

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Then I will say that we have to marry each other”: A qualitative view of premarital pregnancy as a driver of child marriage in Malawi”

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Abstract

Child marriage is common in Malawi, with 42.1% of women ages 20-24 marrying before age 18. Although global research on child marriage has increased in recent years, the reasons are context-specific and there is limited evidence on specific drivers of child marriage in Malawi. We explored pathways to child marriage in Mangochi and Nkhata Bay, drawing on focus groups (n=20) and in-depth interviews (n=39) with adolescent girls and parents of adolescent girls. We find that pregnancy often determines marriage timing and partner selection among adolescents, due in part to norms of adolescent dating or courtship and premarital sexual activity. Once pregnancy occurs, marriage is nearly inevitable even if the girl is under age 18. These findings have important implications for programs to delay marriage; programs must address weak motivations to prevent pregnancy and work to create alternative livelihood opportunities to foster economic self-sufficiency. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2022; 26[9]: 55-63).

Keywords: Malawi, qualitative research, premarital sex, marriage, adolescents

Résumé

Le mariage des enfants est courant au Malawi, 42,1 % des femmes de 20 à 24 ans se mariant avant l'âge de 18 ans. Bien que la recherche mondiale sur le mariage des enfants ait augmenté ces dernières années, les raisons sont spécifiques au contexte et il existe peu de preuves sur les moteurs spécifiques du mariage des enfants au Malawi. Nous avons exploré les voies vers le mariage des enfants à Mangochi et Nkhata Bay, en nous appuyant sur des groupes de discussion (n = 20) et des entretiens approfondis (n = 39) avec des adolescentes et des parents d'adolescentes. Nous constatons que la grossesse détermine souvent le moment du mariage et la sélection du partenaire chez les adolescents, en partie en raison des normes de fréquentation ou de fréquentation des adolescents et de l'activité sexuelle pré-nuptiale. Une fois la grossesse survenue, le mariage est presque inévitable même si la fille a moins de 18 ans. Ces résultats ont des implications importantes pour les programmes visant à retarder le mariage; les programmes doivent s'attaquer aux faibles motivations à prévenir les grossesses et s'efforcer de créer des moyens de subsistance alternatifs pour favoriser l'autosuffisance économique. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2022; 26[9]: 55-63).

Mots-clés: Malawi, recherche qualitative, relations sexuelles avant le mariage, mariage, adolescents

Introduction

Child marriage, or marriage before age 18¹ is associated with a wide range of negative health, social, and economic outcomes for girls, including increased risk of obstetric complications, STIs, intimate partner violence, poor mental health, and limited educational and livelihoods opportunities, all of which impact not only girls themselves, but also their future offspring, families, and wider communities¹⁻⁵. Child marriage is common in Malawi: Results from national surveys suggest that two fifths of women aged 20-24 (42.1%) report

being married by age 18, with higher proportions in Southern Malawi than other regions⁶.

While less has been written on the drivers of child marriage than on marriage and divorce practices in Malawi⁷⁻¹⁰, poverty and poor educational opportunities are consistently cited as drivers of child marriage in this context. Malawi is one of the poorest countries in Southern Africa, with a GDP per capita of 625 USD compared to 1050 USD in Zambia and 5090 USD in South Africa (2020 data)¹¹. There are limited livelihood opportunities for many in Malawi, including adolescents; those who do work for money report engagement in

agricultural or piecemeal work¹². Education quality in Malawi remains low¹³, and returns to primary education are limited¹⁴⁻¹⁵, leaving few options for adolescents to access expanded opportunities through education. Using data from the 2000 and 2004 Malawi Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Palamuleni found child marriage to be associated with both education and region, with those with no education more likely to marry before age 18, especially in the Southern region of Malawi¹⁶. Given limited economic opportunities low returns to education, and gender roles supportive of males as economic providers¹⁷⁻¹⁹, adolescent girls may view marriage as the most effective means of ensuring their own financial security.

Adolescent pregnancy is additionally recognized as a driver of child marriage in Malawi. A 2017 study from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) found that in addition to limited livelihood opportunities and community norms around timing of marriage, adolescent pregnancy was seen by respondents as an important driver of child marriage in their communities²⁰. While Ansell and colleagues suggest that poverty is the most important driver of child marriage, they note that pregnancy also plays an important role in Southern Malawi²¹. In baseline research for the project examined in this paper, nearly 20% (19.1%) of ever married girls aged 12-19 in Mangochi and Nkhata Bay reported that the primary reason for their marriage was pregnancy¹². Interestingly, a large majority (65%) additionally reported that the decision to marry had been their own choice¹².

