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Being dragged into adulthood? Young people's agency concerning sex, relationships and marriage in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how young people exercise agency in rural Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia in relation to sex, relationships and marriage, to inform local programmes aiming to prevent teenage pregnancy and child marriage. In each country, focus group discussions with young people and parents, in-depth interviews with young people and a variety of other participants, and a household survey with young people (15-24 years) were conducted. We found that (child) marriage was often a response to teenage pregnancy, which was highly prevalent in all study areas. Young people's aspirations to enter adulthood were influenced by their life circumstances. Initiation ceremonies symbolised the transition to adulthood and gave social endorsement to young people to start engaging in (often unprotected) sexual activity. Given the uncertain socio-economic context, resource constraints led families to marry off their daughters; or girls themselves to marry early to relieve the burden on their families, but also to get pregnant as a 'next step' towards adulthood. Transactional sex was common. These intersecting cultural, social and economic contextual factors constrained young women's agency, more as compared to young men. However, young women did manoeuvre within contextual constraints to exercise a degree of agency.

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Agency; young people; sexual relationships; marriage; Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are essential for people's health and wellbeing (Starrs et al. 2018). While the importance of SRHR has gained wider recognition over the past decades, young people (aged 10–24 years) have been overlooked in

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global health and social policy, resulting in, amongst other outcomes, poor sexual and reproductive health (SRH) (Patton et al. 2016). In particular, the negative consequences of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and teenage pregnancy threaten the health and wellbeing of adolescents and young people (aged 10-19 years), including their education and economic potential (Bearinger et al. 2007).

Determinants of unprotected sex, resulting in pregnancy under the age of 20, have been studied in various contexts. In Sub-Saharan Africa as well as globally, teenage pregnancy has been associated with the social, cultural and economic context (Odimegwu and Mkwanzani 2016). A variety of intersecting factors influence teenage pregnancy, including peer influence, unequal gender power relations, lack of parental guidance, low education levels and limited comprehensive sexuality education (Yakubu and Salisu 2018). Early sexual debut and limited contraceptive use also contribute to teenage pregnancy (Self et al. 2018). Being married young can lead to teenage pregnancy (Bearinger et al. 2007), while teenage pregnancy also happens out of wedlock and, in certain cases, may lead to (child) marriage (Petroni et al. 2017). Therefore, teenage pregnancy and child marriage – defined as marriage under the age of 18 – can be mutually reinforcing, resulting in a multitude of problems in relation to health, education, social and economic well-being and rights for adolescent girls and young women (Menon et al. 2018).

Gaining contextualised insight into young people's agency in terms of choosing to become sexually active, to obtain and use contraceptives, to have a boy or girlfriend, to get married or pregnant (or not) – in short, agency regarding sex, relationships and marriage – is crucial for informing interventions aiming to reduce teenage pregnancy and child marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa. Problems related to SRH are often a consequence of constrained agency, in particular for young women, however, constrained agency with respect to certain issues does not prevent a person from showing agency in others (Albanesi 2009; Bhana 2015; Luke 2003).

We follow Bell's definition of agency, as based on work by Petesch, Smulovitz, and Walton (2005) as: '... the capacity of individuals to make purposeful choices and transform these into desired actions and outcomes within the social, cultural, economic and political context specific to their daily lives.' (Bell 2012, p. 283). Agency implies consciousness of one's actions and a certain degree of individuality, control and power over one's own life (Blanc 2001; Spencer and Doull 2015). However, the capability of doing so is nuanced by the social, cultural, economic and political context (Petesch, Smulovitz, and Walton 2005). For example, young people's agency regarding sex, relationships and marriage is shaped by social and cultural norms surrounding sexuality and adulthood, ideas about gender that are embedded in social relations (Bell et al. 2017; Bell 2012; Bhana 2015), and young people's access to SRH services (Bell et al. 2017).

