

# **YOUNG AND MARRIED**

Understanding the experiences and needs of adolescent girls and young women in Bangladesh, Mauritania, Nepal, and Tanzania

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Caption: Sumaiya, 17, a student of Grade 11, was about to stop education just before her secondary school examination. Her family members arranged her marriage though she was only 16. But she was able to stop it with the bold action of the Adolescent Club where she is also a member.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, World Vision launched the 'Listening to Child Brides' research, carried out in Bangladesh, Mauritania, Nepal, and Tanzania, with the overarching aim of identifying the experiences and needs of married girls and young women.

The concept of girls' agency — 'the ability to define one's goals and act on them'<sup>1</sup> — is increasingly important in understanding child marriage, from how marriages are entered, to how married girls and young women experience their marriages. Narratives surrounding child marriage often reinforce the idea that girls entering or in these marriages do not have full agency, and legal constructs that differentiate childhood from adulthood reinforce this idea.<sup>2</sup> However, recent studies have highlighted considerable variation in girls and young women's levels of agency, and **understanding the complexities around how girls and young women exercise their power within or outside marriage is essential to better understand how to support girls and young women.**<sup>3</sup>

This report aims to do just that, and to **more fully recognise the experiences and needs of girls and young women who are already married.** By better understanding girls' agency and experiences, policymakers and programme implementers can craft creative ways to ensure that unmarried girls and young women are able to achieve their aims through alternatives to marriage, as well as better support already married girls and young women.<sup>4</sup> **It is only by truly listening to girls that we will be able to support both married and unmarried girls and help protect their educations and childhoods.** The findings of this study paint a picture of girls struggling with a high risk of violence and negative traditional gender roles while attempting to find a better situation for themselves.

This study found that married girls feel more recognised and empowered than their unmarried peers; however, while they gained the ability to decide some things for themselves, they lost power in other areas. To the extent that empowerment is measurable, **married girls were 70% more likely to have a higher empowerment score.**<sup>5</sup> **This was driven, at least in part, because they felt they had the freedom to decide whether they wanted to use sexual and reproductive health**

**and antenatal services — care which can often be out of reach of unmarried girls. Married girls were also 25% less likely to experience physical violence.** Marriage seems to provide some measure of protection from physical violence, especially outside the home; however, this did not mean they are safer overall.

Unfortunately, despite less physical violence and an increased sense of empowerment, **married women and girls were more than five times more likely to experience sexual violence. In Tanzania, almost 30% married girls said they had been forced to have sex more than once in the past 12 months.**<sup>6</sup> Whether girls felt empowered or not did not make much difference in terms of sexual violence: among both married and unmarried girls, **higher levels of empowerment were only associated with a modest decrease in risk of sexual violence.**

Although they had better access to health care, in every country, **married girls and young women felt they had less choice over whether they could go to school or work outside the home.** In Bangladesh, where the vast majority of unmarried girls are in school, once married, less than a third continued; girls and young women were 55% less likely to feel like they could continue to get an education. **After marriage in Tanzania, girls suddenly felt like their freedom to work was reduced by half.**<sup>7</sup> In every country besides Tanzania, at least half of married girls were in school up until their marriage, but they frequently left school afterwards.<sup>8</sup> Only in Mauritania did more than 60% of girls who were in school when they got married manage to continue their educations afterwards.

In general, it was not surprising to see that girls with higher empowerment scores, who were also more likely to be married and older, were 30% more likely to have good health. A pregnant unmarried girl faces stigma, and therefore will often forego medical support, but married girls at these ages are more likely to go to a health service. However, the findings also seem to show that married girls are facing greater psychosocial pressures: **married girls and young women were 17% more likely to report feeling sad or worthless,**<sup>9</sup> **and a higher empowerment score was associated with a 32% increase in the odds of feeling sad or worthless.** Similarly, girls who worked outside the home were 27% more

likely to say they felt sad or worthless. One possible explanation for this is if women and girls' employment and empowerment are undervalued or considered to be at odds with the norm in their communities, their increased visibility may cause backlash and isolation, leading to increased risk of disappointment, discouragement, and anxiety.

Despite some overall trends, the research also highlighted interesting differences between married and unmarried girls across the four countries. Different sets of opportunities and cultural norms led to different experiences and marriages, depending on where girls are living:

- The proportion of married girls and young women who had no say in the decision to marry was higher the younger their age at first marriage and in Bangladesh and Nepal (41% and 47%,

respectively), where parents frequently made the decision for their daughters to marry.

- In Mauritania, girls and young women frequently had 'little control' over these decisions, while in Tanzania, married and unmarried girls and young women reported the highest levels of autonomy over choosing when and whom to marry.
- In Mauritania married girls had more agency over their lives in general, despite the fact that on average they were married to men up to 29 years older. They were also economically better off; married girls in Mauritania were more likely to be wealthier, and less likely to experience hunger than their unmarried peers.
- In Mauritania and Tanzania, unmarried girls and young women were unemployed more often than married women, but in Bangladesh this was more often true for married versus unmarried women.



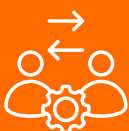
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## Recommendations for policy and programming



### Different interventions are needed in different contexts

The differences between contexts reveal the absolute necessity of understanding girls' experiences when trying to create and fund programmes to help them live full, safe childhoods with access to everything they are promised in UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. For example, girls in Tanzania experienced some of the highest levels of decision-making and agency, but some of the decisions they make are ones we would typically consider to be negative, such as dropping out of school or getting married. The data from Tanzania suggests that improving the quality of education, so girls see it as a viable route to future opportunities, would be a key way to reduce child marriages there. However, in countries like Nepal and Bangladesh, actors should work to change harmful social norms so that girls can overcome societal and parental pressure and achieve the education and jobs they say they want instead of dropping out after becoming brides.



### Interventions should be tailored to the age of married girls

Girls who marry at the youngest ages are the most vulnerable, and interventions should be different depending on girls' ages. The research highlights the divergent experiences of girls who marry at very young ages, and those who marry in late adolescence when it comes to access to education, health services and their experiences of violence. In Nepal and Bangladesh, girls who made it to age 18 without getting married tended to be wealthier, but wealth didn't seem to offer any protection from marriage for younger age groups. Younger girls are generally less likely to have made the decision to marry themselves. This calls for stronger interventions to empower girls with information, skills and support networks to prevent child marriage, as well as support their civic and political capacity, knowledge and skills.



### End stigma and negative social norms, and increase mental health support

Other points were consistent across different contexts. Despite contextual differences, harmful gender norms continue to be one common factor shaping girls' opportunities, acceptable behaviours, and choices. Governments and development organisations should invest in social and behavioural change interventions and approaches to tackle existing harmful gender norms that steer girls' choices toward child marriage. Reducing the stigma around access to sexual reproductive and antenatal health care would greatly benefit both married and unmarried girls and young women. There is also a clear need for mental and psychosocial support to help girls cope with challenges.



### Increase violence prevention and response interventions

This research confirmed some of the linkages between child marriage and sexual violence, but also shed new light on married and unmarried girls' exposure to physical violence. Violence-prevention programmes must be strengthened by working with parents, teachers and school authorities to eliminate corporal punishment and teach young men that positive sexual relationships are built on consent. Furthermore, these strategies should be combined with interventions to reduce stigma and other social norms-driven barriers to accessing protection services for survivors of violence.



### Questions for future research

In some places, the research raises additional questions and highlights areas that require further study. For example, what factors shape the child marriage decision-making process for girls and their families? How are concepts of empowerment and agency shaped by social norms and constructs in a given context? Do we fully understand the relationship between employment and the sense of worth and empowerment it brings to girls? It may be that the types of jobs available, the work environment, or even the need to juggle multiple responsibilities may be driving the correlations with increased feelings of sadness and low self-worth.

# 1. BACKGROUND

Child marriage,<sup>10</sup> defined as a formal or informal union where at least one of the parties is under the age of 18, disproportionately affects girls.<sup>11</sup> Worldwide, one in five girls is married before age 18,<sup>12</sup> and one in three girls in low- to middle-income countries is married before age 15.<sup>13</sup> The practice of child marriage is correlated with a higher risk of experiencing violence, lower educational attainment, gender inequality, and worse health and well-being for girls and their children.<sup>14</sup> Prior studies have demonstrated clear links between marrying under 18 and poor health, experiences of violence, and low education.

Around the world, World Vision and our partners are working to delay and eliminate child marriage, guided by the assumption that delaying marriages will improve the lives of adolescent girls and young women. Traditionally, these prevention efforts prioritise criminalization of marriage under 18 years and programmes to promote girls' education and empowerment;<sup>15</sup> other programmes also focus on changing social norms in the community and improving the economic situation for girls and their families so they have more choices.<sup>16</sup>

However, there is increasing evidence<sup>17</sup> that we need to better understand the motivations for and complexities and variation in girls and young women's experiences of marriage. Qualitative research has highlighted that marrying early is often a rational response to constrained choices and the best available option for girls and young women.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of girls' agency — 'the ability to define one's goals and act on them'<sup>19</sup>— is increasingly important in understanding child marriage, from how marriages are entered, to how married girls and young women experience their marriages. Narratives surrounding child marriage often reinforce the idea that girls entering or in these marriages do not have full agency, and legal constructs that differentiate childhood from adulthood reinforce this idea.<sup>20</sup> However, recent studies have highlighted considerable variation in girls and young women's levels of agency, and **understanding the complexities around how girls and young women exercise their power within or outside marriage is essential in order to better understand how to support girls and young women.**<sup>21</sup>

This report aims to do just that, and to more fully **recognise the experiences and needs of girls and young women who are already married.** By better understanding girls' agency and experiences, policymakers and programme implementers can craft creative ways to ensure that unmarried girls and young women are able to achieve their aims through alternatives to marriage, as well as better support already married girls and young women to achieve their dreams.<sup>22</sup> It is only by truly listening to girls that we will be able to support both married and unmarried girls and help protect their educations and childhoods.



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## 2. RESEARCH AIM, OBJECTIVES, AND QUESTIONS

This research aims to identify the experiences and needs of married girls and young women. Between 2021 and 2023, a team of researchers developed and collected data for a multi-country research project in Tanzania, Mauritania, Nepal, and Bangladesh.<sup>23</sup> This study used a cross-sectional convergent mixed-method design with two main components: a survey of 9,469 married and unmarried girls and young women aged 12 to 24 years,<sup>24</sup> and focus group discussions with married and unmarried girls and young women between 16 and 18 years old.<sup>25</sup>

The research had four objectives:<sup>26</sup>

1. Describe the marriage process, including its context, for adolescent girls and young women
2. Identify key challenges married and unmarried girls and young women face in access to education, health services, and support for those experiencing violence. Identify viable opportunities to overcome these challenges
3. Compare well-being outcomes for married girls and young women — physical and mental health, education, access to protection services, and agency — considering age at marriage and context of marriage
4. Compare the same well-being outcomes among married and unmarried girls and young women.

