

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

A conceptual framework for understanding child marriage, marriage markets, and marriageability

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Abstract

The term 'marriageability' is used frequently in child marriage literature but is rarely defined. We propose a conceptual framework to define marriageability and use qualitative case studies to illustrate how ideas about marriageability contribute to child marriage. Pressure to capitalize on a girl's marriageability before it declines in order to secure the 'best' partner may explain why child marriage persists. We find that marriageability involves both eligibility—or perceived readiness for marriage—as well as desirability or 'value' on the marriage market. We propose that understanding marriageability in context, particularly in countries with limited evidence on interventions to address child marriage, is essential for suggesting ways interventions may critically examine notions of marriageability and disrupt pathways to child marriage. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2022; 26[12s]: 78-87).

Keywords: Child marriage, qualitative, program design, Mali, Malawi, Niger, India

Résumé

Le terme anglais « marriageability » est fréquemment utilisé dans la littérature sur le mariage d'enfants, mais il est rarement défini. Nous proposons un cadre conceptuel pour définir ce terme et nous utilisons des études de cas qualitatives pour démontrer comment les idées sur « l'éligibilité au mariage » contribuent au mariage des enfants. La pression exercée pour exploiter l'éligibilité au mariage d'une fille avant son « déclin » perçu afin d'obtenir le « meilleur » partenaire possible peut expliquer la persistance du mariage d'enfants. Nous constatons que le concept de « marriageability » implique à la fois l'éligibilité au mariage- c'est à dire la perception qu'une fille est prête à se marier- et les caractéristiques considérées comme souhaitables dans une mariée qui constituent sa « valeur » sur le marché du mariage. Nous proposons que la compréhension de ces facteurs dans son contexte est essentielle pour suggérer des façons dont les interventions peuvent examiner de manière critique les notions de l'éligibilité au mariage et perturber les facteurs favorisant le mariage d'enfants, surtout dans les pays où les interventions visant à lutter contre le mariage d'enfants ne sont pas nombreux. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2022; 26[12s]: 78-87).

Mots-clés: Mariage d'enfants, qualitatif, conception de programme, Mali, Malawi, Niger, Inde

Introduction

Use of the term 'marriageability' in marriage literature and child marriage discourse

The term 'marriageability' is frequently used in marriage literature^{1,2} and child marriage discourse³⁻⁵ yet it is rarely defined. Broadly, the term 'marriageability' typically relates to an individual's 'value' on the marriage market and to

concerns about the socio-economic aspects of partnerships. Implicit in these discussions is that being more 'marriageable' allows more control in choosing marital partners, which may lead to increased status and financial security (i.e., "marrying up").

Studies examining girls' marriageability in settings where child marriage is common mostly focus on age at marriage (i.e. "marriageable age")⁵, however 'marriageability' has also been used to

describe characteristics or skills seen as desirable in a spouse or qualities that “enhance girls’ prospects for marriage”⁵ such as physical beauty, obedience, religious piety, relationship skills, education, work experience, or family economic or social status^{2,6,7}. In child marriage discourse, ‘marriageability’ is often related to the social importance of girls’ virginity and to the reputational risks associated with premarital sex^{4,8,9}. This interpretation of ‘marriageability’ is reflected in female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) literature and programs, including in programs that address FGM/C and child marriage together as ‘harmful practices’¹⁰.

Marriageability, social norms, and ‘value’ on the marriage market

As noted in literature on marriage markets^{11–15}, the concept of marriageability as ‘market value’ exists in virtually every society. While social norms about ‘marriageability’ undeniably exert influence on marriage markets everywhere^{1,2,16,17}, these norms are not always closely linked to marriage timing¹¹. Marriage market research on settings with high prevalence of child marriage, however, notes that girls’ time spent “on the market” may negatively affect their perceived “quality”, thus generating pressure for girls to marry at younger ages¹⁸. Regardless of context, social norms determine what it means to be ‘marriageable’, whether a person has reached those markers, and the what the consequences are if perceived marriageability declines. Preserving marriageability is meaningful when there are individuals who are considered ‘unmarriageable’ in a society due to age (too young/old), perceived impurity, or other stigmas.

Contribution of this research

Exploring context-specific dimensions of marriageability may help clarify socioeconomic drivers of child marriage and suggest potential intervention avenues. We propose a conceptual framework with accompanying qualitative case studies to explore factors that contribute to notions of marriageability and drive child marriage in different contexts. We focus on examples from African settings less represented in the child marriage evidence base¹⁹ (Malawi, Mali, Niger) as well as from India, where child marriage

interventions and research are more long-established.

