YOUTH-LED RESEARCH - CHILD MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE MORE THAN BRIDES ALLIANCE LEARNING PROJECT

The More Than Brides Alliance – Learning Project aims to combine research evidence with implementation experience on the linkages between female adolescent sexuality and child marriage. To capture the perspectives of young people on this topic, youth-led research trajectories were carried out in five countries. This booklet summarises the methodology used, the applicability lessons drawn from the research trajectories, and findings on the linkages between sexuality and child marriage. We hope this document will be useful for practitioners, researchers, and others interested in implementing such a research approach or who wish to understand these linkages from the point of view of young people.

More Brides Alliance (MTBA) Learning Project

The **More than Brides Alliance (MTBA)** builds on the collective skills and experience of over 25 partner national organisations in collaboration with international organisations, such as Save the Children Netherlands, Oxfam Novib, Population Council and Simavi. Together, we share knowledge on how to address gender inequality and the sexuality-related root causes of child marriage. This knowledge contributes to improving policy and practice aimed at tackling the negative impacts of child marriage on the health and socio-economic wellbeing of girls, their communities, and broader society; and **expanding girls' life choices to assure their Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)**. Within MTBA, the Learning Project 'Making Most of What We Know (MMWWK)' aims to go beyond commonly discussed drivers of child marriage, such as poverty, insecurity, and lack of education, and, instead, highlight the significant links between child marriage and the norms and values around the sexuality of girls.

To ensure young people's voices and perspectives are represented in the research focus of the learning project, youth-led research trajectories were carried out in five countries: Ethiopia, India, Mali, Nepal, and Pakistan. In these trajectories, young researchers were themselves in charge of choosing the research focus, data collection tools, data analysis, and drawing conclusions and relevant lessons learned. To develop their research knowledge and capacities, support was provided to the young researchers, building on their individual strengths and adding to a more comprehensive skill set.

Figure 1: A workshop on research methods and tools in Mali

Figure 2: Pre-data collection discussion in Ethiopia

Figure 3: Youth researchers with the India country coordinator

Figure 4: Data analysis process in Mali

Youth-Led Research – The Process

The following passages describe how the youth-led research trajectories, under the MTBA learning project, were carried out in the five countries. The processes described below can serve as a guide or inspiration for those wishing to implement youth-led research of their own, modified and adjusted according to their needs.

Preparatory activities: Once the overarching topic of investigation and the area of implementation was chosen, here, the linkages between sexuality and early marriage, in-country coordinators were selected using a structured assessment and selection process. The primary criterion for selecting the in-country coordinators in the five countries was experience and expertise in engaging with youth. Once the coordinators were selected, they were formally introduced to the research theme and the envisioned research process.

Youth-led research curriculum: Oxfam Novib's youth-led research curriculum draws inspiration from various relevant sources and the experiences of several organisations (see list of cited works), including previous initiatives by Oxfam, expanded on by new ideas and directions in content, process, and action.

The youth-led research project's curriculum revolved around a ten-week process, including **five workshops** and activities outside the classroom, such as **data collection, reflection, and sharing**. The material in each workshop was presented gradually through **information** (to introduce concepts and themes), action (to spark participatory learning), and reflection (to encourage discussion and knowledge sharing). In practice, **experimental activities**, such as role-playing, games, visualisation, and problem-solving tasks, helped keep the training engaging and interactive.[1]

Youth-led research in practice

Each research trajectory explored the journeys of young girls and women (14-18 years old) as they navigate the social norms and practices around adolescent sexuality and early marriage. This exploration was not limited to the young women themselves but also stakeholders in their social circle who have significant influence and impact on the lives and journeys of these young women. The research helped to confirm, expand, and often challenge the common knowledge shared by these stakeholders.