Underlying all of these objectives was the notion of agency, to help us better understand how girls and young women enter and experience their marriages, and to identify trends around their access and use of different support services. Agency is generally understood as the capacity of individuals to make choices, and to define one's own goals and act on them within a given sociocultural context. Legally,

all people who enter marriages under age 18 are presumed to do so without agency, but the reality is more complicated.

The quantitative results highlight the links between different attributes of girls and young women and how being married may affect their well-being, and the qualitative findings illustrate the mechanisms at play. However, since we did not speak with the girls over an extended period of time, the study cannot definitively determine causal relationships. It's also important to note that the 'feeling sad or worthless' measure cannot be taken to reflect psychological distress, anxiety, or depression.

Another key element to bear in mind is that there are two distinct ages at play. There is the age of the girls and young women at the time of the interview, and, in addition for married girls and young women, we have their age when they first married. Both age at first marriage and current age are used in this report depending on the focus of the analysis. For unmarried girls and young women, our analyses only reflect their current age. The distinction between these ages is clearly called out in the narrative and in figure titles.

A multivariate modelling approach was used to elucidate the magnitude of the association between marital status, age, empowerment score, and both health- and violence-related outcomes. Importantly, all models reported below included the four countries, and in many, there were significant differences between countries, which was not the focus of this analysis.<sup>27</sup> Ideally, these models would also have included a measure for school attendance or grade level achieved; however, this information was not consistently available for both unmarried and married girls and young women in all countries.

Altogether, given the existing breadth and depth of information, this study offers helpful guidance on how to support girls and young women more effectively both within and outside marriage.

## Case study: Fatimatah, Mauritania



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Fatimatah grew up in one of the poorest suburbs of Noukachott, the capital of Mauritania, and was just 12 years old when she got married. Her father's friend had taken an interest in her, and even though she argued against it, her father decided she should marry.

"I was in my second year of college," Fatimatah remembers sadly. "They didn't let me finish school. I really didn't want it. I wanted to finish my studies, but they forced me into this."

In Mauritania, approximately 37% of girls are married before the age of 18, and 18% are married before their fifteenth birthday, even though the minimum legal age of marriage is 18 years with no exceptions. Zeynabou Cheikh works for a local organization in Noukachott that World Vision has partnered with, and sees many families like Fatimatah's who marry their girls off early.

"Parents here don't work or can't earn a lot of money. When someone comes, they 'give' their daughter without hesitation, because they want to decrease the number of mouths to nourish in the family."

"What makes some parents in the community marry our daughters? Poverty, plain and simple. We wish our daughters to complete their studies, to become valuable in the society, but we do not have the means to help them do that in this neighbourhood."

"There are still people who ignore the advice against child marriage. Their argument? 'How will you help me get food for her? Dress her? Educate her?'"

Although many parents may see marriage as a way to increase girls' economic prospects, once married, girls feel stuck and are left facing a new range of challenges. Fatimatah had her first child when she was still a child herself, at just 15. "My first months of marriage were very stormy. I regularly ran away from my marital home, but after I had my first child, what else could I do but stay still?"

Today Fatimatah works selling donuts on the road side, trying to earn enough to support her four children. Sometimes she trades her sweets for flour to cook at home, and other times she manages to make back her money plus a small profit, but daily life is a struggle to make ends meet.

"You know that someone who has children, in my conditions, cannot save," Fatimatah explains. For now her focus is on trying to provide for her children, but she dreams of being able to go back to school and maybe train as a professional party chef one day.

*Child marriage is cutting girls' educations short, forcing them to become mothers while children themselves, and exposing them to sexual violence. However their experiences are not uniform, and this research highlights the differences between age groups and countries, as well as the similarities.*

# 3. FINDINGS

## 3.1. Key differences between married and unmarried girls in the same age group

This study defined key well-being outcomes as violence (any interpersonal violence, sexual violence, physical violence), health (overall health, feeling sad or worthless), and service access (protection from violence and family planning). This chart (Table

3.1.1)<sup>28</sup> shows how different well-being outcomes correlate with child marriage. **Overall, married girls of the same age as their peers are likely to be more empowered, experience less physical violence, and more sexual violence**, although there are wide differences between countries and ages. Mauritania was the only country where girls had a significantly higher likelihood of having felt sad or worthless in the past four weeks if they were married.

**Table 3.1.1: Predicted outcomes disaggregated by unmarried versus married girls and young women within each age group**

	Age group	Bangladesh			Mauritania			Nepal			Tanzania		
		Unmarried	Married	Variance	Unmarried	Married	Variance	Unmarried	Married	Variance	Unmarried	Married	Variance
	12-14	1.10	1.51	40.8%	1.05	1.44	39.2%	1.07	NE	-	1.35	1.33	-
	15-17	1.16	1.44	27.6%	1.08	1.49	40.8%	1.11	1.30	19.1%	1.34	1.43	8.9%
	18-24	1.24	1.51	26.8%	1.18	1.50	31.9%	1.14	1.47	33.0%	1.43	1.43	-
	12-14	0.26	0.02	-23.4%	0.27	0.02	24.7%	1.13	NE	-	0.43	0.12	-30.7%
	15-17	0.16	0.09	-6.9%	0.23	0.08	15.2%	0.08	0.08	-	0.30	0.18	-12.0%
	18-24	0.12	0.18	6.3%	0.14	0.15	-	0.07	0.13	6.2%	0.12	0.24	12.2%
	12-14	0.00	0.03	-	0.04	0.01	-	0.00	NE	-	0.04	0.32	27.5%
	15-17	0.01	0.06	-	0.06	0.03	-	0.00	0.08	-	0.05	0.21	16.0%
	18-24	0.00	0.11	11.1%	0.03	0.09	6.1%	0.00	0.10	-	0.04	0.30	25.7%
	12-14	0.11	0.11	-	0.18	0.13	-	0.02	NE	-	0.15	0.08	-
	15-17	0.17	0.13	-	0.17	0.24	-	0.06	0.04	-	0.13	0.15	-
	18-24	0.17	0.26	9.7%	0.23	0.21	-	0.10	0.08	-	0.16	0.16	-
	12-14	0.23	0.21	-	0.14	0.25	11.3%	0.05	NE	-	0.10	0.04	-
	15-17	0.24	0.24	-	0.13	0.32	19.4%	0.06	0.04	-	0.10	0.12	-
	18-24	0.38	0.38	-	0.17	0.35	17.7%	0.11	0.09	-	0.11	0.13	-

## Case study: Chadani, Nepal

In Nepal, approximately 33% of girls are married before their 18th birthday and 8% are married before the age of 15.<sup>29</sup> Chadani, 18, was one of them.

When she was 14, her parents arranged her marriage. 'We were a family of eight, and it was difficult to manage daily needs at home. When my mother informed me about my marriage, I felt very bad. All my friends of similar age were playing happily whereas I was going to get married.'

Girls in Chadani's community are very restricted and do not have much agency. 'In our society,' she explains, 'girls do not have the freedom to speak. They say that girls are someone else's property, and they are not allowed to have opinions.'

They are also rarely in school. Chadani herself has never been to school, even before her marriage. 'People do not want to educate their daughters; they only send

their sons to school. I haven't even seen a school up close; I don't even know what a copy or a pencil feels like. When I was child, I dreamt of studying and becoming a successful person, but my dream never came true.'

Chadani hoped that at least after the marriage she might get a bit more freedom at her husband's house — to be able to wear the clothes she wanted or maybe even to go to school. However, her hopes were quickly dashed.

'My husband does not earn enough and I have not been able to eat nutritious food. I cannot even go to the hospital for the check-up. After marriage my life has changed for worse.'

Unlike in other countries in the study, married girls in Nepal are more likely to experience physical violence than their unmarried peers. 'My in-laws used to beat me because I was just a child,' Chadani adds.

'I have a 3-year-old son and currently I am six months pregnant. I do not want my children to suffer like I did. I will not allow my children to be married before 18. I want to raise them to be good citizens; I wish to provide my children with good education. I have a dream they can be a doctor or an engineer in the future, but currently, even managing food is a problem because we don't have enough money.'

A weak education system, harmful traditional beliefs, and malnutrition all help push girls and their families in Nepal into child marriage, even though under the Marriage Registration Act, the minimum legal age of marriage in Nepal is 20 years for girls and boys. World Vision is working in Chadani's community and many others to end the practice by collaborating with local bodies and provincial governments to develop strategies to tackle the problem, and working to empower young people both before and after they are married. We are also collaborating with faith leaders and religious networks like NIRN (National Inter-Religious Network) Nepal to connect with the religious leaders from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian backgrounds, raising awareness of the Nepalese law and strictures from their own faith against child marriage.



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### 3.2. What girls’ lives are like

Around the world, girls are subject to traditional gender norms that leave them more likely to experience child marriage, social isolation, and sexual abuse, and less likely to complete school or work outside the home than their male peers. This cost to girls’ futures is also often passed on to the next generation — children born to women who married young have fewer opportunities and are more likely to be malnourished. It is critical, both for girls today and for their future children, that we break these cycles of poverty and subjugation.

However, there is increasing evidence that in the face of constrained choices and limited opportunities,

marriage is sometimes the best of a bad lot for girls and their families. Factors like whether or not a girl can pursue an education, have the possibility of a well-paid job, or potentially never marry unless she does so early, all contribute to push her and her parents to a decision where child marriage is the seemingly best option.<sup>30</sup>

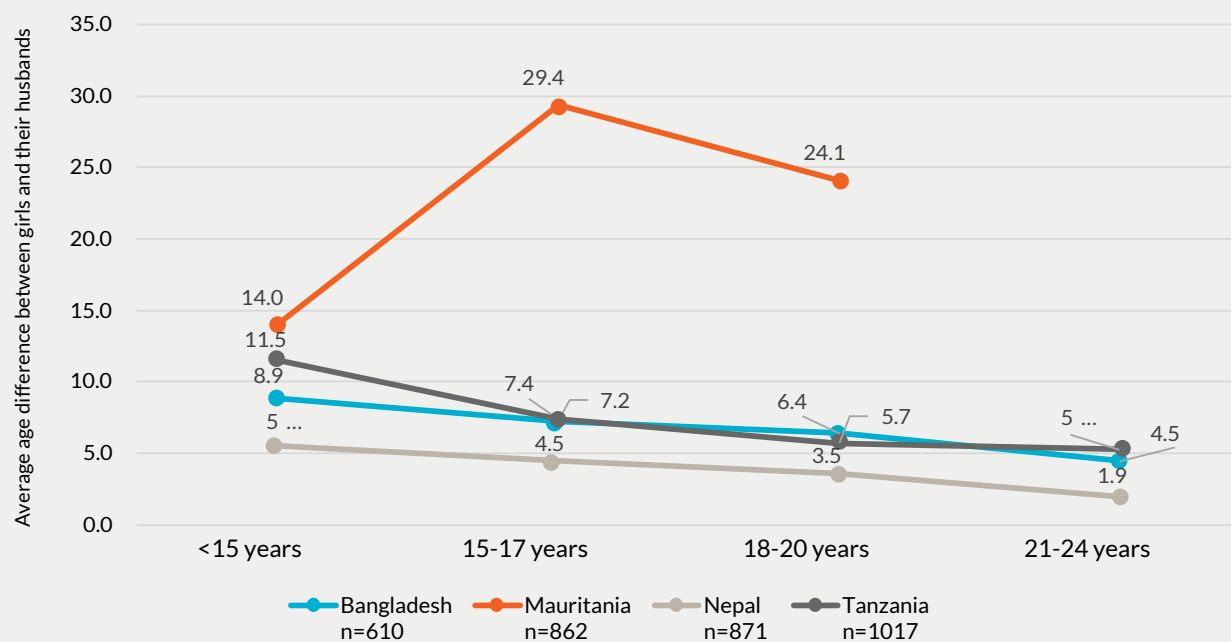
This section explores the contexts that girls and young women are living in today in Bangladesh, Mauritania, Nepal, and Tanzania. We examine their ability to go to school and work both pre and post marriage, their access to health care, and their experiences of violence. They also describe their hopes and dreams for the future — and sadly reveal large gaps between what they wish to achieve and what they think will actually be possible given their constrained opportunities and contexts.