If young people are constrained to find only a few alternatives because of a restrictive context, we speak of 'thin' agency, and if they can access a wide variety of options we speak of 'thick' agency (Bell 2012). An in-depth analysis of where along this continuum the agency of young women and men is situated can aid an understanding of teenage pregnancy and child marriage. Young people's experiences, perceptions and opinions, and those of socialising authorities, are crucial in gaining this understanding (Levin, Ward, and Neilson 2012). In this study, we explored how young people (aged

15-24 years) exercised their agency in rural Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia in relation to sex, relationships and marriage.

Methods

This mixed-methods study was part of the baseline research of the *Yes I Do* programme, which aimed to reduce child marriage and teenage pregnancy in seven countries. The paper focuses on three countries, as the context and emerging themes around young people's agency were found to be similar across the studied communities in these countries. Data were collected between July-September 2016.

The study context

Study communities in the three countries were rural and matrilineal and had subsistence agriculture as the predominant economic activity. Heterosexual relationships between people of similar age were the norm, and teenage pregnancy was prevalent, resulting in child or early marriages that were often not registered. The legal age of marriage is 18 years in Malawi and Mozambique, and 21 years in Zambia.

In Malawi, the study was conducted in Liwonde in Machinga district. Poverty levels are high: in 2016-17, 72.4% of the population in Machinga had a consumption level below the national poverty line (NSO and the World Bank 2018). The Yao, the predominant tribe in the area, are often Muslim and polygamy is common: 21.4% of married women (15-49 years) have one or more co-wives (NSO 2017). Machinga district has the highest child marriage rate in the country with the median age at first marriage being 17.5 years among women aged 20-49 years. Forty-one percent (41.1%) of young women aged 15-19 years have started childbearing. The median age of first sexual intercourse is 16 years for women (20-49 years) and 18.2 years for men (20-54 years). In 2015-16, only 4.6% of women and 13.9% of men aged 15-49 years had completed primary school (NSO 2017).

In Mozambique, the study took place in four communities, namely Km 20, Manlahipa, Meluli B and Riegue in Mogovolas district of Nampula province. In this province, 65% of the people, who mostly belong to the Makua tribe, live below the poverty line (Baez et al. 2018). Catholicism is the most common religion (45.8%) followed by Islam (26.8%) (INE 2013). The median age at first marriage is 18.1 years among women aged 20-49 years. Most marriages are monogamous. Forty-six percent (45.9%) of young women (15-19 years) have started childbearing. The median age of first sexual intercourse is 16 years for women (20-49 years) and 17 years for men (20-64 years). Five percent (4.9%) of women and 14.9% of men aged 15-49 years completed primary school in 2011 (Ministerio da Saude 2013).

In Zambia, the study was conducted in Chadiza and Petauke districts in the Eastern province. This province has a poverty rate of 70% (CSO 2016). The districts are predominantly Chewa and Nsenga, respectively. In the Eastern province, the median age at first marriage is 17.5 years among women aged 20-49 years. The majority of marriages are monogamous (CSO 2014). Forty percent (39.5%) of the women aged 15-19 years have started child-bearing (CSO 2019). The median age of first sexual

intercourse is 17.2 years for women (20-49 years) and 17.8 years for men (aged 20-59 years). Completion of primary school was 13.2% for women and 14.6% for men (aged 15-49 years) in 2013-14 (CSO 2014).

Study methods

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected in the above-mentioned study areas. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with young women and men (aged 15-24 years) and with female and male parents or caregivers. FGDs explored participants' perceptions, experiences and norms concerning gender, voice and decision-making of young people, sex and relationships, SRH information and services, teenage pregnancy, child marriage and economic empowerment. Individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) with young women and men (aged 15-24 years) as well as with a variety of community stakeholders, such as traditional and religious leaders, covered the same issues. In Malawi and Zambia, key informant interviews were also conducted with NGO staff and district-level government officials. For both FGDs and IDIs, topic guides were used. Important terms and their translations were discussed and agreed upon by the research teams in each country. Study participants were purposively sampled, and a mix of gender, age, marital status and educational attainment was aimed for (Tuckett 2004). Participant recruitment was facilitated by resource persons in the community.

