regarding child marriage and adolescent female sexuality, a survey was conducted among key informants in the MTBA focus countries. Based on the outcome of the survey, norms around ‘Marriageability’ of girls has been selected as a key learning theme for the ‘Making the Most of What We Know’ learning interventions. ‘Marriageability’ of girls includes the following interrelated elements:

- **The value placed on virginity:** A girl is often perceived as ‘marriageable’ as long as she is a virgin. If a girl loses her virginity before marriage this could have both social and economic consequences for her and her family.
- **Threat to reputation and family honour:** A strict taboo on pre-marital sex based on cultural or religious values can drive child marriage. In contexts in which family honour is tied closely to a daughter’s avoidance of pre-marital sex, early marriage may be seen as securing the reputation of the girl, her family and her community.
- **Risk for pre-marital pregnancy:** In some contexts, a premarital pregnancy is seen to have a negative impact on a girl’s future marital prospects, increasing her vulnerability both socially and economically. When girls reach puberty and are perceived as being at risk for



pregnancy, early marriage thus becomes seen as a protective factor against the uncertainty that would be caused by a pregnancy out of wedlock.

Besides the focus on 'marriageability' of girls we also aim to look at the risk of marriageability more broadly as in many context, pre-marital pregnancies are also an important driver for child marriage. The above focus topics will guide implementation experience gathering and should inspire youth researcher and learning & exchange spark fund applicants.

### **Connecting scientific evidence with implementation experiences**

Social sciences have produced interesting theoretic insights about how gender inequality, sexuality and child marriage interlink. However, social theories have their limitations and rigorous studies on what kind of interventions work to reduce child marriage or to change norms relating to adolescent female sexuality are few and far between. Acknowledging, that there are large contextual differences in the drivers of child marriage, we believe that program implementers possess valuable knowledge that can be captured as generalizable learnings with the potential to improve interventions across settings. For instance, implementation experiences might provide insight into how to best support girls to challenge marriageability norms and or into what strategies or language are most convincing for changing deeply entrenched norms and practices. Within the Making the Most of What we Know project, we aim to connect scientific evidence with learnings from implementation practice. During the project, we aim to collect the following experiences:

- Project implementation experiences within the current MTBA program that focus on changing norms around girls' marriageability and pre-marital pregnancy.
- A scan of interventions that aim to change sexuality and marriageability norms
- In depth interviews with a selected number of implementation experts.

The implementation experiences gathered will be presented and discussed in relation to scientific evidence in national learning events in up to nine countries. Besides connecting implementation experience and scientific evidence, lessons learned from other learning trajectories in the project such as youth-led research and small grants learning & exchange fund can also be presented during these events. All lessons learned will come be brought together in an international learning meeting planned in for October 2020

### **About the More Than Brides Alliance**

The More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) consists of Save the Children Netherlands, Oxfam Novib, Simavi and Population Council. With funding from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs this alliance is implementing the programme 'Marriage: No Child's Play' (2016-2020) with the aim to reduce child marriage and its adverse effects on young women and girls. The 'Making the Most of What we Know' project (2019-2021) is a complementary project funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is implemented in up to nine countries starting in the MTBA focus countries India, Pakistan, Malawi, Niger and Mali followed by Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal and Uganda.

### **More information**

Would you like to get involved? Contact the MTBA Learning Coordinator:

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