Methods

Case study methodology

Site selection

The case studies presented here are informed by cross-sectional qualitative data gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted as a part of research associated with the More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) intervention in India, Malawi, Mali, and Niger. FGDs were conducted in intervention and matched comparison villages involved in the MTBA impact evaluation in each state/region where the program took place (Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Odisha, India; Nkhata Bay and Mangochi, Malawi; Ségou and Sikasso, Mali; and Maradi and Tillabéri, Niger). Further details about intervention strategies and impact can be found in the MTBA Endline Evaluation Report²⁰.

Study population

In all countries, FGDs were conducted with separated groups of unmarried adolescent girls, married adolescent girls, mothers of adolescent girls, and fathers of adolescent girls. Table 1 shows details on the FGDs conducted in each setting.

Data collection

FGDs were conducted by experienced interviewers of the same sex as participants. In India, qualitative data collection was led by Population Council India. In the other three countries, FGDs were implemented by MTBA’s local research partners: Le Centre d’Études et de Recherche sur l’Information en Population et Santé (CERIPS) (Mali), Le Laboratoire d’Études et de Recherche sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local (LASDEL) (Niger), and Invest in Knowledge Initiative (IKI) (Malawi). FGDs were conducted in local languages, recorded, and later transcribed and translated into English or French. French quotes were then translated into English for inclusion here. While the themes covered in the FGDs varied across countries, questions concerning girls’

Table 1: Details of FGDs informing each case study

| Case Study | Year | Number of FGDs conducted with each respondent type | Key themes discussed |
|---|------|---|--|
| Case Study 1: <i>Poverty accelerates eligibility for marriage in Malawi</i> | 2018 | 20 total: - 5 with unmarried girls 12-19 - 5 with married or engaged girls 12-19 - 5 with fathers of girls 12-19 - 5 with mothers of girls 12-19 | Pregnancy, transactional sex, marriage withdrawals |
| Case Study 2: <i>Parental concerns about the threat of pre-marital sex to family honour and girls' marriageability drives child marriage in India</i> | 2017 | 24 total: - 5 with unmarried girls aged 12-14 - 5 with unmarried girls aged 15-19 - 5 with married girls aged 12-19 - 5 with fathers of girls 15-19 - 10 with mothers of girls 15-19 | Mobility and safety, girls' education, livelihoods, engagement practices |
| Case Study 3: <i>Fiancés Determine Readiness for Engagement, Sex, and Marriage in Mali</i> | 2017 | 31 total: - 5 with unmarried girls 12-19 - 5 with married girls 16-19 - 5 with engaged girls 12-19 - 8 with fathers of girls 12-19 - 8 with mothers of girls 12-19 | Migration, livelihoods, marriage processes |
| Case Study 4: <i>Physical Maturation Influences Perceived Eligibility and Assigns Girls to Marriage Cohorts in Niger</i> | 2018 | 16 total: - 4 with married girls 12-19 - 4 with unmarried girls 12-19 - 4 with fathers of girls 12-19 - 4 with mothers of girls 12-19 | Agency and choice, influence of peers on marriage timing, divorce |

readiness for marriage and perceptions of what makes a “good” or “ideal” bride/wife were asked everywhere.

Data analysis

Qualitative data from FGDs were analysed using a thematic approach²¹ informed by grounded theory^{22,23} to allow collaborators in different locations to manage coding and workflow together in an online platform. Analysis was completed using Dedoose 8.1.8 software²⁴. Original code trees predetermined by interview guides were revised as analysis progressed. Through an iterative process, coders sorted data into parent and child codes, merging codes as overarching and repeated themes emerged and using memos to identify interesting patterns and refine the code list. The case studies presented here draw from the key findings from each country’s qualitative study and were selected to illustrate distinct components of marriageability.

Developing a theoretical framework

In February 2021, MTBA hosted an international learning event during which program implementers and researchers from eleven countries gathered virtually to discuss how norms related to adolescent girls’ sexuality drive child marriage. During this

event, a draft marriageability framework (developed based on existing literature) was vetted by program implementation teams from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Niger. Written feedback on this framework was additionally solicited from event participants from Ethiopia, India, Malawi, Mali, Pakistan and Uganda. The framework was revised to incorporate feedback from these contributors.

