

ADOLESCENT MIGRATION AND MARRIAGE: EVIDENCE FROM MALAWI, MALI, AND NIGER

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BACKGROUND

Rapid urbanization is increasingly recognized as a force of change that influences young people’s lives in varied ways. Adolescents’ movement out of rural areas, often described as an “exodus”, is motivated by the need to seek educational or work opportunities or in response to droughts, natural disasters or conflict at home (Temin et al., 2013). The impact of migration on adolescent lives is gendered (Hertrich and Lesclingand, 2012; 2013).

All three countries we study (Malawi, Mali and Niger) have witnessed rapid urban growth in recent decades. While child marriage has declined in Mali, it has remained stagnant and high in Niger and Malawi.

	% of population in urban areas		% of women (20-24) married by age 18	
Mali	24.2 <small>(1992)</small>	41.6 <small>(2017)</small>	70.0 <small>(1996)</small>	59.6 <small>(2013)</small>
Malawi	12.2 <small>(1992)</small>	16.7 <small>(2017)</small>	54.9 <small>(1992)</small>	42.1 <small>(2016)</small>
Niger	15.5 <small>(1992)</small>	16.4 <small>(2017)</small>	83.5 <small>(1992)</small>	76.3 <small>(2012)</small>

Data Source: World Bank; DHS

METHODS

Data for this paper come from an impact evaluation of the More than Brides Alliance (MTBA) program of intervention to reduce child marriage and empower girls. Structured interviews with adolescent girls ages 12-19 in Malawi, Mali, and Niger included questions about girl’s experience and motivations for migration, family experience of migration, including the role of remittances.

We also collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescent girls and their parents in Mali (2017), Malawi (2018) and Niger (2018), as well as in-depth interviews (IDI) with male and female key informants in Mali and Malawi.

	Malawi	Mali	Niger
Interviews	1029	829	599
FGDs	29	31	16
IDIs	21	41	-

FINDINGS

Adolescent migration is most often driven by economic motivations, however, data show that the impact of migration extends beyond material gains, influencing marriage timing, personal skills and aspirations, and the adoption of new practices and ideas. Female adolescent migration patterns differ by context: in Mali girls migrate mostly for work but migration is usually seasonal; in Malawi, education is the dominant reason girls migrate to more urban areas; and in Niger, while there appears to be some seasonal migration for girls, respondents attested that urban migration is much more common among boys. Our qualitative findings support Hertrich and Lesclingand’s research (2012; 2013), demonstrating that for females, migration is seen to be associated with individual earnings and development prior to one’s marriage, whereas for males, migration is seen as central to household economics.

Perceptions of Adolescent Female Migration

Motivation: Material Gains

The villagers know that migration isn’t a good thing, but if you don’t have the means, you don’t have a choice. You will let your girl leave. She will work in search of her trousseau, in search of money for her marriage trousseau. (IDI with married girl, Ségou, Mali)

Impact on Marriage Timing

If a girl is engaged and she migrates, you her father, you cannot bring her to her husband as she isn’t back. And some girls are gone two years, others even three years before coming back. So the moment when she should marry passes. (Fathers, Ségou, Mali)

For those who don’t like early marriage, they leave and hide out in Bamako for a period of time. (Engaged girl, Ségou, Mali)

Personal Growth/New Skills

Migration can render certain girls more mature. They learn a lot of small business skills if they go in places where they can learn these... On their return, if they apply their knowledge in commerce, they can have a little bit of money. (Mother, Sikasso, Mali)

Acceptable Migration

Unless you have a relative who is there, but otherwise a girl or a woman does not leave like that to go elsewhere. (Father, Tillabéri, Niger)

Impact on Marriage Practices

Those who have migrated, when it comes to marriage, they want to have their hair done. They want to have everything done. Coming back from the city, they demand that the marriage is celebrated as in the city. If that is not respected, they refuse to marry. (Mother, Sikasso, Mali)

Before, there were no civil marriages. [Those who migrated] brought that [back] and if in our day the civil ceremony doesn’t happen, people say the marriage didn’t happen. It’s school and travels that changed that. (Father, Sikasso, Mali)

Autonomy

Some of them refuse to stay at their boss’s house. They are given a room behind the boss but they refuse to live there because they only work during the day at the boss’...(or) You will find that some women sell rice during the day and in the evening they will no longer be selling rice but they will sell their bodies. (Father, Nkhata Bay, Malawi)

Perceptions of Adolescent Male Migration

“Yes, men go on an exodus to look for money or food...Some are gone for months, others for years. Generally, for those who haven’t found much out there after some time, they feel obligated to come back with something.” (Married Girls, Maradi, Niger)

“75% send money while 25% they don’t send money. As the result, divorce is very common in this community.” (Key Informant, Mangochi, Malawi)

“If a migrant and a non-migrant both aspire to marry the same girl, some girls prefer the migrant even if they don’t love him because he will have more financial capacity to take care of her and his physical appearance will be better than the other’s.” (Mother, Tillabéri, Niger)

“If ever, he returns from exodus or migration, we monitor him carefully in bed for a few days with reluctant strategies. Like that, easily, we do not accept him in bed as before. We fear being contaminated by some sort of disease. That’s the change.” (Mothers, Maradi, Niger)

MIGRANT GIRLS

Female adolescent migration...

...is common

In our sample, 43.0% of girls in Mali, 26.2% in Niger, and 12.5% in Malawi reporting having moved outside of their village for at least 3 months at a time.

...occurs early

The mean age at first move (of at least 3 months) among girls in our sample was 11.0 years in Niger, 12.1 years in Mali, and 12.2 years in Malawi.

...involves different labor and living arrangements

Migrant girls may live with family or non-relatives, may exchange domestic labor for food, shelter, and or/wages, and may have various levels of autonomy and control over their wages.

CONCLUSIONS

- Although motivations for both male and female migration are largely economic, the female economic goal is inextricably linked with marriage.
- The changing context of migration is influences marriage timing, process and marital relationships.
- Programs to address child marriage need to acknowledge role of movement in lives of adolescent girls.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA)’s *Marriage, No Child’s Play* is a program of action and research to reduce child marriage in India, Malawi, Mali, Niger and Pakistan.

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