This paper also presents selected findings from a two-stage cluster household survey conducted among randomly selected young people (aged 15-24 years) in the three study areas. The survey focused on a variety of topics, including SRHR, worries and aspirations, gender, marriage and pregnancy. The questionnaire was developed based on a literature review and existing instruments, after which it was adjusted to each country context. Sample size calculations for women were based on being able to detect a 10% reduction over a 5-year period in the percentage of women aged 15-24 who have had a live birth or who were pregnant with their first child, with a power of 0.8, a significance of 0.05 and a design effect of 1.5. In each country, a smaller sample of men was added, yielding a $\pm 75\%$ -25% female-male ratio. Survey respondents were randomly selected at household level, where a set number of households was visited per enumeration area. Enumeration areas were randomly selected with a probability based on size. An overview of study methods and participants is provided in [Table 1](#) with further details contained in an [online supplemental file](#).

Trained research teams collected data in the local languages, with young women being interviewed by female, and young men by male research assistants. All data collection tools were pre-tested, after which they were adjusted and finalised. Survey data were collected using tablets. Data collection took place in a private location and at a time convenient to study participants. Research teams held daily feedback sessions to discuss main findings and refine lines of enquiry.

FGDs and interviews were transcribed in English for Malawi and Zambia, and in Mozambique, summaries of the discussions were written. Transcripts and summaries were checked by members of the research teams who were not involved in transcription; in Malawi and Zambia, this included random checks against audio files.

Table 1. Methods and participants.

Method	Participants/respondents	Malawi	Mozambique	Zambia
FGDs (8 participants per group)	- Girls 15-19 years	2	2	2
	- Young women 20-24 years	2	2	2
	- Boys 15-19 years	2	2	2
	- Young men 20-24 years	2	2	2
	- Parents and caregivers	2	4	2
IDIs	- Girls 15-19 years	2	2	2
	- Young women 20-24 years	2	2	2
	- Boys 15-19 years	2	2	2
	- Young men 20-24 years	2	2	2
	- Parents and caregivers	2	4	2
	- Grandmothers/ initiators	2	0	2
	- Traditional/ religious leaders	4	9	2
	- Teachers	2	3	2
	- Health/ social workers	1	4	2
- CBO/ youth organisation staff	1	0	2	
KIs	- NGO staff	3	0	5
	- District-level government officials	4	0	3
Survey	Young women and men 15-24 years	815 (615 women, 200 men)	715 (596 women, 119 men)	708 (516 women, 192 men)

FGD: focus group discussion; IDI: in-depth interview; KI: key informant interview; CBO: community-based organisation; NGO: non-governmental organisation.

Qualitative data were coded in AtlasTi, based on existing understandings of the concept of agency. The analysis was conducted by three researchers and findings on main themes were developed into a matrix for cross-country analysis discussed by all co-authors. Narratives per theme related to young people's agency on sex, relationships and marriage, were written up and complemented with survey findings. Quantitative data were analysed in Stata 15 using demographic and behavioural data disaggregated by gender. Pearson's χ^2 test was used for significance testing; $p < 0.05$ was considered significant.

Ethical approval was granted by the KIT Royal Tropical Institute Research Ethics Committee (proposal S69), the National Health Sciences Research Committee in Malawi (approval number NHSRC #16/6/162), the Comité Institucional de Bioética para Saúde da Universidade Lúrio (ref 14/CIBSUL/16) in Mozambique, and the Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies, University of Zambia, the National Health Research Authority in Zambia. Participants provided oral or written consent. Parents' or caregivers' consent was obtained for study participants under the age of 18 years in Malawi and Mozambique, or under 16 years in Zambia.