The specific ways in which adolescent pregnancy interacts with poverty to drive child marriage warrant further exploration of contextual factors surrounding adolescent sexual initiation and marriage in Malawi. Previous research on adolescent romantic relationships in Malawi have examined the nature of premarital romantic relationships⁷, including the economic transactions within these relationships¹⁷, effects on schooling²², and knowledge and use of contraceptives²³. This body of research suggests premarital sexual activity is not uncommon in Malawi: Poulin notes that adolescents in Southern Malawi (Balaka) commonly use the word *chibwenzi* to describe a long- or short-term boyfriend or girlfriend, usually implying a sexual partner¹⁷. These findings are

confirmed by Clark *et al* who report that in rural areas, men propose to women before entering romantic relationships⁷. Although this is not a marriage proposal, it leads to a relationship, sexual activity, and often marriage¹⁶.

Survey data have shown that sexual debut begins early in Malawi: over half (59.7%) of women aged 20-24 report having had sex by age 18 and 16.6% by age 15⁶. Biddlecom and colleagues found that among girls aged 18-19 who completed primary school, 48.1% reported ever having had sex and 27.0% reporting having had premarital sex while still in school²⁴. Munthali and colleagues found that an estimated 72% of men and 38% of women in Malawi will have premarital sex before reaching age 20²³. Mensch and colleagues, comparing reports of sexual activity among unmarried women aged 15-21 in Mchinji, Malawi by interview mode, found that reports of sex with a boyfriend ranged from 21.0% (through an audio computer-assisted self-interview) to 30.9% (through a face-to-face interview)²⁵. Qualitative research on sex and sexuality among adolescents in Malawi has shown that premarital sex is normalized. Undie and colleagues found that adolescents view sex in three main ways: as an activity that is normal; as something that is pleasurable; and as an act that involves passion as an essential component²⁶.

Adolescent pregnancy is additionally common in Malawi, with one in three (30.6%) women aged 20-24 reporting having given birth before age 18⁶. Although other studies have noted the role of pregnancy as both a cause and consequence of child marriage²⁷, only recently have “universal” conceptual frameworks of child marriage begun to reckon with the importance of pregnancy as a driver in high marriage contexts like Malawi (see for example Psaki *et al*²⁸). This is likely due in part to a historical disproportionate emphasis in child marriage literature on contexts where arranged marriage is the norm—namely, in South Asia²⁹—where fear of adolescent pregnancy and associated reputational risk are more significant drivers of child marriage than pregnancy itself³⁰.

Using qualitative data and a grounded theory approach, this study aims to explore how adolescent girls and their parents view premarital sexual behavior and adolescent pregnancy and how these perceptions link to child marriage in Malawi.

Methods

Study sites

This research is part of an intervention project to delay marriage, improve access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, and improve education and livelihood opportunities for adolescent girls in Malawi. The More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) implemented the project “Marriage, No Child’s Play” in rural communities in Nkhata Bay and Mangochi. In addition to implementing baseline, midline and endline surveys to evaluate the program, the MTBA collected qualitative data to describe the context in which child marriage occurs in these communities and better understand the drivers of child marriage in order to design and implement effective programs to meet adolescents’ needs.

Data collection took place in six villages in Northern (Nkhata Bay) and Southern Malawi (Mangochi). There are several differences between study sites worth noting: in baseline surveys as part of this project, girls in our study areas from Mangochi were predominantly Muslim (95.5%) and Yao (93.3%), while girls from Nkhata Bay were predominantly Christian (98.3%) and Tonga (71.9%)¹². As others have noted, in the Northern region, patrilineal marriage relocation is the norm, whereas in the Southern region, matrilineal marriage relocation is more common⁹. In areas adhering to patrilineal marriage norms, marriage traditionally also involves payment of *lobola*, or bride price, which is paid by the groom’s family to the bride’s family to signify a girl or woman’s transfer from her natal to her marital household³¹⁻³². In the MTBA baseline study, 45.2% of girls in Nkhata Bay reported that their marriages had involved payment of *lobola*, compared with just 25.8% in Mangochi¹². Norms related to bride price payments and spousal relocation are important to consider in this exploration, as they may influence social and financial aspects of marriage decision-making in Malawi and impact marriage timing. Both Nkhata Bay and Mangochi have historically experienced labor migration to South Africa³³⁻³⁴; other recent studies have shown that Zambia and Mozambique are common destinations for young people in the Southern region³⁵.