#### Child marriage in the research countries

This research spoke to equal numbers of married and unmarried girls, in countries with child marriage rates ranging between 19% and 33%.<sup>31</sup> Divorce was uncommon in all countries, and widowhood was extremely rare, unsurprising given the young age of the girls and women interviewed. In Mauritania and Tanzania, more than 15% marriages had ended due to divorce or widowhood.

In most countries, the younger a girl had been married, the greater the age gap between her and her husband. The only outlier was in Mauritania, where girls who married before age 15 were on average 14 years younger than their husbands. This age gap was even larger for older teens and young women (29 and 24 years respectively).

**Figure 3.2.1: Average gap between girls and young women and her husband’s age by age at first marriage**



NOTE: For ease of interpretation, data points are labelled. Data for the oldest age group in Mauritania was omitted due to sparse data (n=14). For each country except Mauritania, the trend across age at first marriage groups is statistically significant at the p<0.001 level.

Please see supplemental data in Appendix C for more demographic information.

## Opportunities: The tension between work, education, and marriage

Education is tied to many traits that we think of as important for girls — the longer a girl stays in school, the later she marries, the more likely she has the agency to advocate for herself and her children, and the healthier she is likely to be.<sup>32</sup> However, these correlations mask a multitude of reasons girls may or may not be in school and fail to consider contextual differences, even between countries of similar levels of economic development.

Unsurprisingly, our research found that, overall, married girls and young women had lower levels of education than their peers. Except in Mauritania, **unmarried girls and young women were much more likely to be in school than their married peers, sometimes by a 10-fold difference.**<sup>33</sup>

In addition, when we compared married to unmarried girls of the same age group, **the married girls were less likely to have been in school, even before their marriages, hinting at underlying differences in the demographics** of the two groups, although the data doesn't give us the full story. In Bangladesh and Mauritania, girls in school were less likely to be in the lowest wealth quintile. It's possible that married girls were from the more economically vulnerable families in their communities, and so some had to drop out before their marriage, while other families may have struggled to make ends meet and keep girls in school, but the economic struggles provided an impetus for the marriage itself. Nepal had an especially large gap in enrolment for unmarried girls and young women (83% across all ages) and married girls (just 54% prior to marriage); girls who weren't in school in Nepal were also consistently more likely to consider themselves 'a little less wealthy', and less likely to think of themselves as 'a little wealthier' than their peers in school. However, the economic differences are slight and the gap between married and unmarried girls in school in Nepal may


also be due to access or traditional gender norms that prioritise boys' educations over girls.<sup>34</sup>

Notwithstanding the difference pre marriage, in Bangladesh, Mauritania, and Nepal, most married girls who weren't in school cited marriage as the reason they ended their schooling. In Bangladesh, almost three-fourths of girls attended school prior to getting married (74%), but in both Bangladesh and Nepal, 84% of married girls ended school because of marriage (Table 3.2.1). In Mauritania, although marriage was the most common reason for married girls to have left school, it was also common for girls to continue (64%), complete their desired grade (10%), or just decide for themselves they didn't want to go anymore (29%).

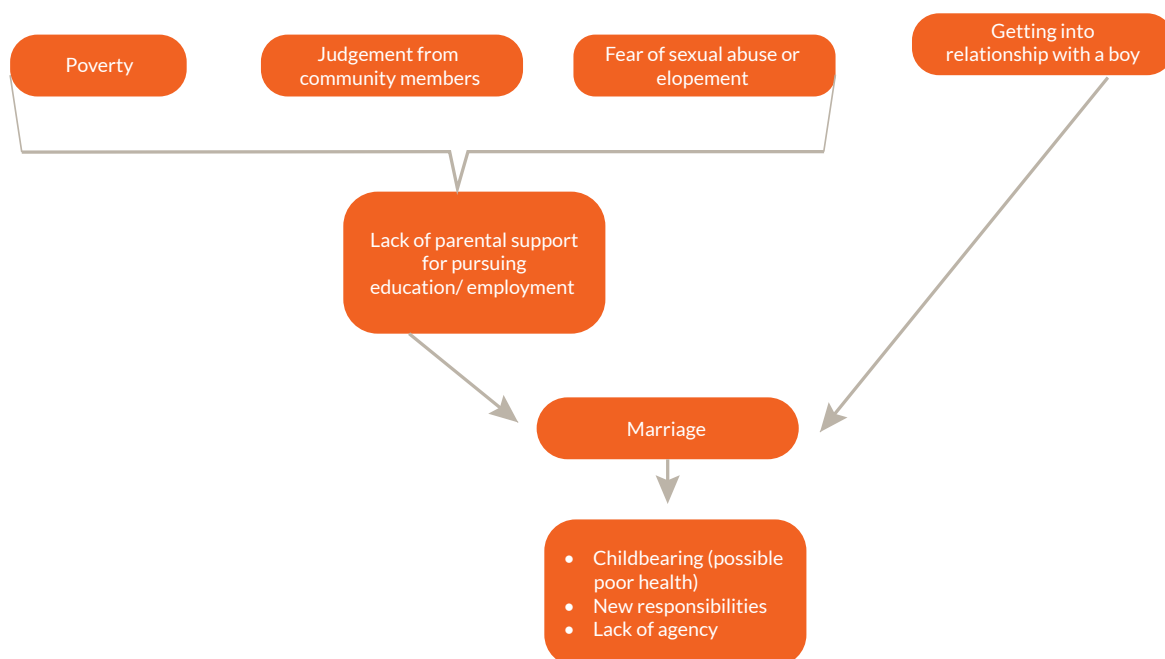
There were also some unmarried girls who had dropped out of school for whatever reasons, but they are a far smaller number than their married peers. Unmarried girls in Nepal and Bangladesh were overwhelmingly in school, with less than 20% unenrolled in either country, and near universal enrolment at the youngest age groups. Tanzania was the only country with almost half of all unmarried girls out of school and just 12% of married girls and young women attending school before their marriage. This points to the finding that **child marriage is not a primary reason for girls in Tanzania to drop out of school.**

In Bangladesh, Nepal, and Tanzania, a higher proportion of unmarried than married girls and young women reported that work conflicted with school, probably because in many countries girls are expected to stop working outside the home after marrying. Almost half of unmarried women in Bangladesh (43%), said work conflicted with school, but just 7% of married women and girls said the same. This is probably because Bangladesh had the highest overall levels of enrolment (87% of all unmarried girls and young women were in school) and a significantly greater proportion of unmarried than married girls and young women who were working. More than

**Table 3.2.1: School experience by country among married girls and young women (per cent)**

	Bangladesh	Mauritania	Nepal	Tanzania
Attended school before marriage	74.4	49.2	54.0	11.5
Continued school after marriage	32.9	64.5	43.1	1.7
Ended school because of marriage	83.8	62.0	84.3	27.6
Unmarried girls in school	87.0	73.0	83.0	54.0

**Figure 3.2.2: Key barriers for unmarried girls and young women in Bangladesh to achieve the dream of education and employment**



70% of unmarried girls who weren't working also said they wanted to be. In the focus groups, unmarried girls in Bangladesh were primarily focused on getting an education and a job as a path to self-sufficiency, to 'stand on my own two feet', or to gain standing in the community. However, they acknowledged many barriers to achieving this goal, summarised in Figure 3.2.2. Rarely did unmarried Bangladeshi girls and young women envision a future as married and with children.

Among unmarried Nepali and Tanzanian women, about a third said they had difficulty balancing work and schooling (34% and 31%, respectively). In Nepal in general, less than 7% of girls, married or unmarried were working, although over half of them wanted to be employed. There was no significant difference between married and unmarried girls and work experience in Nepal.

In Mauritania, over a third of married and unmarried girls struggled to balance work with school, with no significant difference between the groups. However, married girls were slightly more likely (14% compared to 9%) to be working, and markedly more interested (55% to 33%) in wanting to work if currently unemployed.

*I want to work after studying. I will do my best and stand by my family. My dream is to work in a good position. And so that everyone in the village sees me well. [unmarried, 17-year-old, Bagerhat, Bangladesh]*

**Table 3.2.2: Work experience for unmarried and married girls and young women by country (per cent)**

	Bangladesh		Mauritania		Nepal		Tanzania	
	Unmarried	Married	Unmarried	Married	Unmarried	Married	Unmarried	Married
Currently employed	13.3	8.5	8.7	14.2	5.2	6.9	12.5	21.5
If not working, desire to be employed	71.3	58.3	32.8	54.5	52.6	56.2	68.2	59.8

In Tanzania, married girls were almost twice as likely to be working as unmarried girls, although unemployed unmarried girls were slightly more interested (68%) in finding work than married girls (60%) (Table 3.2.2). In the focus groups, girls and young women dreamt of having their own businesses as tailors, market vendors, or housekeepers; for these jobs, further education was not required. For both married and unmarried girls in Tanzania, education was viewed as undesirable for several reasons, including no longer understanding lessons, school being too far from home, or the beatings they experienced while at school.