Results

Marriageability framework

The proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1) is composed of two distinct dimensions of ‘marriageability’: *eligibility for marriage* and *desirability on the marriage market*.

Eligibility can be understood as a status: a girl is considered by her community to be either eligible or ineligible for marriage. Factors including age and physical maturation—or in some contexts the legal marriage age—may influence when a girl is considered to be marriage eligible. Certain familial factors may also influence a girl’s perceived eligibility. For example, financial need might lead a family to have a daughter married to reduce

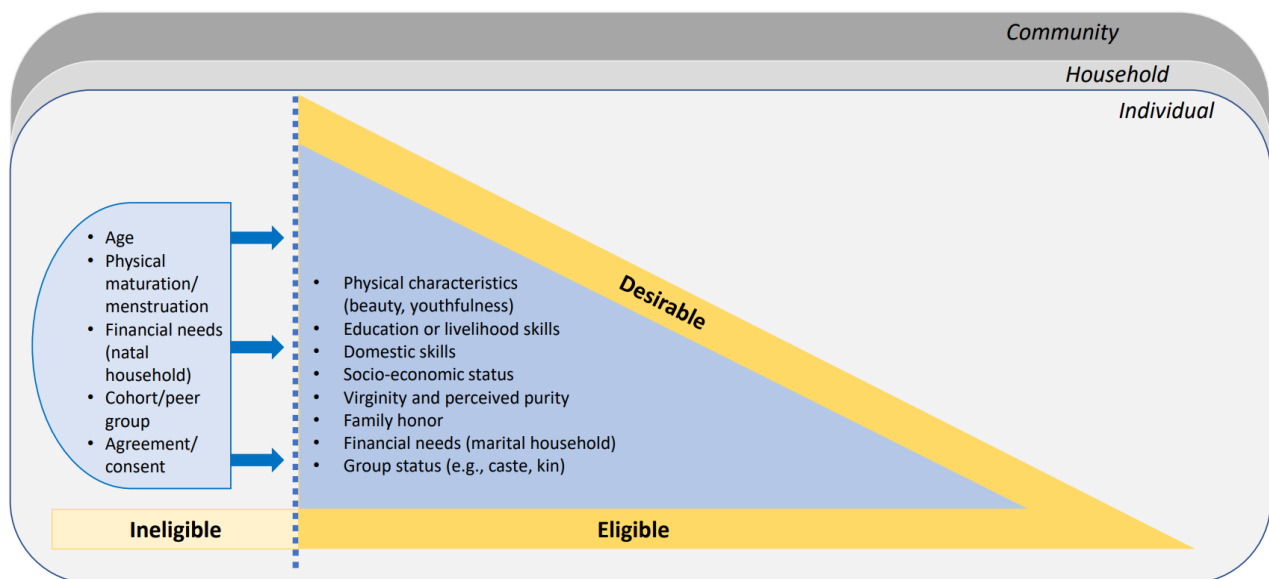


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for marriageability

household expenses or to offset higher dowry costs for older brides, hastening the daughter’s perceived marriage eligibility. In some contexts, community-level perceptions may be particularly influential for determining eligibility, such as in contexts where girls of specific age groups are traditionally married in cohorts during the same marriage season. In some settings, girls themselves may have a say in determining when they have become eligible for marriage. While eligibility is not necessarily static and unidirectional (for example, in some settings, a woman who is divorced or widowed may be considered ineligible for remarriage), since the present examination relates to child marriage, this framework considers factors that influence when a girl is first seen as having transitioned from being “ineligible” to being “eligible” for marriage.

Desirability on the marriage market is a more dynamic construct, representing a combination of factors that may make a girl attractive to suitors and influence the timing of her marriage. Such factors might include a girl’s perceived physical attractiveness, sexual purity, reputation, personality traits, level of education, work or domestic skills, and/or her family’s economic or social standing.

As a construct, desirability is both individually subjective (i.e. dependent on suitors’ preferences) and influenced by social norms and other external factors. For example, financial strain

on a (marital) family may lead to pressure for sons to marry a girl who can contribute additional labour or income to the household. In settings where younger girls require payment of a lower bride price or dowry, household-level economic considerations may accelerate the timing of a marriage.