In total, 73 youth researchers were part of the research process in the five countries. They conducted 309 interviews and 26 focus group discussions and collected several 'life stories' among young women and men, parents, teachers, religious leaders, community members, and other relevant stakeholders. The research topics, questions, tools and target respondent groups are presented in figure__. The findings of the research are summarised by country below:

YOUTH-LED RESEARCH TOPICS, tools and respondents

	Ethiopia	India	Mali	Nepal	Pakistan
	Main causes and factors of child marriage	Relation between girls' education and adolescent female sexuality	Norms about adolescent sexuality	Perceptions relating to child marriage and sexual harassment	Linkages between child marriage, female adolescence, and sexuality
	In-depth interviews and focused group discussions	In-depth interviews	In-depth interviews and focused group discussions	In-depth interviews	In-depth interviews and focused group discussions
	Young women, community and religious leaders, parents, health workers, officials	Young women	Young women, village elders, parents	Young women	Young women, mothers, female health workers, teachers

Ethiopia

The researchers listed five main causes of early marriage: 1) the prevalent and long-lived customs, perceptions, and beliefs, 2) pressure from family, community, and/or peers, 3) lack of access to education, 4) low levels of income, and 5) weak law enforcement and mechanisms to avert child marriage. Economic problems, especially, were observed to be among the major causes of child marriage. Marriages allowed families to gain the economic benefits of a bride price or dowry and from community members through wedding gifts.

Furthermore, the researchers categorised the various factors that encourage child marriage into internal and external factors. The internal factors include economic hardships; the desire for an honourable status, the legacy of grandchildren, and the protection of daughters from migration, sexual intercourse, unwanted pregnancy, and sexual violence; debt settlement; and commitment to promises as part of betrothal arrangements. The external factors included pressure from community elders and religious leaders and the practice of child marriage by others within the community.

India

According to the research, controlling female sexuality emerged as a major cause of school dropout among adolescent girls. The urge to control is fueled by the perspective of protecting girls from sexual violence and the notions of shame and honour associated with pre-marital sexual activity. In turn, the ideas of protection, shame, and honour emerge from the traditionally held belief that girls belong to the households into which they will be eventually married and the dowry system that exerts immense economic pressure on girls' families.

According to the respondents, education is the key to preventing child marriage and for progress towards freedom for women in general. However, at the same time, many young women seemed to (reluctantly) accept, and, in some cases, even uphold, the notions of shame and honour and the belief that girls do not 'belong' to their natal household.

Mali

According to the respondents, the main condition of sexuality or sexual activity is marriage. A girl who becomes sexually active before marriage is considered deviant in society,

bringing shame to her family. Generally, the only way for the family to wash away this 'affront' is to give the girl away in marriage at the earliest possibility. Therefore, as soon as families observe or suspect pre-marital sexual activity, adolescent girls are given away in early marriages. The results of this study suggest that early marriage is used as a coercive measure to suppress girls' supposed delinquency.

The young researchers also observed that parents found it difficult to understand and engage with adolescent girls. New behaviours adopted by the children (daughters, usually) in relation to sexuality and their (perceived) indifference to parental advice are seen as signs of defiance, which parents believe necessary to suppress, even if it means sacrificing the child's future to improve the family's image supposedly.

Nepal

According to the research findings, while child marriage is already common, cases of self-initiated child marriage are rising. The respondents believe that one of the common causes of early marriage is the desire for happiness as adolescent girls do not find love, care, acceptance, and support from within their families.

Other factors, as reported by the respondents, included peer influence, access to social media, lack of education, and poverty. The respondents were aware of the consequences of early marriage, such as health problems, exclusion from the community (in case of self-initiated marriage), domestic violence, and the various health issues caused by early pregnancy.

Pakistan

The research found that adolescent girls may not always drop out of school after the onset of menstruation, but they do start underperforming in their studies. Adolescent girls tend to start withdrawing into themselves or become shy as they hear others commenting on their appearance. This increased attention, as a result of the physical changes, affects their self-confidence and, in some cases, even leads to a sense of guilt or wrongdoing. Consequently, they lose interest in studies, leading to underperformance and, sometimes, dropping out.

Furthermore, after the onset of menstruation, girls do not feel comfortable playing with their friends. They hesitate when interacting with their brothers, fathers, and other male members of their families/communities. As a result, they stop talking about certain issues with their fathers and brothers.

The respondents believe that girls' physical and mental health gets adversely affected as a result of early marriage. They are expected to serve their husbands and in-laws after marriage, but they cannot meet their expectations, often leading to marital strife or poor quality of married life.

Youth Actions

Designing, planning and organising youth actions based on the research conducted and the analysed findings is an integral part of the youth-led research methodology. The intention is for young people to take charge of the research. The hard work they put in should reach a cogent end and enable a sense of closure, an 'end product' signifying the culmination of their research project.

