

What's Sex Got To Do With It? — Exploring the links between female adolescent sexuality and child marriage

MORE THAN BRIDES ALLIANCE



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While the dominant drivers of child marriage vary widely from one region or country to the next, gender inequality and concerns related to female sexuality are consistently powerful drivers across contexts. According to the World Health Organization:

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.

For the purposes of the present discussion, we examine dimensions of “sexuality” most closely connected to gender identities and roles, sexual behaviours, reproduction, community norms, expectations related to sexual behaviours. This thematic brief explores the various pathways connecting perceptions, expression, and control of female adolescent sexuality and early marriage in the five countries where the More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) is currently implementing its program, “Marriage, No Child’s Play”: India, Pakistan, Mali, Niger, and Malawi. It offers a brief overview of key,

interrelated dimensions of female adolescent sexuality and their connections to the practice of child marriage. Investigating context-specific pathways connecting sexuality-related norms and the practice of early marriage may shed light on potential key areas for programmatic focus.

Part 1: Exploring Key Dimensions of Adolescent Sexuality and Related Norms

PRINCIPAL REASONS CITED FOR EXPLAINING EARLY MARRIAGE OF GIRLS IN NIGER: (WILDAF-AO)

- **Worries related to avoiding pregnancies outside of marriage (51,8%)**
- **Worries related to preserving the honor of the girl’s family (41,6%)**
- **Worries related to preserving the girl’s virginity until marriage (22,3%)**

Sexuality as risk of premarital pregnancy

In many settings, the possibility of sexual activity during adolescence is closely linked to fear of pre-marital pregnancy, which is a powerful driver of child marriage, as parents prioritize having their daughters marry prior to their sexual initiation. One study of 1200 male and female community members in Niger found the most frequently cited reason for girls’ early marriage to be “preventing pregnancies outside of marriage” (WiLDAF-AO, 2017). In this setting, the prevalence of premarital pregnancy is very low. The MTBA’s Baseline study in Niger found almost no reported instances of

pregnancy outside of marriage: among girls age 15-19 who had never been married (n=160), only 1 (0.6%) reported ever being pregnant. This was compared with 25.7% of ever-married girls in the same age group. For girls in this context, pre-marital sex is highly stigmatized and early marriage is often viewed as a protective factor against pre-marital pregnancy. Focus group participants explained that the physical changes that occur during puberty often prompt parents to have their daughters married to avoid out of wedlock pregnancies:

Here, our parents are afraid that the girl will get pregnant while at home. When she starts her period and they notice the changes in her behaviour, even if she is still in school, they take her out and give her away in marriage.

– Married Girl, Sikasso, Mali

While premarital pregnancy is also related to early marriage in Malawi, evidence indicates that the pathway connecting the two in this context is substantially different from the example of Niger. Premarital sex and pregnancy are much more common in this context and parents appear to be less restrictive regarding their adolescent daughters' sexual behaviour. Of 522 girls age 15-19, 35.9% (n=187) reporting having had a boyfriend (before marriage), and 66.8% (n=125) of these girls reported having had sex with their boyfriend. Among never married girls in the MTBA baseline sample in Malawi, 7.5% (n=27) reported ever being pregnant. Parents included in qualitative focus group discussions in Malawi acknowledged premarital sexual activity among their daughters and explained that in the instance of premarital pregnancy, having one's daughter marry the person who impregnated her is the appropriate response. As respondents explained:

Some girls also get pregnant outside of marriage and this is not good for the family's honor. But if your child is given to a man and the pregnancy is from him, there is no problem with that. But getting pregnant without being married is not good.

- Engaged Girl, Ségou, Mali

When a girl is pregnant as elders have noticed, her relatives take her to the boy that impregnated her. They ask the boy if he is indeed responsible and once he accepts, they leave the girl at his home. What remains after this is the payment of dowry by the man. The man is also required to pay a fine for the damage he has caused to the girl. Otherwise, that marks the beginning of the marriage.

– Traditional Leader, Nkhatabay, Malawi

In the context of Malawi, parents do not seem to be as anxious to have their daughters married before sexual initiation, however, pre-marital pregnancy itself does appear to be a driver of early marriage. Pregnancies resulting from romantic relationships among adolescents are often cited as the reason for early marriages.