Furthermore, contextual social norms shape what factors are seen as contributing most to a girl’s ‘desirability’ on the marriage market. In high fertility settings, for example, puberty and physical indicators of fertility may increase a girl’s perceived desirability, while in other settings, education and skills associated with income-earning potential may be considered more desirable personal characteristics.

Marriageability pressures at multiple levels

The economic pressures and social norms that shape perceptions of girl’s marriageability and in effect drive child marriage often operate at multiple levels simultaneously. On an individual-level, girls may have internalized norms favorable of early marriage or may themselves have fears and anxieties related to their family honour or future financial and social security. These pressures may be reinforced by fears, opinions, and expectations of parents, suitors or future in-laws, peers, or others in the community.

Case studies

The following case studies illustrate notable components of marriageability in different settings and show how marriageability-related norms are reinforced by pressures at different levels, effectively accelerating marriage for girls. In each case study, we examine one component of marriageability. We do so for simplicity in illustrating the framework, not to argue that the component explored is the most determinant of child marriage in that context nor that it is unique to that setting.

Case study 1: Poverty accelerates eligibility for marriage in Malawi

In Malawi, research shows that poverty pressures parents' to consider their daughters' eligibility for marriage earlier than they otherwise might. FGD participants explained how parents turn to marriage for their daughters because alternate livelihood opportunities are lacking. A mother in Nkhata Bay explained how poverty is directly related to timing of marriage for girls:

What drives early marriage is poverty. When parents are poor, they don't have any money to buy clothes for their children, even food. Children are malnourished...this makes the girl child get married to get enough food and clothing.

- Mother of an adolescent girl, Nkhata Bay

When asked about why girls marry, fathers in Mangochi also noted that marriage is expected to alleviate poverty for girls and potentially also for their parents and siblings, particularly when other livelihood opportunities do not exist:

P5: Poverty. Many people in this community, they are not employed. They are very poor so they can't afford to take care of all the children. That's why they force girls to get married.

P4: Others they go and get married because their parents can't afford to feed them. So they get married so that they can also help their parents and siblings.

- Fathers of adolescent girls, Mangochi

When parents can no longer provide for a daughter, her marriage may be seen as the best option for meeting her needs. A married girl from Mangochi

noted that her parents' inability to support her schooling led to her marriage:

“Poverty. My parents could not afford to support me with what was needed at the school, like buying a school uniform, writing materials, and pocket money. Secondly, my parents did not encourage me to continue with my education.”

- Married girl, Mangochi

These results show how poverty and material needs influence when a girl is considered eligible for marriage, as her parents turn to her marriage as a means of alleviating the financial burden of providing for her needs.

Case study 2: Parental concerns about the threat of pre-marital sex to family honour and girls' marriageability drive child marriage in India

In India, abstaining from sex prior to marriage is seen as essential for protecting family honour and ensuring that a girl will be desirable for marriage. FGD participants often spoke of the importance of protecting girls against sexual threats to avoid damage to their honour, which could imperil a good marriage and therefore a good future. One mother in Bihar explained that girls do not go out alone out of fear of reputational risks:

Without their guardian, the girls don't go out. Here there isn't any girl who goes out alone. If a girl does anything wrong—even if she makes only one mistake—then her guardian's name is spoiled. Then they will have to answer in front of the whole village about this—that it is her fault.

-Mother of an adolescent girl, Bihar

A father in Bihar further explained how the need to preserve “prestige” drives early marriage:

They do the marriage at an early age because it is a matter of prestige...Many girls don't obey their parents and even the boys don't obey their parents. This is the reason that they make them [girls] marry at an early age.

- Father of an adolescent girl, Bihar

Such parental concerns are significant, especially in India, where arranged marriage is the dominant practice. A mother in Jharkhand explained how

fears about one’s daughters’ marriageability being threatened affect the timing of arranged marriages:

That’s why we marry them [girls] at an early age, due to the fear of getting defamed. What can we do? Maybe she gets spoiled or maybe she gets pregnant or maybe she gets molested by someone. Due to this fear, we marry her early.

- FGD with mothers, Jharkhand

These quotes demonstrate the centrality of virginity as a factor influencing girls’ desirability for marriage and the role that girls’ parents play in driving child marriage in response to anxieties about their daughters’ marriageability. In India, the prospect of any premarital sexual contact creates fear of reputational risk for girls and their families. Early marriages are thus socially sanctioned to reduce risk to girls’ safety and to protect family honour.