*I want to start a tomato business because it has a good cash flow and pays you on time, so if you take it seriously, you manage to get your capital back and make a profit. I can no longer return to school to study because I no longer understand the lessons and my thoughts are no longer in school. I'm currently thinking about other aspects of my life, such as starting a business and getting married. [unmarried, Kigoma, Tanzania]*



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## Violence



















Girls in the four countries experienced varying levels of violence, with the lowest levels in Nepal and highest in Tanzania (Table 3.2.3). There were several cases where the difference among unmarried and married girls and young women was striking. Unmarried girls and young women reported higher levels of physical violence than married women in Bangladesh, Mauritania, and Tanzania, and for the

youngest age groups in those countries, **married girls were between 23% and 31% less likely to experience physical violence than their unmarried peers.**

Overall, **the probability of reporting an experience of physical violence in the last year was 26% lower for married versus unmarried**



**Table 3.2.3: Unmarried and married girls and young women reporting violence- and protection-related outcomes (per cent)**

	 Unmarried		 Married		 Any violence		 Sexual violence		 Physical violence		 Violence protection in community	
												
Bangladesh	17.9	14.7	0.4	7.8	17.9	12.3	95.2	96.2				
Mauritania	22.5	14.9	4.2	6.4	21.6	11.1	82.1	94.9				
Nepal	9.6	14.9	0.3	8.9	9.4	10.3	93.8	94.6				
Tanzania	31.7	36.9	4.8	28.5	29.8	22.5	92.8	92.8				

NOTE: Darker colour denotes higher per cent and white lettering denotes significant difference between observations for unmarried and married girls and young women. In no case did the denominator fall below 700. Sexual violence was defined as responding 'a few times' or 'often' to a question whether in the past 12 months, how many times an girls and young women had sexual intercourse when she did not want to, referring to perpetrator as someone in household or a partner for unmarried and husband for married. Violence protection in the community was defined as responding yes to whether there are places in the girls and young women's community where they could go for help if they experienced violence and was not specified as to type of violence.

**girls and young women.**<sup>35</sup> Older age was also independently associated with a lower probability of physical violence; young women who were 18 to 24 years old were less likely to experience physical violence than 12- to 14-year-old girls<sup>36</sup> (Figure A-C8).

Although in this study, marriage was associated with a lower risk of physical violence, the multivariate model found **marriage was associated with a more than five-fold increased risk of sexual violence.**<sup>37</sup> Women in the oldest age group (18 to 24) also had a modestly higher risk of sexual violence compared to the youngest age group.<sup>38</sup> Sexual violence was rarely reported among unmarried girls and young women, but **in Tanzania almost 30% girls said they had been forced to have sex more than once in the past 12 months.** This is in contrast to parents' perceptions of the risk; many focus group participants in Bangladesh named fears of their daughter experiencing sexual violence while unmarried as a key motivation to marry early, second only to poverty. However, this research seems to confirm that child marriage is the cause of sexual violence. Although child marriage is not an effective protective mechanism from sexual violence, from the family's point of view, it may still prevent the shame, stigma, and rejection that sexual violence against unmarried girls brings to girls and families.

More than 90% of both unmarried and married girls and young women reported that violence-protection services were available in their communities, although in Mauritania, unmarried girls were more than 10% less likely to know of available services (82% versus 95%, respectively).<sup>39</sup> However, even though the quantitative data shows girls knew of violence-protection services, girls and young women in focus groups were often concerned with the challenges of accessing them. They cited fear of stigma and the threat disclosure might bring as key barriers to using the services, fearing it would impact the social capital of their families, precipitate a marriage decision (for unmarried girls and women), or initiate backlash from their husbands.

In Tanzania, fear of retaliation emerged as a reason girls didn't report abuse at schools.

Both married and unmarried girls and young women described fear of retaliation from family members. For unmarried girls, the concern was retaliation from a parent, who may even be the perpetrator. For married girls, there was fear of retaliation from husbands. And in relation to marriage, violence may be the response to a variety of 'underperformance' perceptions, some related to increasing autonomy.

“Many do not go there for their dignity. They think if people know about it, it will not be good for me. [16-year-old, never married, Bandarban, Bangladesh]

“The parents [are a barrier to accessing support for violence]. They think if we dig the thing more, many people will know, more problems will occur, and their status will be diminished. That’s why they don’t want us to go there. [18-year-old, married with one child, Dinajpur, Bangladesh]

“No, we keep silent. For example, if you go to say that, your teacher will be taken into custody. If you go back to school, you will be harassed even more. So, we keep quiet. [unmarried, Kigoma, Tanzania]

“...some women failed to report violence from either their husbands or relatives because their husbands threaten them — if they report they will be killed — so due to that fear many of them tend to remain in pain at home. [married, Maswa, Tanzania]

“Most of the time, it is for non-essential reasons [that girls get abused], but in our society, small mistakes like coming home late, not working hard like farming, asking for money for personal use, and a variety of other reasons can result in you being beaten or reprimanded by insulting your parents or even your husband. [17-year-old, married with one child, Kigoma, Tanzania]

## Health

In recent years, increasing focus on mental health and well-being have highlighted a lack of information of the effects of child marriage on a girl’s mental health. Some studies have found lower stress among young women who married before age 18<sup>40</sup> while others found that married 15- to 17-year-old girls had poorer mental health than their unmarried peers of the same age.<sup>41</sup>

Our data paints a picture of **one-fifth of girls struggling with poor mental and physical health** in general,<sup>42</sup> with no significant differences in many countries between married and unmarried girls. Marriage seems to have a slight adverse effect for overall health – married girls and young women in Bangladesh were slightly more likely to have poorer health, but overall, there were no significant correlations.<sup>43</sup> However, **girls with a higher empowerment score were 30% more likely to have favourable health**, too,<sup>44</sup> and young women 18 to 24 years old had 60% greater odds of good health compared to the youngest age group.<sup>45</sup>

The data was slightly clearer for mental health — **odds of poor mental health were 17% higher for**
















**married women<sup>46</sup> and 32% higher for those with higher empowerment scores.<sup>47</sup> Employment was also associated with 27% higher reporting of unfavourable mental health.<sup>48</sup>**

The only country with a significant difference in the predicted probability of feeling sad or worthless was Mauritania where married girls and young women were up to 19% more likely to have higher odds of poor mental health than unmarried women.<sup>49</sup>

In general, married women had better access to family planning in the community, which agrees with their improved sense of agency in accessing antenatal and sexual and reproductive health services (see section 3.3 on changes to agency). However, marriage doesn’t make too much of a difference and access is generally high for both married and unmarried girls, aside from in Mauritania, where there was an 8% gap, similar to the gap in violence-prevention services.

In focus groups in Bangladesh, although girls may have known of health services, they still experienced several barriers to accessing them. In general, girls spoke

**Table 3.2.4: Unmarried and married girls and young women reporting health-related favourable outcomes (per cent)**

	 Unmarried		 Married		 Positive general health status		 NOT feeling sad/worthless		 Family planning in community	
										
Bangladesh	85.0	80.6	71.6	69.4	87.3	92.7				
Mauritania	81.0	79.4	85.3	67.1	80.5	88.8				
Nepal	93.9	94.0	92.7	93.3	89.2	99.4				
Tanzania	85.7	84.4	89.6	87.0	91.7	96.3				

NOTE: Darker colour denotes higher per cent and white lettering denotes significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between observations for unmarried and married girls and young women. In no case did the denominator fall below 600. Positive health status was defined as 'always well' versus 'less than always well'.

of shyness or a fear of sharing personal problems, especially with a male health-care provider. This view was shared by unmarried and married women alike.

The distance to health services and the cost of seeking health care were also a concern for girls in both Bangladesh and Tanzania.

**“If I am a woman, I feel shy to talk about the problem to a male doctor. [18-year-old, never married, Rajshahi, Bangladesh]”**

**“Many early-age girls are unlikely to share their personal issues freely with doctors because of shyness. This is one of the problems they face. And if the doctor is a male, they hesitate even more. They share a bit with the female doctor, but with the male, they don't even share anything. [18-year-old, no children, Dinajpur, Bangladesh]”**

**“Girls of our age face difficulty to use these services who are not capable of spending money. [17-year-old, never married, Bandarban, Bangladesh]”**



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### Future aspirations







A key part of the research was finding out from unmarried girls what they were hoping for and what they expected to happen in their lives in the next two to five years. Table 3.2.5 includes data by country and future situation. Across all countries, girls most commonly hoped for and expected to be living with parents and in school or university. The least desired or expected situation was to be a mother, although this varied widely, from just 9% in Bangladesh, to 38% in Mauritania and Tanzania.

Sadly, in some areas there were significant gaps between what girls hoped for and what they actually

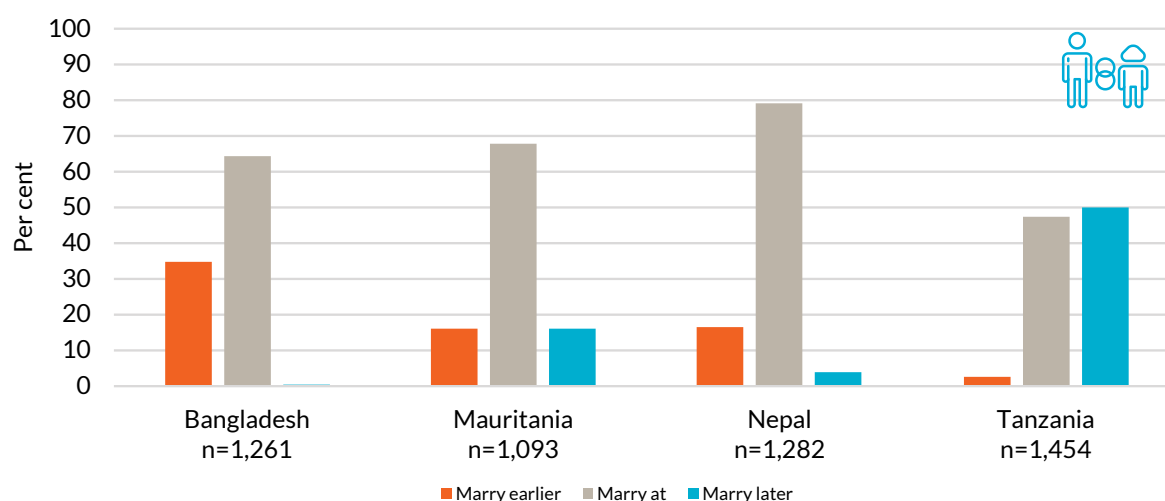
expected their futures to look like, painting a picture of young girls fighting against societal expectations.

This may also start to explain the high levels of those who felt sad or worthless. Girls wanted to be in school, living with their parents, and working outside the home more than they thought they would actually be able to do so. Almost 90% of girls in Bangladesh hoped to be in university, but just 73% expected to be able to stay in education. There were smaller but still significant gaps between expectations and hopes for education in Mauritania and Tanzania.