Data collection

Qualitative data were collected in April 2018 following on findings from the baseline survey, conducted in 2016¹². A qualitative approach was chosen to enable an open-ended and in-depth exploration of adolescent social life, the marital process, and educational and livelihood opportunities. Qualitative data collection was carried out by an experienced social science research group based in Malawi, Invest in Knowledge Initiative (IKI). Six research assistants with experience in qualitative data collection were trained over a period of four days in April 2018. Interviewer training covered qualitative methods and limitations, study instruments, methods for accurate translation and transcription of data, and ethical procedures for interacting with study participants.

Study sites were selected among villages included in the MTBA evaluation. To enable FGDs with groups of married adolescent girls, we first used baseline data¹² to identify areas with a sufficiently high proportion of ever-married adolescent girls aged 12-19. The proportion of ever-married girls in these areas ranged from 18% to 41%. Among these eligible villages, we then selected three villages in Nkhata Bay and three villages in Mangochi, which together represented a diversity of ethnic and religious groups. We recruited individuals who met selection criteria for participation in one of the data collection activities shown in Table 1.

Although this research focused on adolescent girls, we included both parents and key informants in the sample. Adults were included to understand how perceptions of adolescent sexuality and expectations about pregnancy influence the timing of marriage. Although this research focuses on pathways to child marriage, data collection also included questions about perceptions of child marriage and legal enforcement of child marriage laws: those findings are presented elsewhere³⁶. We used criterion sampling to find individuals that met our criteria (for in-depth interviews) and to create homogenous samples of individuals according to age, marital status, or parental status (for focus groups). We therefore have higher proportions of girls who had ever been married (42.8% in IDIs;

22% in FGDs) and who had ever had a child (28.5% in IDIs; 25.8% in FGDs) than what would be expected from a random sample. The mean ages of FGD participants were 13 years for unmarried girls, 22 years for married girls, 40 years for mothers, and 47 years for fathers. The average duration of the FGDs and IDIs were 80 and 45 minutes, respectively.

Instruments

Semi-structured interview guides and focus group discussion guides were developed by researchers in the United States and Malawi, with input from program staff in Malawi and the Netherlands. Guides were developed in English, but IDIs and FGDs were conducted in the local languages. The format of the FGDs and IDIs was open-ended, facilitating a free flow of ideas from the respondents. Separate guides were designed for each respondent category with related though distinct questions on topics including marriage and the marital process, education, livelihoods, role models and adolescent social life including courting. Interview and discussion recordings were translated and transcribed from local languages into English in their entirety.

Data analysis

Analysis of qualitative data was both inductive and deductive. Some topics were identified *a priori* from our research instrument and coded broadly (e.g., pregnancy). Our analysis was also informed by grounded theory³⁷ allowing for additional themes to emerge from the data (e.g., transactional sex, which was not included in our instrument). The research team coded each FGD and IDI transcript, using an iterative approach to identify relevant themes across respondent groups, individuals and settings, to develop an initial codebook, and to refine themes as analysis progressed. Memoing was used by all coders to document additional topics for discussion and in some cases led to the addition of new codes. Two researchers AM and NM first reviewed a subset of transcripts and independently developed codebooks by annotating the transcripts. The researchers then met to discuss the codes, developing a refined codebook with parent and child codes, removing redundancies, and

developing a preliminary hierarchy. After development of the codebook, a third reviewer was trained and began coding the transcripts. Dedoose software (version 8) was used to establish intercoder reliability³⁸ and for subsequent analysis, including the development and review of memos to address emergent themes. Dedoose's intercoder reliability test generated a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of .77 across all codes and .81 on marriage. All transcripts were coded by two independent researchers coding blind to one another. After completion of coding, we then examined pertinent excerpts for code co-occurrence, code occurrence by demographic characteristics, and code counts³⁹. Code excerpts were exported to Microsoft Word for further organization around the larger themes.

Results

Participant characteristics

Research participants were selected using criterion sampling to ensure representation from married girls and from the major ethnicities in the study area. Tables 2 and 3 show participant demographics. Girls in the IDIs were older than those in the FGDs (17.0 vs. 16.2 years) and more likely to ever report being married (42.8% vs. 22.6%). About one in four girls reported ever having a child (25.8% in FGDs compared to 28.5% in IDIs). Among parents in our FGDs, fathers were on average older than mothers (47.1 vs. 39.8 years). A higher proportion of fathers reported ever being married (100%) compared with mothers (76.0%).