Some impregnate each other while they are dating. And that is rampant here and most of the early marriages are caused by that. When they impregnate each other they then get married. Young people marry each other because of dating.

– Leader of Police Unit, Namavi, Malawi

Where pre-marital pregnancies appear to be driving early marriages, MTBA's baseline findings on pregnancy among unmarried

girls are likely under-representations of the true prevalence of pre-marital pregnancies. Given the significant financial and social burdens associated with motherhood across high prevalence child marriage countries, the risk of pregnancy is among the most important dimensions of sexuality that parents consider when determining when their daughters should be married. See comparative MTBA Baseline data on premarital pregnancy in Tables 1 and 2.

Sexuality as risk of physical/sexual violence

In many contexts, a girl's budding sexuality is viewed as a significant risk factor for physical and sexual violence and early marriage is regarded as a potential protective factor against this threat. As a girl matures physically during puberty, her educational opportunities and freedom of movement are oftentimes restricted in response to her being seen as a sexual being. During a focus group discussion in Bihar, India, for example, when asked why girls do not continue to study past primary school, several mothers explained:

R5: They are not able to [travel outside of the village to study]. The only reason for that if they go out to study then the boys will follow them. They do anything, they can do anything, they can even hold them, and they can beat them. This is the reason that we are not able to send our girls there to study.

R8: Even if any other girl is with them then also when the boys see the girls they follow them. That is the reason that they don't go.

- Mothers, Bihar, India

Where the threat and/or fear of sexual violence against women is high, evidence demonstrates that parents consider marrying their girls early for their own physical safety. Marriage is seen as a way of ensuring that a

girl will not be the target of sexual attacks. As one mother in Jharkhand explained:

Maybe she gets spoiled or maybe she gets pregnant or maybe she gets molested by someone. Due to this fear we marry her early.

- Mother in Jharkand, India

Sexuality as threat to reputation and family honour

Even in circumstances of coercion or sexual violence, premarital sexual activity among girls is considered to be strictly counter-normative and intimately connected to the honor of a girl and her family. Mothers in Jharkhand, India, explained:

R5: It is about prestige, what else. It is about the girl.

R6: If boys catch them they may spoil the prestige.

R10: That's why everybody is scared.

- Mothers in Jharkand, India

In many contexts, when an adolescent girls' behavior or appearance is perceived by others to be provocative or promiscuous, the potential reputational risks associated with the girl's sexuality can pressure parents to have their daughters married early. As adolescent girls in Ségou, Mali explained:

What can lead to the early marriage of certain girls, there are parents who, if they are respected in the village, if you have a girl who is not afraid of anything, that can lead to the parents losing their honor in the village...There are many who say, my child isn't old enough—you keep her, and after, she will cause your dishonor.

- Married girl, Ségou, Mali

“Marriageability” and the value placed on virginity

Closely related to norms surrounding pre-marital sex and to beliefs connecting a daughter’s sexual behaviors to her family’s honor is the social and economic value placed on a girl’s virginity and implications for her marriage prospects. Socially speaking, where premarital sex is seen as a threat to a girl’s “marriageability”, early marriage may be considered a means of securing her future. As one mother in Rajasthan, India explained:

R4: If anything wrong happens to the girl then nobody is ready to marry that girl.

R5: If anyone makes any kind of relationship with her then nobody will want to marry her.

R6: Then where will the girl go, if anything like this happens?

- Mothers, Rajasthan, India

Mothers in Jharkhand, India echoed these anxieties. As one put it:

That’s why we marry them at an early age due to the fear of getting defamed. What can we do? By the age of 12-13 years we get interest in the girl. We could make a mistake and things [could] get messed up. That’s why we marry them soon.

- Mothers, Jharkhand, India

In economic terms, while practices regarding wealth transfers at the time of marriage vary from one context to the next, a girl who has not engaged in pre-marital sexual activity may be considered to have higher value on the marriage market and to thus be better positioned to attract a more desirable husband. While data on the factors influencing economic exchanges related to marriage are limited, in contexts where a girl’s virginity prior to marriage is closely

connected with her “respectability”, parents’ desire to find financially-secure spouses for their daughters may drive them to have their daughters married early, before sexual initiation.