**Table 3.2.5: Desired vs. expected situations in 2-5 years times among unmarried girls and young women (per cent)**

Situation	Bangladesh		Mauritania		Nepal		Tanzania	
	Desired	Expected	Desired	Expected	Desired	Expected	Desired	Expected
 In school/ university	87.5	72.5	73.8	67.7	81.2	78.2	57.5	51.4
 Married/living with partner	19.7	37.2	45.1	47.6	18.5	25.9	37.4	37.8
 Being a mother	9.1	13.2	38.6	38.4	13.5	19.3	37.6	38.0
 Living with parents	78.6	58.6	66.5	60.3	93.8	91.6	63.6	62.3
 Working outside the home	60.7	48.4	62.8	55.1	56.2	50.5	60.3	57.3
 Working in the home	46.3	52.6	69.7	66.7	82.7	83.0	47.5	45.2

**Figure 3.2.3: Expected age at marriage among unmarried girls and young women**



## Case study: Farah, Bangladesh

Farah was 14 when her parents told her she was going to be married.

She and her family live in Wazirpur, a coastal area full of rivers, canals, and dams with narrow, unpaved roads winding between them. Many people earn a living through subsistence farming, carting goods on three-wheel carts, day labouring, or fishing.

They were struggling to provide for Farah and her younger sister and brother when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and work delivering goods for her father, the family's sole breadwinner, dried up. They believed it was the best option for the family to have one less mouth to feed.

In their community, poverty levels are high and girls are often seen as a burden not a blessing. Although things are changing, girls' education can still be considered a waste of money because they are expected to leave their family and get married — not to work and support their family like boys. Despite this, many girls dream of a different future, and like many other girls in Bangladesh, Farah was in school at the time of her marriage and focused on becoming a nurse one day.

In Bangladesh, approximately 51% of girls are married before their 18th birthday and 22% are married before the age of 15.<sup>50</sup> Child marriage is more common in rural areas where 60% of girls are married before age 18, compared to 55% in urban areas. The minimum legal age for marriage in Bangladesh is 18 years for girls; however, the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 includes a loophole where a court can allow child marriage in 'special cases'. Underlying drivers of child marriage include poverty, lack of education opportunities, family honour, violence against girls, sociocultural and gender norms, and adolescent pregnancy.

Farah was devastated at the news that she'd be forced to drop out of school and go live with a husband and his family, 40 km away.

The wedding was barely finished when the abuse from Farah's new husband and in-laws started — name calling, humiliation, and threats. She called her parents, miserable, but they told her to make the best of it; they had invested their few savings into paying her dowry. But Farah only became more and more desperate. After more calls and one month, Farah's mother arrived to take her back home.

Farah is relieved to be home again, and able to go back to school. But not everyone welcomed her back. Many of her neighbours laughed at her or told her she should be ashamed. Though dowries are now illegal in Bangladesh, they are still common in many rural areas like Wazirpur, and a girl's family is expected to give the groom's family money, livestock, or household goods when she gets married. The amount expected increases as the girl gets older or if she is divorced. As a result, child marriage is widespread in the community. Girls as young as 12 are married off to reduce the financial burden on their families.

Farah is still rebuilding her life. She is in grade 10 and working hard to finish school so she can pursue her career. Financial independence is even more for her important now, because being divorced and no longer 'pure' means her parents would be expected to pay a much higher dowry if she was to remarry. She is also working with the child forum in her community to help stop other girls from being forced into a child marriage. She speaks at the Village Development Committee meetings and talks to parents whenever she can, explaining her experience, the harm child marriage has on girls, and how Bangladesh law protects children's rights and prohibits child marriage.

*World Vision has been running a child sponsorship programme in Wazirpur since 2019. Sponsors are supporting children and communities to strengthen education; health; livelihoods; water, sanitation, and hygiene; nutrition; and child protection. Child sponsorship is also helping to tackle the issue of child marriage. We are working with parents, faith leaders, community leaders, and children to educate them about children's rights and the harm child marriage causes, not just for girls, but their whole family. We are also helping to address the financial insecurity that drives parents to marry off their girls early through programmes to help people produce more food, eat more nutritious diets, have access to clean water, earn more income, and manage the money they earn.*

\*Farah's name has been changed to protect her identity and keep her safe.



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### 3.3. Young marriage: Agency of married girls and young women

Conventionally, international development organisations have focused on improving girls’ agency as a way to help prevent child marriage. There are contexts and cultures, such as South Asia, where parents traditionally control the marriage process and girls may exercise less or more variable levels of agency. However, there is increasing evidence that girls, as well as their parents may see marrying at young ages as a logical or a desirable situation, such as when access to schools or opportunities as a result of education are low,<sup>51</sup> poverty or family instability leaves girls with few other options,<sup>52</sup> or marriage may improve their standing in their communities.<sup>53</sup>

#### Marriage decision

Both married and unmarried girls were asked about decision-making for marriage — information about who made the marriage decision among married girls and young women is shown alongside who unmarried girls expect to make the decision in Figure 3.3.2.<sup>54</sup> In general, unmarried girls’ expectations more or less mirrored what had happened with their married peers, with the caveat that unmarried girls generally underestimated their own roles.

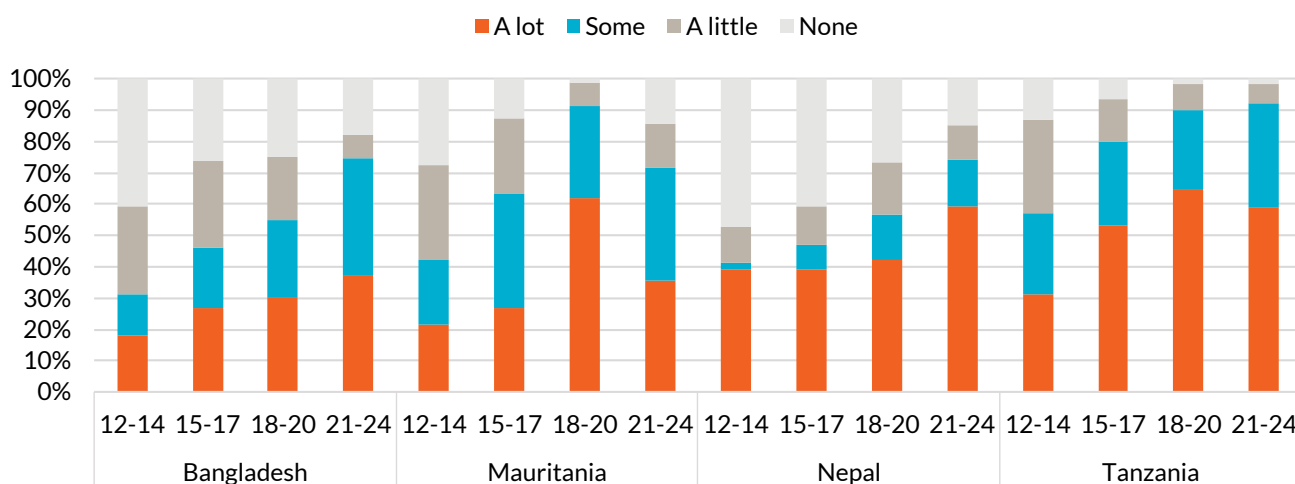
The younger a girl was when she was married, the more likely her parents were to have been the ones to have decided for the marriage, and the older she was, the more likely she was either to have decided to get married for herself or been a lead decider with someone else. However, these overall trends mask large differences between countries. In Bangladesh, a context where arranged marriages are common, girls and young women had low levels of autonomy; even among 21- to 24-year-old women, over 50% of their marriages were decided by their parents. In Bangladesh, girls in focus groups spoke about how parent-led marriage decisions seemed to be linked with avoiding social risk (e.g., elopement) or poverty. When poverty is a driver, parents focused on finding a financially secure marriage, despite a daughter’s age.

**Almost half of young girls in Bangladesh and Nepal<sup>55</sup> had absolutely no say in their decision to marry, and at the other extreme, in Tanzania more than 60% of girls marrying between the ages of 15 and 17 made the decision themselves.**

In both Tanzania and Mauritania, more than 20% of girls got married because they were pregnant. In contrast, this was only true for 4% of girls in Nepal (Figure 3.3.1).

In all four countries girls expected, and did have, more control over their marriage decision as they got older, although levels overall were lower in Bangladesh and

Figure 3.3.1: Gradient from no control to a lot of control over the marriage decision within each group of age at first marriage among married girls and young women

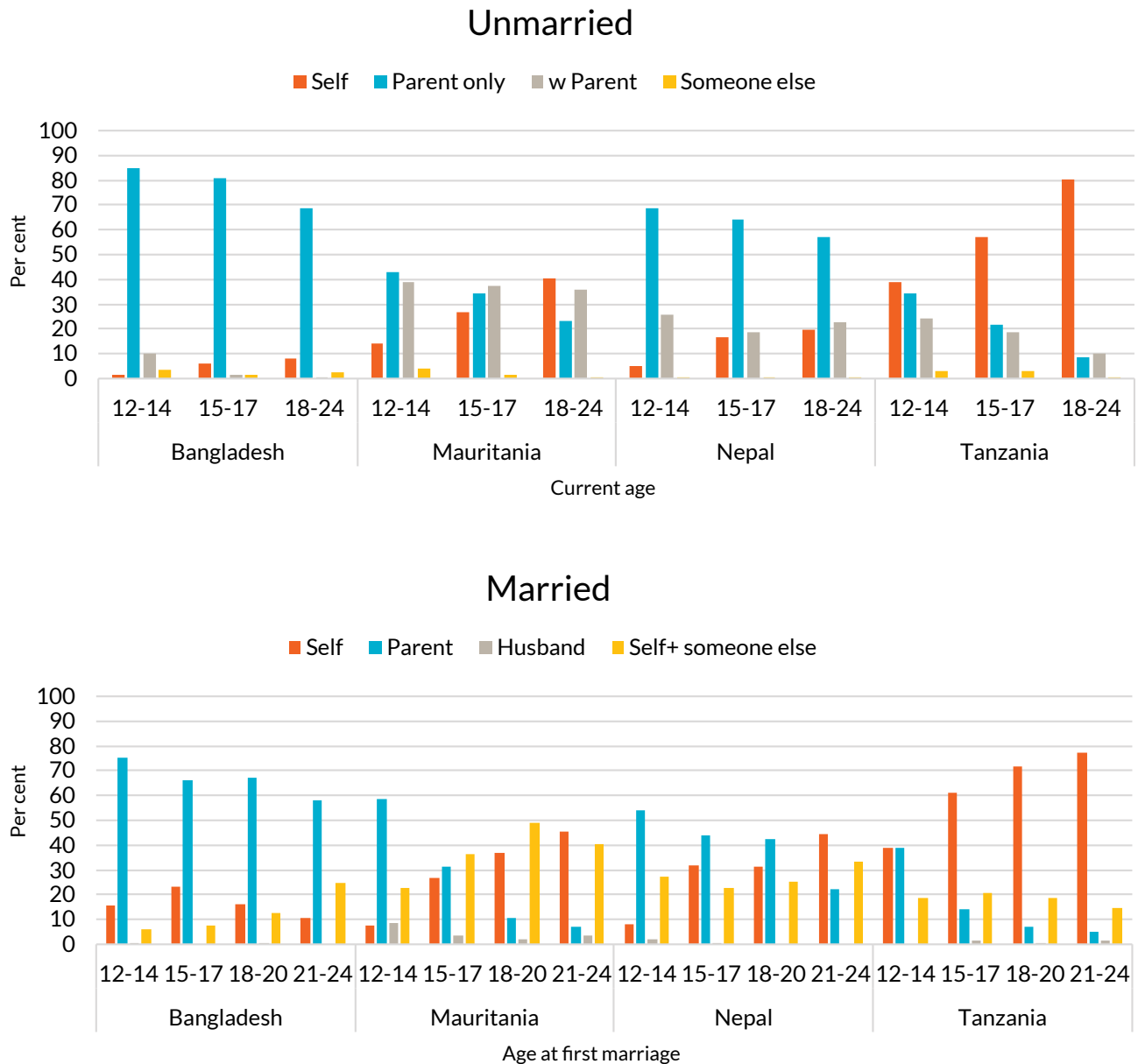


NOTE: For each country, the trend across age at first marriage is statistically significant at the p<0.001 level.