Like the research theme, questions, and tools, the youth researchers had complete freedom when choosing the mode of youth action they wished to take. The research team in India and Nepal chose to organise advocacy events in the communities where the research was conducted. In India, with support from the in-country coordinator, the researchers organised an event to showcase the research and its findings at a government high school in the district where the research was undertaken. The event began with an exhibition of posters designed by the young researchers based on the major findings of the research

Figure 5: Street theatre performance by youth in India and Nepal

and a street play focusing on false narratives and the control of female sexuality. The attendees at the event included members of the local government.

The researchers in Nepal opted for a similar approach. Following the research findings and discussions during the workshops, the young researchers decided to perform a street drama. For this, the researchers participated in a street drama workshop. Then they wrote the script and produced the play. They performed the drama in Banke district, where the research was undertaken.

In Mali, an advocacy event was organised where the research findings were presented. Each of the researchers involved in the project was given specific responsibilities, such as playing the master of ceremony and presenting the findings on specific topics. They presented the findings to the administrative and local authorities of the commune of Kléla, where the research was undertaken.

Research teams in Ethiopia and Pakistan decided on a more general approach. They stated that they planned to present the findings of the research and their recommendations to government officials, civil society organisations, and community members. In this process, they hoped to ensure the findings would be used by the policymakers and implementing agencies, such as CSOs, to design evidence-based advocacy and community sensitisation activities.

Recommendations from respondents and researchers

Effective messaging for communities on ending child marriages: Perhaps the most common theme across recommendations among the five countries was the need to continue and reinforce awareness-raising around early marriage. While awareness among the community (men, women, youth, and community leaders) on sexuality and the impact of early marriage on young women was expressed by respondents and the researchers themselves in all countries, there were also specific recommendations on the targets and themes of awareness-raising.

Researchers in Ethiopia thought that engaging with religious leaders on the harmful consequences of child marriage was important so that they can pass on this information to their constituencies. Young researchers in India expressed the need for programmes and projects to go a step further and focus on making community members aware of the prevalent patriarchal customs and beliefs and sensitising different stakeholders about their roles and responsibilities in discouraging and preventing early marriages.

The need to focus on awareness-raising and targeted messaging was particularly pronounced among the recommendations from researchers in Mali. The prevalence of early pregnancy in Mali, according to them, was largely due to the lack of information and access to contraceptives among adolescents. Therefore, the need is to design information programmes for adolescent girls and their parents to help them access relevant information and break the taboo around talking about and encouraging access to contraceptives.

Support groups, clubs, volunteers: Researchers across the five countries mentioned that existing groups, clubs and formal and informal institutions should be tapped into for more impactful inroads into the communities. Researchers in Ethiopia suggested that girls' clubs should be provided to help identify potential cases of early marriages and notify support groups or responsible enforcement bodies. Children and youth clubs are already widespread and active in Nepal. Researchers in Nepal recommend that the support of such groups and clubs should be enlisted to conduct door-to-door campaigns, especially among households with young people, to discourage families from marrying off their children early.

The formation of informal groups within the community, including both young people and older community members, was also seen as a possible mechanism to help fight child marriages. While researchers in Ethiopia referred to these groups as task forces, researchers in Pakistan chose the term 'community volunteers.' According to researchers in Pakistan, such groups could monitor and report child marriage cases, display and disseminate information regarding laws against early marriage within the community, and conduct informal awareness sessions with community members. Researchers in Ethiopia suggested relying on more traditional institutions such as 'Edir,' an informal financial and social institution for awareness-raising.

General recommendations for reinforcing current and designing future programmes:
Researchers in Nepal stated that more girls or youth-driven programmes focusing on eliminating child marriage and other harmful practices that impact girls and women should be designed and implemented. Echoing this, researchers in India wanted policymakers and programme designers not to limit the youth development programmes on awareness generation and skill development - as the young researchers believed they currently are. They wanted them to go a step further and have programmes that focus on establishing role models in society.

Researchers in Mali believe that a lack of communication between parents and children is at the root of early sexuality and early pregnancy. To this end, findings from their youth-led research could be used to reinforce existing programme messages while designing future programmes on sexuality and early pregnancy and child marriage. The researchers also wanted programmes to consider the communication gap with parents, especially when children go through a tumultuous adolescence, to help parents better understand their children.

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¹ *Add link to general product once available to the footnote*

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