Case study 3: Fiancés play a role in determining readiness for engagement, sex, and marriage in Mali

In Mali, it is common practice for unions to be negotiated while girls are young children, well before they are considered eligible for marriage. FGD participants described a process whereby a suitor initiates an engagement with a girl he considers desirable for marriage, the families accept the engagement, and then he waits for the girl to mature before the marriage is formalized. Participants suggest that this practice of early engagement is fueled by a sense of urgency in securing a desired spouse before others have the chance to ask for her hand. A fiancé’s perceptions of a girl’s readiness for marriage then appear to be closely tied to her physical development at puberty, which is seen as signaling her eligibility as a sexual partner. One mother in Ségou explained how men seek engagements with girls and then wait for them to mature before marriage:

They [girls] are still engaged. Even at 11 years old, they are engaged. But the men are waiting for them to grow up a bit...It’s often that “I love this woman so I don’t want someone else to beat me to it.”

- Mother of an adolescent girl, Ségou

Responses suggest that once a girl is promised in marriage, her future husband is granted a certain degree of access to her even before she reaches a ‘marriageable’ age. A married girl in Ségou explained that in the case of an extended engagement, sex between fiancés is common: “Yes, [the marriage] is consummated. We do not have a choice. If your parents give you, and your fiancé asks for you to go chat with him, you don’t have the choice.”

Another married girl in Ségou added that pregnancy and child marriage often result from such relations:

They give the girl to a man, even if the marriage is not (yet) celebrated, he will ask her to come chat. A 12-year-old engaged girl who goes to chat every time with her fiancé will get pregnant...But if you don’t give a 12-year-old child in marriage, will other men be able to come and get her to go and chat?

- Married girl, Ségou

In this context, girls’ future husbands appear to have significant power in determining when sexual relations will begin within the union, even prior to the official marriage celebration. When pregnancy results from pre-marital sex between fiancés, perceptions of the girl’s marriageability shift, as the girl’s parents and community agree that her marriage should be formalized, and she should move into her husband’s household to give birth within her marital household. Men’s perceptions of girls’ eligibility as sexual partners combine with community- and family-level norms that grant fiancés sexual access to their future spouses and accelerate marriage for girls.

Case study 4: Physical maturation influences perceived eligibility and assigns girls to marriage cohorts in Niger

In Niger, research shows that a girl’s perceived ‘marriageability’ is not merely a function of her individual or family characteristics, but is also influenced by community-level factors, namely the timing of marriage for her peers and related pressure to marry within a window of opportunity deemed socially acceptable. In this context, girls are traditionally married in peer cohorts during a marriage season. If a girl is not married among her

peers, she risks being seen as “left behind” and as inherently less marriageable.

Age and physical maturation appear to be closely linked in determining a girl’s peer group as it relates to readiness for marriage. In this context, a girl who has reached puberty sooner may be considered the ‘peer’ of older girls. As an unmarried girl in Tillabéri explained, “*Some girls do not want to get married because they say they have not reached marriage age, but as soon as you see them, you know that is false.*” This quote demonstrates that a girl’s actual age is not the sole determining factor of when she is considered to have reached “marriageable age”. An unmarried girl in Maradi similarly emphasized the role of physical maturation in determining a girl’s marriage cohort: “*When she is the age—and often even if she isn’t the age—if she grows fast, we say that she must be married.*” Another unmarried girl agreed, adding, “*If she becomes tall, she has reached the age.*”

While marriage may occur later for a girl who reaches puberty after other girls of her same age, the marriage of girls her same age still strongly influences what is seen as an acceptable window of time for her to marry. As one unmarried girl in Maradi remarked, “*She must marry even if it is at 12 years old, because her friends are married.*”

Once girls are seen as having reached marriageable age, there appears to be little incentive for them to choose to go against expectations by delaying marriage. The following exchange among unmarried girls in Maradi illustrates the positive associations with being the first among girls of one’s age to marry:

R1: If she marries before the others, we will say that she is strategic and clever.

R2: We will say it’s because she is cleaner than the others.

R3: We will speak well of her.

R4: We will say that she is clever. It’s Allah who chose her. Her moment is soon.