Nepal (Figure 3.3.2). The greatest contrast between what unmarried girls and young women expected and married girls and young women experienced was in Nepal. In general, unmarried women did not expect to be able to make this decision themselves (just 5%,

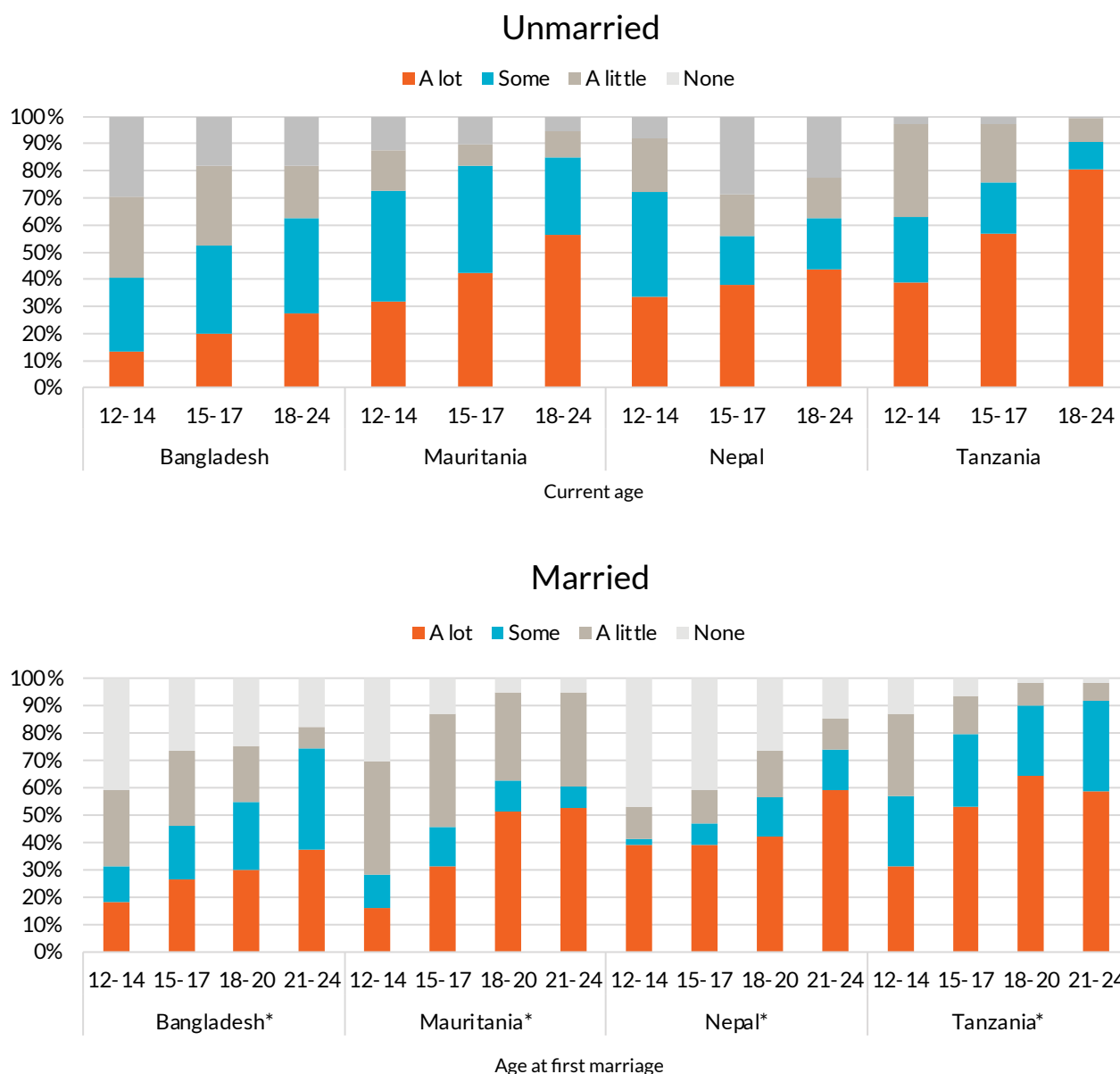
16%, and 20% across the three age groups thought they would), but married girls and young women reported taking this decision themselves about twice as often (36% and 27% for 15 to 17 and 18- to 24-year-olds respectively).

Figure 3.3.2: Age patterns for who will decide the respondent will marry



NOTE: For each country, differences across age groups are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level except for married women in Nepal ( $p = 0.072$ ).

Figure 3.3.3: Gradient from no control to a lot of control over the marriage decision by age group



NOTE: For each country, differences across age groups are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level except for married girls and young women in Bangladesh ( $p = 0.114$ ) and Nepal ( $p = 0.004$ ).

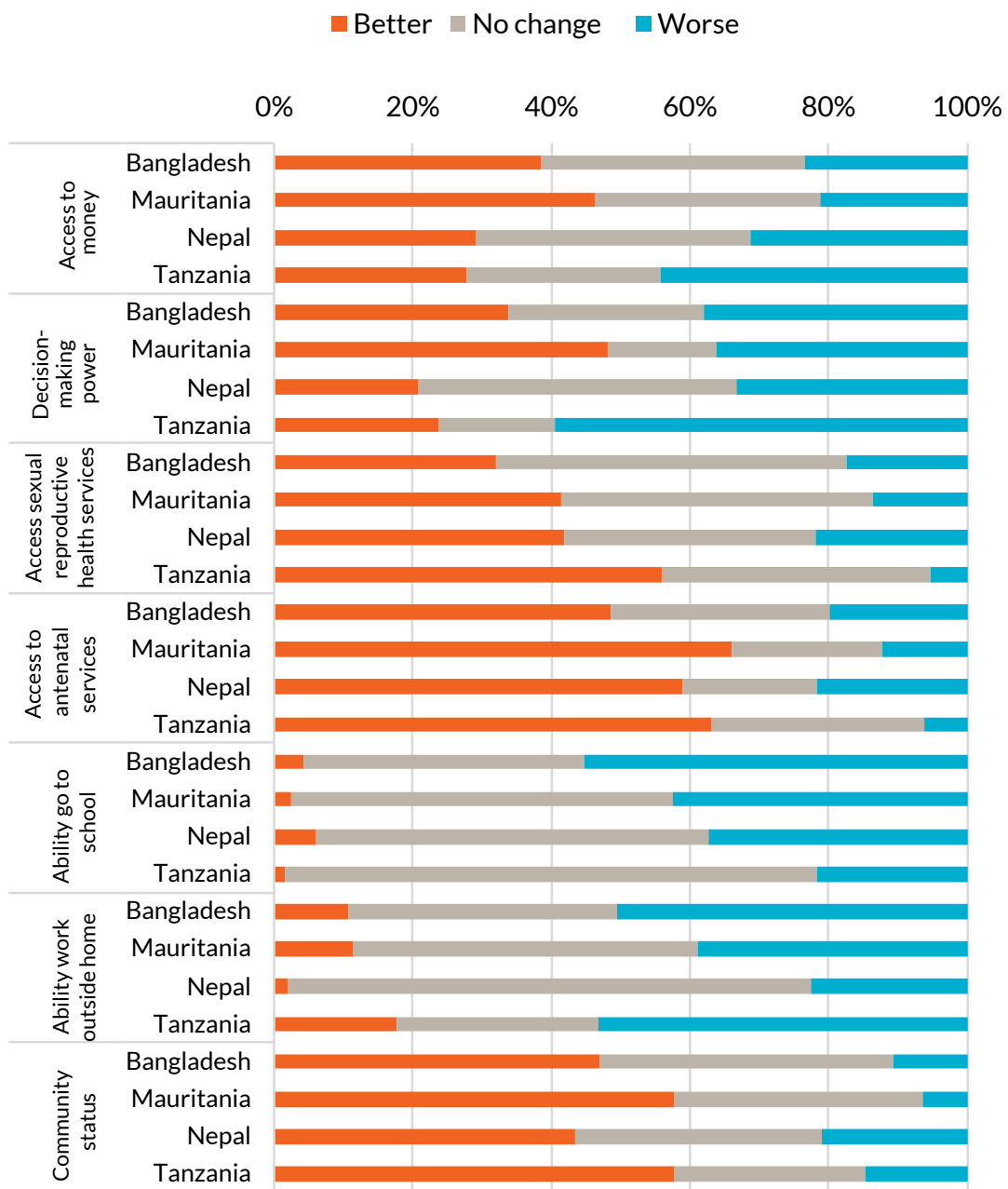
### Changes in agency due to marriage

In addition to their marriage decision, we also analysed girls and young women's agency using a scale made up of a total of six elements<sup>56</sup> and computed following defined methods for this [validated scale](#). In general, married girls and young women thought **marriage had reduced their ability to choose to go to school or work outside the home, but increased their status in the community and access to sexual and reproductive health and antenatal services**<sup>57</sup> (Figure 3.3.4).