Results

Teenage pregnancy and (child) marriage

Survey findings revealed that in study areas in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, teenage pregnancy rates (among women 20-24 years) were 63%, 78% and 46% and child marriage rates (among women 18-24 years) were 18%, 31% and 13%, respectively. Qualitative data showed that teenage pregnancy and child marriage occurred under similar circumstances and had similar consequences. Early sexual debut, low access to

Table 2. Sequence of pregnancy and marriage.*

	Malawi	Mozambique	Zambia
Pregnant before marriage among (ever) married mothers (15-24 years) % (n)			
Yes	18.5% (97)	16.7% (67)	21.1% (38)
Same year	52.9% (277)	45.5% (183)	50.0% (90)
No	28.6% (150)	37.8% (152)	28.9% (52)
Total	100% (524)	100% (402)	100% (108)
Pregnant before marriage among married teenage mothers (15-18 years) % (n)			
Yes	9.5% (4)	14.1% (17)	9.5% (2)
Same year	64.3% (27)	54.5% (66)	71.4% (15)
No	26.2% (11)	31.4% (38)	19.1% (4)
Total	100% (42)	100% (121)	100% (21)

*Figures do not present the situation in the whole countries, but in the study areas.

SRH information and services – including contraceptives, and lack of education and employment opportunities, were major contributing factors.

In all study areas, especially in Malawi and Zambia, participants in the qualitative study component said that (child) marriage was often a logical consequence of teenage pregnancy. On the statement ‘child marriage often occurs after teenage pregnancy’, 86% of the survey respondents in Malawi, 65% in Mozambique and 89.5% in Zambia answered ‘yes’. Other findings also signalled the connection between teenage pregnancy and marriage. The majority of married teenage mothers (aged 15-18 years) indicated that they either first got pregnant and then married or got pregnant and married in the same year (Table 2).

In the survey, respondents were asked whether it was their choice to become a parent (the first time). Among young women (aged 20-24 years) who had experienced a teenage pregnancy, 61.8%, 42.5% and 75.2% said ‘no’ in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, respectively. In Malawi, more young women (aged 18-24 years) who experienced a child marriage indicated that it was not their choice to get married at that time (42.9%, $n=42$), compared to 30.5% of all married young women. For Mozambique, this was 28% ($n=51$) versus 27.9% and for Zambia, 48.8% ($n=20$) versus 30.5%. Lastly, among young women (aged 18-24 years) who had experienced child marriage, 16.3% ($n=16$), 35.2% ($n=64$) and 43.9% ($n=18$) indicated they felt pressured into marriage by a person, including family members, in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, respectively.

Readiness for sex and relationships

From FGD and IDI findings from young women and men, we inferred that notions about adulthood were related to being ‘ready’ for sex and relationships, and sex and relationships were viewed as being synonymous.

In all study areas, initiation ceremonies were common. These ceremonies, held in the early teenage years, marked the transition from child to adulthood. Young people attended the ceremonies as decided by parents, according to prevailing cultural norms, but in a few cases chose to attend the ceremonies themselves – partly to conform to their peers. Attendance of initiation ceremonies was further associated with readiness for sex and marriage. Some participants indicated that young people were taught about sex and encouraged to have sex right after the ceremony – even if they

did not feel ready for that, while other participants mentioned that this practice no longer existed.

'... girls receive sexuality education during the initiation rites and after that many of them become pregnant.' (FGD, girls 15-19 years, Mozambique)

Readiness for sex and relationships was also related to growing curiosity and desire.

'This age [15 years and older] that is when young people are rebellious, and this is the age when young people want to have sex. The urge to have sex for young people starts when they reach 15 years so for most people to control themselves, it fails.' (IDI, boy 17 years, Zambia)

Mention was made of 'love' in Malawi and Zambia, in line with the idea that sex, love and relationships were the same. Having peers who had experience with sex led some young people to initiate sexual relationships. In all study areas, adult and young participants complained that young people engaged in sex because of 'bad behaviour' by others: some religious leaders were reported to have sexual relationships with other men's wives, and teachers with schoolgirls.