Marriage to 'Legitimize' pregnancy

We find that contrary to in high child marriage settings where child marriage is the norm—such as India⁴⁰—in Malawi, respondents reported that girls themselves typically select their partners and that marriages before age 18 typically occur due to pregnancy. This is because it is expected that once a pregnancy occurs, the man or boy who impregnated the girl will agree to marry her:

When they start having sex while they are young they end up getting pregnant. As a result, their parents force them to get married.
-FGD unmarried adolescents, Mangochi

Table 1: Data collection activities

		Number of groups	Number of respondents
In-depth interviews	Adolescent girls (married and unmarried)	-	21
	Key informants (adults in community)	-	18
	Total interviews	-	39
Focus group discussions	FGDs with unmarried adolescent girls	8	75
	FGDs with married adolescent girls	6	40
	FGDs with fathers of adolescent girls	3	22
	FGDs with mothers of adolescent girls	3	25
	Total groups	20	162

Table 2: Characteristics of adolescents in FGDs and IDIs (N=145)

	FGDs (n=124)	IDIs (n=21)
Age (mean years)	16.2	17.0
Ever married (%)	22.6	42.8
Enrolled in school (%)	54.8	33.3
Has a child (%)	25.8	28.5

Table 3: Characteristics of parents in FGDs (N=47)

	Males (n=22)	Females (n=25)
Age (mean years)	47.1	39.8
Currently married (%)	100.0	76.0
Number of children (mean)	5.1	4.4
Ethnicity	68% Yao; 32% Tonga	64% Yao; 36% Tonga

Pregnancy pushes a girl and/or her family to arrange the marriage quickly to avoid both the shame of having an out-of-wedlock birth and to ensure some financial security for the girl and her child through the marriage. A male teacher from Mangochi noted how pregnancy, including the threat of pregnancy, influences marriage in his community:

It happens when the girl is 10-12 years old... Sometimes parents are afraid that their girls will get pregnant and they just arrange marriage for them. When a girl is pregnant her parents force her to get married. Parents feel ashamed when their daughters are pregnant.

-In-depth interview with male key informant from Mangochi.

Several respondents describe a scenario they felt was typical in their community regarding an unplanned pregnancy. In this case, the pregnancy means an inevitable marriage as the girl and unborn child are now the responsibility of the boy or man. As one father put it:

The girl is forced to get married because she is pregnant outside marriage. The parents says, "you [the daughter] must get out of our household" and then tell her brothers to go and escort her to her [future] husband who has impregnated her. The girl is escorted to the boy or man who impregnated her so that he can take care of the unborn child.

-Focus group with fathers, Nkhata Bay

Some participants also used language about 'giving' the pregnant girl to the man responsible and passing responsibility for the girl (and the unborn child) to him:

They [adolescents] engage in a sexual relationship. When they have done that the girl gets impregnated and the parents of the girl give that child to the man responsible for the pregnancy.

-In-depth interview, 17-year-old unmarried female from Mangochi

We find that pregnancy is a critical juncture at which girls enter marriage and there seems to be a consensus and acceptance that marriage should happen once a girl is pregnant to legitimize the birth.

Pregnancy and partner selection

For some respondents, pregnancy is shameful and an adverse outcome to be avoided, while for others pregnancy is a means by which girls can exercise some agency in selecting their preferred husband. One girl who was married at age 17 describes her partner and timing of her marriage as her choice, and pregnancy as a factor that accelerated that choice. She describes choosing to get into a relationship that later led to pregnancy and marriage. In the following exchange between a married girl and an interviewer, the girl presents her

decision to get married following pregnancy as linked to her decision to get into a relationship in the first place:

I: Who made the decision for you to get married?

R: I made it myself.

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 in you getting pregnant?

R.: I chose so.

I. You chose?

R.: Yes.

I: Why did you choose to marry him?

R: Because he impregnated me.

-In-depth interview with married adolescent, age 19, Mangochi

Although the girl made the decision to get into the relationship, she also states it was her decision to marry him, though pregnancy appears to have factored heavily into that decision. Despite perceptions that parents force girls to marry once pregnant, girls may not necessarily recognize pregnancy as the most important component in the decision to marry. One 18-year-old married adolescent either tried to avoid talking about pregnancy as a reason for her marriage or did not see it as important to mention until probed:

I: Why did you get married?

R: There was not any reason.