- *Unmarried girls, Maradi*

Additionally, negative associations with marrying “late” may effectively pressure girls to marry within the same window as others in their peer group. As

one unmarried girl in Tillabéri explained: *Being the last is not good—that would be a worry for me.*”

Discussion

The framework presented in this paper deconstructs the concept of ‘marriageability’ as it relates to child marriage, showing how pressures related to perceived ‘eligibility’ and ‘desirability’ for marriage can drive early marriages. Qualitative case studies from four countries help demonstrate that many components of marriageability are fundamentally linked to anxieties and fears about girls missing the opportunity for a desirable union, which could risk their economic security, social capital, and happiness in the future.

In Malawi, we see that poverty influences notions of marriage eligibility, as girls marry early to alleviate economic strain on their natal households. In India, parents’ fears that their daughters’ marriageability could become ‘spoiled’ by premarital sex effectively drives early marriage. In Mali, we see that husbands have significant power in determining a girl’s eligibility for marriage, as a man’s perception of his fiancée’s maturity can lead to early sexual initiation and subsequent pregnancy and marriage. In Niger, we see clearly the role of the community in influencing when a girl is considered to be marriageable, as girls typically marry within cohorts of peers and social norms dictate an acceptable window of opportunity during which girls must be married to avoid stigma and decreased marital prospects in the future.

This paper has several limitations. First, we recognize that we may be missing factors related to marriageability that are influential in countries or states/regions not represented by the case studies or the team of research and program staff who contributed to this framework. Another limitation relates to the use of data from certain areas where MTBA was active from 2016 to 2020; the presence of the intervention in some villages where FGDs were held may have influenced how individuals view child marriage. Despite these limitations, we believe this framework is useful for identifying specific factors that influence norms related to marriage timing at different levels. In a companion piece to this paper²⁹ we explore programmatic implications and how practitioners can consider

how to better address marriageability in program design.

Ethical Approval

Ethical clearance for this study was issued by the Institutional Review Board of Population Council and by the National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities (NCRSH) (Malawi), the Institut National de Recherche en Santé Publique (INRSP) (Mali), and the Comité d'Éthique pour la Recherche en Santé (Niger).

Conclusion

We believe that programs aiming to reduce child marriage would benefit from detailed analysis of context-specific factors that influence marriageability-related norms and in turn accelerate marriage for girls. While common elements of marriageability exist across settings where child marriage is common, identifying specific differences between contexts can offer important insights about particular norms to address within programs. Intervention packages developed in settings that have typically been the focus of child marriage programs and research may not be as effective in reducing child marriage prevalence when applied elsewhere. Thus, when adopting programmatic ‘best practices’ in a new context, program evidence must be considered alongside additional sources of information that provide a more nuanced view of context-specific variables. For example, existing evidence shows that the programs most effective in delaying marriage to date have been asset-building and/or human capital-focused interventions that increase girls’ value on the marriage market by increasing their education and skills, and therefore offering opportunities beyond marriage^{19,30,31}. While some of the mechanisms underpinning the demonstrated success of these strategies will likely apply in any context, analyzing specific norms and pressures related to marriageability can give insights into what messages should be embedded within asset-building programs (for example, what internalized norms might be important to address) or into what complementary strategies might be adopted to foster a social environment in which anxieties about girls’ marriageability do not lead to child marriage. We propose that the marriageability framework can be used as a tool to enable practitioners to

concretely discuss how different context-specific components of eligibility and desirability create pressure for girls to marry early.

Contribution of authors

Andrea J. Melnikas and Grace Saul conceived of and designed the study, developed the original marriageability conceptual framework based on a review of the literature, presented the framework at the MTBA international event in 2020, solicited and incorporated feedback from event participants from 11 countries, drafted the case studies drawing from MTBA qualitative results, and drafted the initial manuscript. Mouhamadou Gueye led MTBA data collection in Mali, gave feedback on the marriageability framework, and contributed to the Mali case study qualitative analysis and write-up. Neelanjana Pandey led MTBA data collection in India, gave feedback on the marriageability framework, and contributed to the India case study qualitative analysis and write-up. James Mkandawire led MTBA data collection in Malawi, gave feedback on the marriageability framework, and contributed to the Malawi case study qualitative analysis and write-up. Aïssa Diarra led MTBA data collection in Niger, gave feedback on the marriageability framework, and contributed to the Niger case study qualitative analysis and write-up. Andrea J. Melnikas analysed MTBA qualitative data from India and Malawi, in collaboration with Neelanjana Pandey and James Mkandawire. Grace Saul analysed MTBA qualitative data from Mali and Niger in collaboration with Mouhamadou Gueye and Aïssa Diarra.

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