Narratives from both young people and adults revealed that young people's wish for the transition to adulthood and thus readiness for sex and relationships was associated with lack of opportunities in education and employment in rural areas – or 'not having anything to do', as one 23-year-old young man in Zambia put it. This was apparent in all study areas, and confirmed by quantitative findings. Young people worried most about education/completing studies (41%, 46% and 61.9% in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia respectively) and getting a job/working/prospering (48%, 41.3% and 34% in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia respectively). Some young people talked of 'being stuck' when it came to opportunities for education and employment and therefore, quite actively, chose to start sex, relationships and in some cases marriage, as they felt there was no alternative.

'Because this is a remote area and people are uneducated, when they get married they feel like they have done something big and productive.' (IDI, young man 22 years, Malawi)

Autonomy in partner choice

While notions about adulthood encouraged young people to initiate sexual relationships, their decisions were also influenced by the cultural, social and economic context. While survey findings showed that many young people – both young women and young men – felt that they had autonomy and choice when deciding on future partnership, respondents from Mozambique expressed less autonomy and choice (Figure 1).

Unprotected sex in a context where youth sexuality is taboo

While information on SRHR was available mainly from health facilities and schools, many young people, in all three areas, had limited access to comprehensive information. Intergenerational communication (between young people and parents, but also between young people and health workers) on these topics was limited because it was considered disrespectful, and it was clear that youth sexuality was a taboo issue.

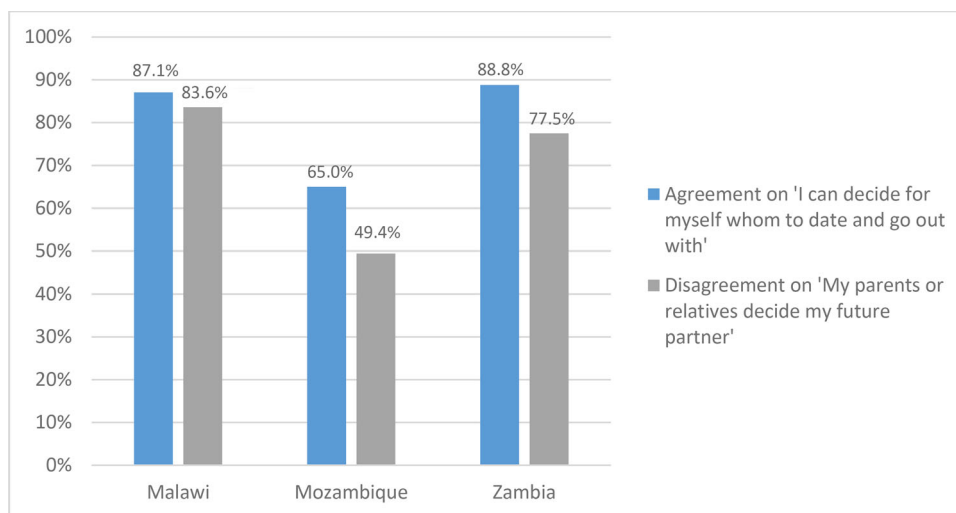


Figure 1. Young people's perceived autonomy in choice while dating and deciding on a future partner.

In Malawi, 43.4% of female survey respondents and 70% of male respondents indicated that they found it difficult to talk to their parents or caregivers about sexuality and marriage. In Mozambique, these figures were 70.7% and 64.7%, and in Zambia 52.7% and 70.3%, for female and male respondents respectively. In each study area, the differences between young women and young men were significant. Sexual matters were said to be discussed among young people themselves or sometimes with adults of the same sex (girls talked with mothers, grandmothers or aunts, boys with grandfathers or uncles), and there seemed to be limited communication about sex within couples.