Compared to unmarried girls and young women, married girls and young women appeared to have higher levels of empowerment<sup>58</sup> in all countries, except for Tanzania where there was a small decrease in empowerment for married girls and young women (37% versus 47%). This is also supported by regression analysis, which found that **married girls were 70% more likely to have an increased empowerment level, relative to unmarried girls and young women.**<sup>59</sup>



Figure 3.3.4: Agency patterns in the four participating countries

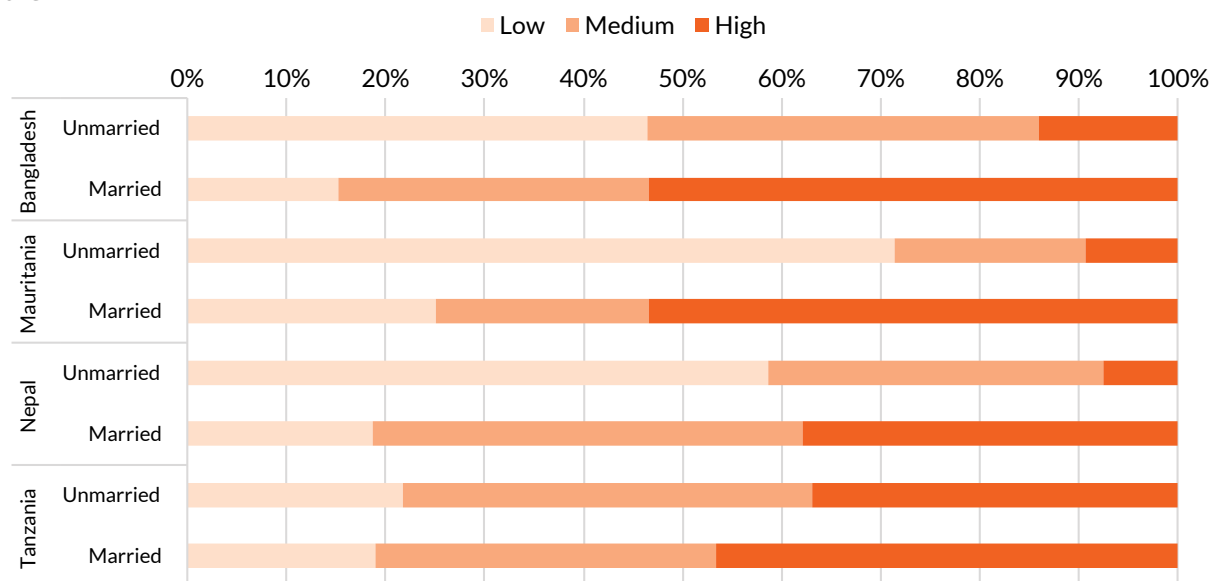


Employment was also associated with a 30% higher probability of increased empowerment.<sup>60</sup> However, there wasn't much difference in employment across age groups, perhaps reflecting the fact that in general girls rarely worked and even less so when they were married. The oldest young women (18- to 24-year-olds) were overall 12% more likely to work than 12- to 14-year-old girls.<sup>61</sup>

These findings seem to support the idea that being the wife of a household head comes with more decision-

making power than being a daughter of a household head.<sup>62</sup> Such a finding can help explain why in some cases child marriage is attractive to girls experiencing certain constraints. However, it's worth noting that the areas of most improvement in the empowerment score were access to sexual and reproductive health and antenatal services, and standing in the community, which are a reminder that in many contexts negative gender norms and controls on girls' sexuality are another reason parents may push their daughters into child marriage.<sup>63</sup>

Figure 3.3.5: Unmarried and married girls and young women with low, medium, or high empowerment score



NOTE: differences between unmarried and married girls and young women are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level.

**BB** *Before marriage, I could not go outside or spend time with friends. I was kind of bound in the house. I faced these barriers from my parents rather than from my husband. I can move freely after marriage, and the most important thing is that he supports me in whatever I wish to do. [married, Dinajpur, Bangladesh]*

**BB** *Before marriage, the [household] work was not compulsory. Parents are happy with whatever I have done for them. But when you're in the house of your husband, you are bound to do whatever they tell you to do. [28 years old, married at 15, one child, Dhaka, Bangladesh]*

In Bangladesh, some focus group participants described the way marriage can boost girls and young women's agency.

On the other hand, as expectations change from their role in their natal home to their new role, girls in focus groups described the increased burden of household-related work.

From the qualitative results, there are many rich descriptions of forms of autonomy and limits on the same faced by unmarried girls and young women.

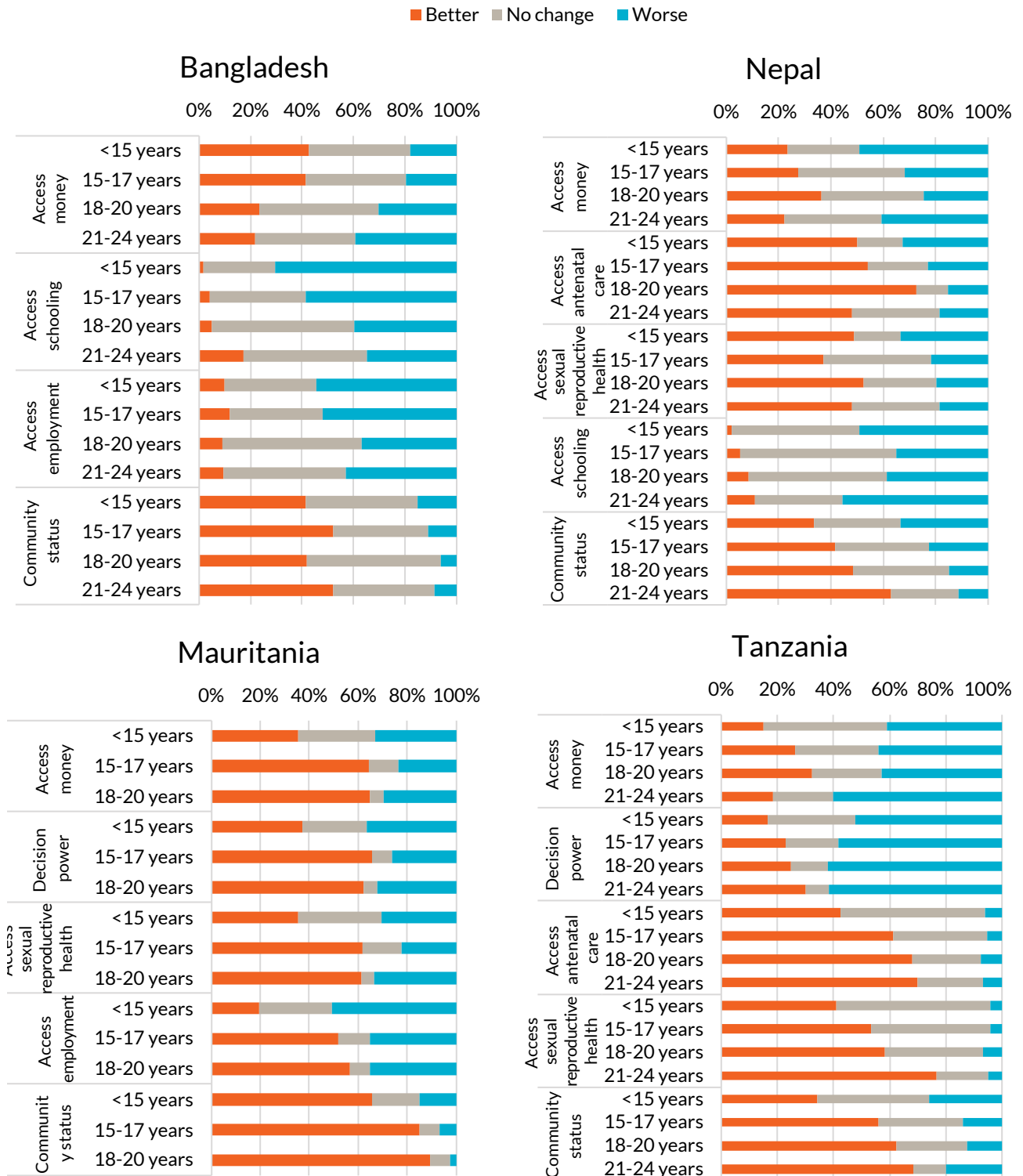


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*When I hang out with friends, I think I have a relationship with them. You can't talk to them [and] if you go out a little, [you] can't talk on the phone. They say that you can't go out. These are our constraints. The people of the village have no end of words. [unmarried 18-year-old, Rajshahi, Bangladesh]*

Figure 3.3.6: Differences in agency patterns by age at first marriage



## Emerging trends by country

Looking across all the data, stark patterns begin to emerge of the situation in the four countries where the research took place.

### Tanzania

Compared to their peers in other countries, girls in Tanzania are relatively free and have higher levels of agency, even before they're married. Girls aren't dropping out of school to get married; they're dropping out to work. Only 12% of married girls were in school before marriage, and just half of unmarried girls expect to be in school in two to five years. About 60% both expect and want to be working outside the home. In Tanzania, unmarried girls seem to be anxious to get married and move on with their lives; more than 50% of unmarried girls were worried they'd marry later than they wanted to.

Even at the youngest age groups, only 13% of 12- to 14-year-olds had absolutely no say in their marriage, and even then 'self' was the most common response in who led the decision to marry, more so than parents or anyone else. However, one in five marriages were because the girl was pregnant. Although they go into their marriages with relatively high levels of agency, after choosing to marry, girls actually experience a decrease in empowerment, from 47% to 37%.

Similar to other countries, older age at first marriage was clearly linked to access to antenatal and reproductive health services, decision-making power, and status in the community.

### Mauritania

The most striking data in Mauritania is around the massive age gaps between girls and their husbands, with differences of almost three decades for some age groups. One in five girls got married because they were pregnant. Although over 70% unmarried girls wanted to be in school in two to five years, only 50% of married girls were in school when they got married, indicating that perhaps there are key social differences in girls who do and don't get married in Mauritania. Girls who were in school in Mauritania were less likely to be in the lowest wealth quintile, and perhaps because their husbands were so much older and better established, in Mauritania married girls and young women tended to be better off than their unmarried peers, and were less likely to be sometimes or always hungry. Contrary to general assumptions, in Mauritania unmarried



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girls were more than twice as likely to say they were much less wealthy, compared to married girls of the same age. Altogether it seems that improving their economic circumstances is likely a key motivation for girls in Mauritania to marry.

Of the unmarried girls, almost half of them also wanted and expected to be married or living with a partner in the near future, and almost 40% wanted and expected to be a mother. Almost half (48%) of girls reported improved decision-making power after marriage, and 46% said they had increased access to money. Increasing age at first marriage was consistently related to improved agency in multiple domains including access to money, decision-making power, access to sexual and reproductive health services, employment, and status in the community.

## Nepal

In general, girls in South Asia seemed to have less control and freedom over their lives. In Nepal only half of married girls were going to school prior to marrying, and although almost all unmarried girls under age 15 were in school, only 82% unmarried 15 to 17 year olds stayed in education. Overall, the numbers of unmarried girls who wanted to be in school in the near future were the lowest out of the four countries, at less than 60%; even fewer, barely more than 50%, thought they would be able to. This may partially be due to economic factors, unmarried young women in Nepal tended to be wealthier than their married peers, and women 18 years or older who were in school were up to twice as likely to be 'a little wealthier' than girls out of school. In Nepal, older age at first marriage was linked to greater access to schooling and status in the community, although girls seem to pass from tight parental control to control by their in laws, and were unlikely to have their own home.