I: So why did you get married if there is no reason for you to get married?

R: Because I was pregnant.

-In-depth interview with 18-year-old married female, Nkhata Bay

Given the assumption of marriage following premarital pregnancy, in this context, the decision of whom to date may be the juncture at which girls have more choice in selection of a marital partner, though it was not typically described this way. Pregnancy was commonly discussed by participants, perhaps due to expectations of premarital sexual activity. As we have noted, marriage is an expected consequence of adolescent pregnancy in these communities. Thus, the decision

of whom to marry may effectively occur much earlier when courting or romantic relationships first begin. Indeed, Clark and colleagues note that rural relationships in Malawi often are formalized with a proposal to begin dating or courtship⁷. In discussing how premarital sex leads to child marriage, one respondent notes that:

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 unmarried girls, Mangochi

Choosing a partner and taking the risk of becoming pregnant may be an example of exerting some level of volition regarding marriage, at least in partner choice. However, the expectation of marriage following pregnancy is not always realized. We heard that men may have the option to decline to marry a girl they impregnated. As one respondent, an unmarried 18-year-old female from Mangochi observed, men may decline marriage even when confronted by a pregnancy:

The girls' parents take her to the man responsible for the pregnancy and he refuses...It happens that he doesn't want the girl but he accepts the pregnancy.

-Unmarried adolescent female, age 18, Mangochi.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that the Malawian context differs from other high child marriage areas in how marriages before age 18 occur. We heard few reports of any arranged marriages and most girls reported having some say in the decision to marry. We heard from research participants that romantic relationships and sex between adolescents are considered acceptable and normative behaviors and that childbearing and marriage are expected outcomes of such unions. While the threat of pregnancy and desire to control girls' sexuality effectively accelerates marriage for girls in many countries, pregnancy itself appears to be a primary driver of child marriage in Malawi. This confirms research from others, which has shown that in Malawi, 11.0% of women marry while pregnant with their first child and 9.7% of women are unmarried at the time of their first birth⁴⁰. These findings are additionally consistent with our

baseline research, which found that 7.5% of never married girls reported ever being pregnant¹².

If premarital sex and pregnancy are commonplace, the selection of a romantic partner in adolescence takes on significant meaning, as this choice may reasonably lead to a lifelong partnership. Pregnancy from romantic courting may also serve as justification for a girl to marry a preferred marital partner when the male lacks resources and/or social standing to be considered desirable by the girls' parents. While we heard that some men have declined to marry a girl whom they impregnated, participants generally reported that marriage was the expected consequence of pregnancy and most men complied. Significant stigma associated with not being married to the father of one's child³⁶ may place additional pressure on adolescent girls regarding selection of sexual partners.

Pregnancy as a driver of child marriage presents particular challenges for programs aiming to delay marriage for adolescent girls. For example, addressing girls' motivations to prevent pregnancy (or lack thereof) must be a key programmatic priority, in addition to providing sexual and reproductive health information and services to adolescents. Programs that fail to acknowledge the reality of sexual activity in premarital adolescent relationships in Malawi will likely fail to impact child marriage. Programs may wish to draw on a rights-based approach to adolescent sexuality, recognizing that sex within consensual relationships may be considered a normative part of the adolescent experience in some contexts. Research has shown that comprehensive sex education that addresses gender equity and power in relationships is five times more effective than programs that do not address these issues⁴¹. Power and gender are particularly important themes to address in contexts—such as Malawi—where economic opportunities are extremely limited and adolescent girls may feel pressure to engage in unsafe transactional sexual relationships as a livelihood strategy. It is clear that as long as marriage is seen as the primary means of securing one's economic well-being, many girls and their families will continue to resort to early marriage, particularly in the case of premarital pregnancy. Thus, programs aiming to prevent child marriage

must work to expand livelihood opportunities available to adolescent girls.

The main limitations of this study are that we did not interview young men who are the partners of girls in these communities so we lack their valuable perspectives. Additionally, some of the villages included in this research were located in program implementation areas where local non-governmental organizations have been active and thus the perspectives offered by people in these villages may differ from those of people living in similar communities not exposed to these programs. We note that the findings here may not be representative of Malawi as a whole, but rather more representative of communities in rural Malawi that are characterized by high child marriage prevalence.

Ethical approval

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Population Council Institutional Review Board in New York and the National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities (NCRSH) in Lilongwe. Parental permission and informed consent procedures were followed prior to including individuals in the research.

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Conflict of interest

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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