'... Grandpa tells me a lot on not making a mistake of sleeping with a girl, because I can make her pregnant. He tells me to concentrate at school and marry after I finish my college... My father cannot share with me such things of sleeping with a girl because it's a taboo.' (IDI, boy 17 years, Zambia)

Information provided focussed on abstinence (also known as 'not misbehaving', as described by a 20-year-old young man in Malawi) in all study areas. However, in Malawi and Mozambique, young women were particularly advised to avoid sex outside marriage, while young men were 'allowed' to have a sexual partner before marriage, because 'abstinence is not possible'.

In Mozambique, young participants pointed to the low popularity of condoms. This was further illustrated by survey results (Figure 2), where confidence to insist on condom use was lowest in the Mozambique study area, and across all study areas, significantly lower for women than for men.

Unprotected sex in a constrained economic context

Transactional sex – sex exchanged for material support and other benefits – was prevalent in all study areas and reported to be related to the inability of parents to

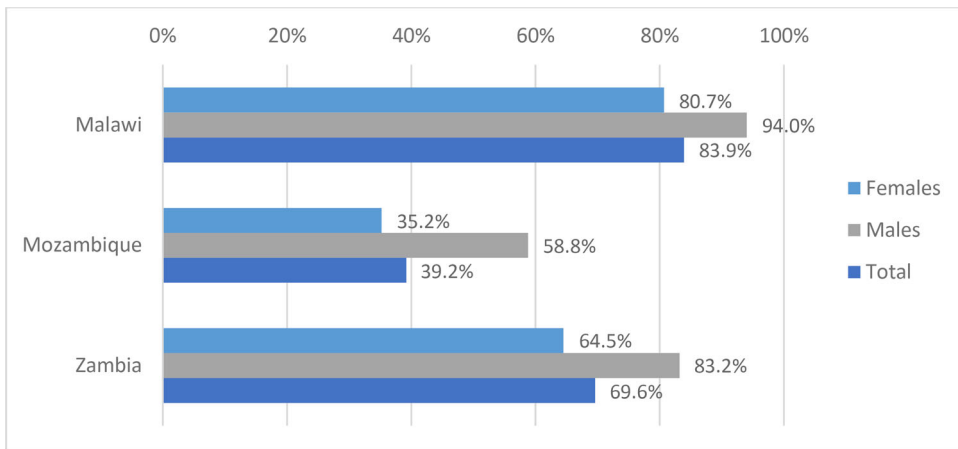


Figure 2. Agreement with 'I feel confident that I can insist on condom use every time I have sex'.

provide for daughters' school necessities, or to young women's desire for certain goods such as lotions or nice clothes. In these cases, girls exercised their agency to initiate sexual relationships to fulfil their needs and wants.

'There is no future for the girls, the girls believe that a man will provide them with money and if you talk to them, they say "brother are you going to sleep with me? Can you give me money?"' (FDG, young men 20-24 years, Malawi)

In Malawi, some parents encouraged their daughters to 'marry Johannesburg', or have a sexual relationship with a man who worked in South Africa and had the potential to send the girlfriend or wife money for upkeep.

Teenage pregnancy resulting in marriage

As a consequence of the above, teenage pregnancies were prevalent. While the option of (an illegal) abortion was mentioned by a few study participants in Malawi and Zambia, teenage pregnancy often resulted in marriage – whether officially registered or not; mostly with the young man who had made the girl pregnant, but if not, with any man who proposed (Malawi). In most of these cases, the decision to marry was made by the maternal uncle, backed by the parents and accepted by the young people concerned. In a few cases, young people were reported being forced to marry – to avoid harsh treatment, or even isolation, from parents.