Value placed on high fertility

In many countries with high prevalence of child marriage, dominant social norms value high fertility. According to the 2012 Demographic and Health Surveys, the mean reported ideal number of children for women in Niger was 9.2 children. This figure was 5.7 in Mali, 4.1 in Pakistan, 3.7 in Malawi, and 2.2 in India. Especially where sex is exclusively confined within marriage, the desire to maximize one’s fertility can drive early marriage for girls once they are physically able to conceive and bear children. As one married girl in Mali explained:

People give their daughters away in marriage so that they can give birth to babies quickly.

-Married girl, Mali

In some contexts, the value placed on high fertility translates into social peer pressure to marry and have children early. A qualitative study conducted in Niger found that while parents most often cited “to protect girls against unwanted pregnancies” and “to protect families against dishonour”, among adolescent girls themselves, the desire “to have children” and to demonstrate one’s fertility was the most frequently cited response given in favour of early marriage (WiLDAF-AO, 2017).

Transactional sex and premarital pregnancy

In some contexts, female sexuality is mobilized as a tool for cultivating favours or accessing capital. The term “transactional sex” describes a wide range of behaviours,

from the exchanging of sex for gifts within relationships to formal commercial sex work. In some contexts, it is well known and acknowledged that adolescent girls participate in transactional sex. In Malawi for instance, transactional sex was frequently mentioned in focus group discussions, even without prompting from discussion facilitators: the topic was mentioned in 52.5% (n=31) of all qualitative transcripts. Both girls and parents in Malawi acknowledged the prevalence of transactional sex among adolescents. In some instances, participants reported that transactional sex can lead to pregnancy and then to marriage for adolescent girls. As one father explained:

We rely on fishing here, boys also go for fishing, after fishing they earn money and they use that money to coax girls they fall in love, have sex and end up getting married early after getting pregnant.

- *Father, Nkhata Bay, Malawi*

Some girls described early marriage as a measure of self-preservation when one becomes pregnant through engagement in transactional sex. As one married girl explained:

Yes [premarital sex] contributes to marriage because most parents don't support their children fully as a result their children go to fetch firewood to sell. So other girls refuse to fetch firewood, they prefer boys to buy their necessities resulting in marriage.

- *Married Girl, Mangochi, Malawi*

Part 2: Reflections for Program Implementers

Each of the dimensions of female adolescent sexuality and related norms present unique programmatic challenges, especially as they combine to make sexuality a complex and oftentimes taboo topic to discuss at the community-level. Examining context-specific social norms surrounding adolescent female sexuality and how they are related to child marriage through different pathways can shed light on possible intervention strategies to improve the lives of girls. For example, if parents' fear of sexual violence against their adolescent daughters is a strong factor motivating them to arrange early marriages for their children, interventions might consider focusing on norms related to domestic violence to help parents to recognize the risk factors associated with domestic violence and early marriage.

Part 3: Tables

TABLE 1: Prevalence of pregnancy among girls aged 15–19, by marital status; n (%)

	India	Malawi	Mali	Niger
% of never-married girls reporting ever being pregnant	-*	27 (7.5)	34 (9.3)	1 (0.6)
% of ever-married girls reporting ever being pregnant	228 (44.0)	95 (58.6)	76 (61.3)	45 (97.8)
Total % ever pregnant	228 (44.0)	122 (23.4)	110 (22.5)	46 (13.9)

*pregnancy-related questions not asked of unmarried girls in India

TABLE 2: Marital status of girls who have ever been pregnant: n (%), MTBA Baseline, 2016

	Ever Married	Never Married	Total
India	228 (100.0)	0 (0.0)*	228 (100.00)
Malawi	95 (77.9)	27 (22.1)	122 (100.0)
Mali	76 (69.1)	34 (30.9)	110 (100.0)
Niger	45 (97.8)	1 (2.2)	46 (100.0)

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