'I know a girl who was thrown out of the house because of having become pregnant and because of having dropped out of school. Her father left her in the house of the man who had made her pregnant.' (FGD, young women 20-24 years, Mozambique)

The main reasons for marriage were mitigating further shame faced by the pregnant girl and her parents, as well as reducing the financial burden on the girl's family (by making the young man and his family financially responsible). The taboo on girls' sexuality caused parents or caregivers, in particular mothers, to be blamed for a

teenage pregnancy. As one informant in Malawi put it, 'You were smiling or letting that girl to be naughty'.

The value of marriage

While teenage pregnancy was found to be a key driver of marriage, other reasons to marry were also mentioned. Economic hardship directly influenced decisions to marry, in particular for young women. As education was not believed to lead to prosperity, especially for girls, marriage was seen as a good option by parents in all study areas. Gender norms contributed to this as, within marriage, no money was expected from women, while men were expected to financially provide for the family. In Malawi, young men in an FGD (15-19 years) indicated that a young woman could initiate divorce if the husband was not able to provide for her. Findings from the survey showed that 92% of the respondents in Malawi, 77.3% in Mozambique and 95.8% in Zambia agreed that men should be heads of the household, with 82.3% in Malawi, 79.4% in Mozambique and 79.4% in Zambia agreeing that a wife should be subservient to her husband.

The cultural custom of receiving a bride price played a minor role in decisions on marriage in Mozambique and Zambia, while in Malawi participants made no mention of bride price as a factor contributing to marriage choice. Instead narratives revealed cases of girls choosing to marry to relieve their families of the financial burden of still being part of the family.

'I lost my father, when he died, I wanted to marry, I thought that I could then perhaps help my mother.' (FDG, young women 20-24 years, Mozambique)

In all study areas, there were some reports of young people deciding themselves, against parental advice, to marry. In Malawi, a few study participants talked about girls who deliberately became pregnant to force their parents to agree to their marrying a particular young man.

'Sometime two people are in a relationship and the girl really wants to get married but the parents refuse. She continues the relationship until she gets pregnant and the parents just give up.' (IDI, young man 22 years, Malawi)

Marriage was said to increase respect for a young person. For example, once married, one could attend community meetings. In Mozambique, a few young people also explained that marriage was a better option than staying with stepparents. In Malawi and Mozambique, male FGD participants said marriage ensured that young men had a sexual partner. In Zambia, an 18-year-old young woman saw marriage as a safeguard against STIs.

'Instead of me being reckless and end up contracting diseases, I would be better off getting married.' (IDI, young women 18 years, Zambia)

Discussion

Overall, results suggest that young people in rural Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia showed agency, particularly in relation to sex and relationships and to a lesser extent marriage and were thus not 'dragged into adulthood'. In fact, many respondents actively aspired to adulthood through agentic actions, albeit constrained by unequal power

relationships between women and men, other socio-cultural factors and structural inequalities related to the socio-economic context. This finding is in line with those from studies in different settings in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bell 2012; Bhana 2015; Heslop and Banda 2013; Luke 2003; Petroni et al. 2017; Schaffnit, Urassa, and Lawson 2019).

Young people's and adults' notions about adulthood were related to readiness for sex and relationships. The transition from child to adulthood was supported by initiation ceremonies (Nash et al. 2019; Frederico, Arnaldo, and Maúngue 2017). Some young people reported that curiosity or desire made them start sex and relationships. Others used sex to obtain material goods and benefits, partly following peers doing the same. Although the choice to become sexually active was influenced by these contextual factors, most young people in all study areas exercised agency in beginning dating and choosing a sexual partner, as has been found in other Sub-Saharan African settings as well (Petroni et al. 2017).

Young people received limited or hard to understand SRHR information and had constrained access to SRH services (Self et al. 2018; Zulu et al. 2019; Frederico, Arnaldo, and Maúngue 2017). Consequently, many had unprotected sexual relationships. When this led to teenage pregnancy, marriage often followed to avoid social stigma and re-direct financial responsibility to the future father or his family, as reported elsewhere (Petroni et al. 2017; Schaffnit, Urassa, and Lawson 2019).

Study findings signal a tension between the transition to adulthood and thereby starting sex and relationships, and the simultaneous taboo on youth sexuality. This taboo was reflected in limited intergenerational communication about SRHR, as reflected in the findings from a systematic review of child-parent communication about sexuality and HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bastien, Kajula, and Muhwezi 2011). Lehr (2008) argues that the idea that young people cannot be sexual agents is rooted in understandings of adolescence being a 'stage of becoming', that justifies the exercise of power by parents and public officials such as teachers, and leads to the denial of support to exercise agency.

Similar to our findings, Heslop and Banda (2013) in a study in Chipata, Eastern Zambia, concluded that initiation ceremonies taught girls to become sexualised, while at the same time female virginity was prized, creating a conflicting message for young people. Other studies have discussed this sexual double standard, with young men being allowed to engage in sex before marriage while women are censured for it, risking reputational damage (Crawford and Popp 2003) and encouraging early marriage.

While this study did not focus on socio-political factors, findings point towards poverty and weak public services resulting in thin agency of young people in relation to sex, relationships and marriage. Transactional sex was common in all study areas, in line with findings from previous studies in the three countries (Goes-Green 2013; Heslop and Banda 2013; Poulin 2007; Swidler and Watkins 2007). Household insecurity and parental influence led young women to engage in sexual relationships with men who could provide in line with the 'sex for basic needs' paradigm (Stoebenau et al. 2016). However, 'sex for improved social status' also took place. Here, transactional sex was not the result of desperation, but more the pressure to access consumer goods possessed by peers (Stoebenau et al. 2016). Both paradigms portray different levels of young women's agency and stress 'provider masculinity', where adulthood for males is connected with financial capacity (Stoebenau et al. 2016).

Literature from Sub-Saharan Africa also points towards a change in young women's agency over time. While thick agency may be observed at the initiation of sexual relationships, there is an apparent reduction in agency subsequently (Luke 2003). Moreover, while young women may exercise agency in choosing (affluent) sexual partners, they have less power to negotiate condom use within these relationships than young men. Such a situation was reported in a study from Zambia, where women's difficulties in negotiating condom use were related to fear for rejection, abandonment or infidelity (Ngoma, Roos, and Siziya 2016), and in a study from Mozambique, which pointed to the fear of losing financial support (Machel 2001).

Our study findings show that while marriage was often a consequence of teenage pregnancy, some young people also chose to marry themselves. Bertrand-Dansereau and Clark (2016), in a study on marriage and early divorce in Malawi, state that 'impulsive marriage', which is neither traditional (facilitated by kin) nor modern (based on affective ties between the couple), is on the rise. They relate impulsive marriage to the social pressure on young women to marry early, the idea that finishing secondary school will not improve women's employment opportunities, and the relative wealth of the man making him a potentially good provider. The latter socio-economic factors, together with gaining respect, were reasons for 'impulsive marriage' among young women in our study.

In conclusion, it is important to recognise that agency is not static and easily measurable. This study was embedded in a broader baseline study for a programme on the prevention of teenage pregnancy and child marriage. Although our study did not only focus on 'problems', we recognise that further detail could have been obtained on young people's circumstances, feelings, thoughts and decisions around sex and relationships. In addition, qualitative data collection proved less rigorous in Mozambique than in other countries. Despite this, similarities between the three country contexts were found, in line with findings from other research.

Understanding young people's, in particular young women's, agency in relation to sex, relationships and marriage is important for shaping local programmes which focus on the link between teenage pregnancy and child or early marriage. Programmes clearly require multiple, complementary components in recognition of the variety of individual and contextual factors influencing young people's agency, while acknowledging that young people have the capacity to negotiate sex, sexuality and relationships within the context they live in.

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Data availability statement

The dataset used and analysed is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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