## Bangladesh

Girls in Bangladesh also experienced tight parental controls and less agency, although they had some of the highest levels of education. Almost three-quarters of girls in Bangladesh were in school prior to their marriage, but just 33% of girls continued their education afterwards. Girls who married later in Bangladesh had improved access to schooling

following marriage compared to girls who married younger, although even with the oldest age-at-first-marriage group, access to schooling was still somewhat uncommon (17%). Almost 40% of girls and young women reported increased access to money in Bangladesh (39%) after marrying; however, this effect seemed to be largest for girls who married earliest, with less access to money as age at first marriage increased. Economically, married girls in Bangladesh seemed to be worse off –they were more likely to be sometimes or often hungry and less likely to be never hungry than their unmarried peers. Unmarried young women in Bangladesh also tended to consider themselves wealthier than married young women, but there was no significant difference among girls under age 18.

Unmarried girls' wishes and expectations illustrated the cultural pressure — almost 90% wanted to be in school or university in the near future, but just 73% thought they'd manage it. Large majorities of girls wanted to be living with their parents and working outside the home in the near future, but 20% and 13% less, respectively, thought they'd actually be able to do so. Instead, they worried that marriage was in their futures: less than 20% wanted to be married in the next two to five years, but almost 40% thought they would be. Although a majority of girls in Bangladesh thought they would be able to marry at their ideal age, 35% unmarried girls were also worried they'd have to marry earlier than they wanted.



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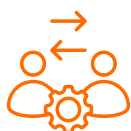
## 4. POLICY AND PROGRAMMING IMPLICATIONS



### Interventions need to be driven by context

The differences between different contexts highlight the absolute necessity of understanding girls' experiences when trying to create and fund programmes to help them live full, safe childhoods where they experience the realisation of their rights as articulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The impact of child marriage on girls' empowerment is context specific. In some contexts, after marriage girls and young women have greater autonomy and increased ability to make decisions. Marriage can also be viewed as an attractive alternative, particularly when other options, like continuing schooling, are not feasible or carry risk. Education has been shown to help delay marriage, but in some contexts, like Tanzania, girls and young women judge the merits of continuing their education to be marginal.<sup>6465</sup>



### Interventions should be tailored to the age of married girls

This study, as have many before it, highlights the elevated vulnerability of adolescent girls. Interventions should be different depending on girls' ages — the research highlights the divergent experiences of girls who marry at very young ages and those who marry in late adolescence. Girls who marry at the youngest ages are the most vulnerable. In this study, young age, especially 15 or younger was associated with a higher likelihood of low empowerment and experiencing physical violence. Yet older girls and young women were at higher risk for numerous poor outcomes, including increased odds of sexual violence, poorer general health, and increased reports of feeling sad or worthless.

**The way that agency operates in the set of decisions related to marriage is highly context specific and varies by age.**



### Ending stigma and negative social norms is key across contexts

Despite contextual differences, harmful gender norms continue to be one common factor shaping girls' opportunities, acceptable behaviours, and choices. To address child marriage, governments and development organisations should invest in social and behavioural change interventions and approaches to shift existing harmful gender norms.

Programmes and interventions to change harmful social norms need to avoid promoting messages and norms that could result in a backlash against adolescent girls and young women who fall outside those norms (e.g., avoid having a baby out of wedlock or newly married girls and young women should live with her husband and his family). Reducing the stigma around access to sexual and reproductive health and antenatal care would greatly benefit both married and unmarried girls and young women.

Girls and young women's concept of agency will be different in each context and it's important to recognise when the broader environment does not support their autonomy, and ensure that behaviour change interventions are appropriate and safe.



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## Taking into account the above, policy makers and practitioners should:

- **Design, implement and scale up social and behavioural change interventions** and approaches to tackle existing harmful gender norms that steer girls' choices toward child marriage. Collaborating with faith leaders, parents, and communities to challenge harmful gender norms using social and behavioural change approaches is paramount.
- **Strengthen policies and programmes to ensure that every girl has access to inclusive, safe and child-friendly primary and secondary education, including after marriage:** Improving the quality of education as well as making it safe is critical for both families and girls to see it as a viable route to future opportunities, and would be a key way to reduce child marriages.
- **Empower girls with information, skills and support networks to prevent child marriage, as well as support their civic and political capacity, knowledge and skills:** This can particularly help younger girls to gain and exercise more agency when it comes to decisions on child marriage, as well as education and access to reproductive health services. Programmes need to ensure that efforts to increase agency are complemented by work to address the systems and power relations that limit or expand girls' agency.

- **Increase violence prevention and response interventions:** This research confirmed some of the linkages between child marriage and sexual violence, but also shed new light on married and unmarried girls' exposure to physical violence. There is a clear need for mental and psychosocial support to help girls cope with challenges. Violence-prevention programmes must be strengthened by working with parents, teachers and school authorities to eliminate corporal punishment, and teaching young men that positive sexual relationships are built on consent. Furthermore, these strategies should be combined with interventions to reduce stigma and other social norms driven barriers that prevent girls from accessing protection services.



## Areas for further research:

In some places, the research raises additional questions, and highlights areas that require further study. For example, what factors shape the child marriage decision-making process for girls and their families? How are concepts of empowerment and agency shaped by social norms and constructs in a given context? Do we fully understand the relationship between employment and the sense of worth and empowerment it brings to girls? It may be that the types of jobs available, the work environment, or even the need to juggle multiple responsibilities may be driving the correlations with increased feelings of sadness and low self-worth.

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# APPENDICES

## A. Study methods

This study used a cross-sectional convergent mixed-methods design with two main components: (1) a survey of married and unmarried girls and young women aged 12 to 24 years, and (2) focus group discussions with married and unmarried girls and young women between 16 and 18 years old. Participating countries included Bangladesh, Nepal, Mauritania, and Tanzania.

BOX A-A.1: Overview of research objectives and questions	
<p><b>OBJECTIVE 1: Describe the marriage process, including its context, for adolescent girls and young women (AGYW).</b></p> <p>Research questions:</p> <p><b>1a.</b> What are AGYW's aspirations? Do they differ for married versus unmarried AGYW of the same age groups? What are challenges and facilitators to achieving their aspirations?</p> <p><b>1b.</b> What options are realistically available for girls other than marriage? Do viable opportunities differ between married AGYW versus unmarried AGYW of the same age groups? What are challenges and facilitators to achieving these options?</p> <p><b>1c.</b> How do AGYW enter marriages? (e.g., who decides when it is time to marry? Who decides an AGYW will marry? What motivates AGYW/parents/others to decide an AGYW should marry?)</p>	<p><b>OBJECTIVE 2: Compare well-being outcomes among married and unmarried AGYW.</b></p> <p>Research questions:</p> <p><b>2a.</b> Among girls of the same age, what is the relationship between marital status and:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Health (mental and physical, including sexual and reproductive)</li> <li>ii. Experience of violence (e.g., intimate partner violence [IPV] and/or sexual violence)</li> <li>iii. Education (current enrolment, age at exit, and current access to)</li> <li>iv. Access to education, health services, and violence-protection services</li> <li>v. Agency (household decision-making, health decision-making, etc.)</li> </ol>
<p><b>OBJECTIVE 3: Compare well-being outcomes for married AGYW by age at marriage and context of marriage.</b></p> <p>Research questions:</p> <p><b>3a.</b> What is the relationship between age at marriage and:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Health (mental and physical, including sexual and reproductive)</li> <li>ii. Experience of violence (e.g., IPV and/or sexual violence)</li> <li>iii. Education (current enrolment, age at exit, and current access to)</li> <li>iv. Access to education, health services, and violence-protection services</li> <li>v. Agency in marriage (household decision-making, health decision-making, etc.)</li> <li>vi. Agency entering marriage</li> </ol> <p><b>3b.</b> How does agency change after marriage among married AGYW?</p> <p><b>3c.</b> How does level of agency exercised in entering marriage compare to level of agency exercised within a marriage?</p>	<p><b>OBJECTIVE 4: Identify key challenges married and unmarried AGYW face</b> in these areas: access to education, health services, and support for experiencing violence. <b>Identify viable strategies/opportunities to overcome these challenges.</b> For each area:</p> <p><b>Research questions:</b></p> <p><b>4a.</b> What challenges do married AGYW face compared to unmarried AGYW of the same age groups?</p> <p><b>4b.</b> What are the barriers to accessing support/services for married AGYW compared to unmarried AGYW of the same age group?</p> <p><b>4c.</b> What would help them the most to overcome the challenges and barriers married AGYW face compared to unmarried AGYW of the same age group?</p>

## Study locations

This study took place in four countries, selected based on a combination of practical and research considerations: the prevalence of marriage before 18 years (prioritising countries with relatively high prevalence), the capacity of field offices to conduct the research, and funding availability. Based on this, the study was conducted in Bangladesh, Nepal, Mauritania, and Tanzania.

Prevalence of marriage under 18 among 20- to 24-year-old women ranges from 31% (Tanzania) to 53% (Mauritania) among the countries included in this study. Except for Mauritania, where nearly half of child marriages occur in early adolescence, marriages generally occur in later adolescence (between 15 and 17 years old), and 5% to 18% of marriages taking place before age 15 (Table A-A1). In all four countries the legal minimum age at marriage for girls is at least 18 years.

## Data collection

### Quantitative sampling and questionnaire

For the quantitative component, the sample size estimated to be 2,544 adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) per country, aged 12–24 years, split evenly into six groups based on current marital status (married versus unmarried) and three age categories (12–14, 15–17, 18–24) with each group having a sample size of 424. Sample sizes were calculated to allow each age group to be compared to any other group in the same or different country at 90% power and evaluate 10-point differences, so a confidence interval of  $\pm 5$  would be obtained (for example, married

girls aged 15 to 17 in country X may be compared to unmarried girls 15 to 17 within the same country or a different country, and a 10-difference detected.) Likewise, married girls aged 15 to 17 in country X may be compared to married girls aged 18 to 24 in country X. The sample size calculations were performed to require the largest sample, and then 10% was added to build in a non-response rate of 10% to allow for the desired margin of error despite a slightly lower sample size.

Of the 10,176 AGYW, data collection was completed among 9,469 survey participants (5,410 unmarried and 4,059 married). Table 3.1. details the sample size for each country by age and marital status. The total sample size was less than projected because, in all countries, fewer married AGYW aged 12–14 years were available in the setting, which limits some findings, especially for Nepal and Tanzania (Table 3.1, highlighted in yellow).

AGYW were eligible to participate if they fell within the age group of interest (12–24 years) provided verbal informed consent (see 'Ethical approvals' section below).

Mobile devices were used to collect all data. A standardised questionnaire was mobile enabled using [Kobo](#). Surveys and focus group guides were translated into French (Mauritania), Swahili (Tanzania), Nepali (Nepal), and Bengali (Bangladesh). The survey tool was standardised and for each local language version required, a team of two field office staff members translated the English version of the questionnaire into the local language. A second set of two different staff members then translated the local language version of the questionnaire back into English. All four staff

**Table A-A1: Proportions of 20- to 24-year-old women married before age 15 and 18 years in participating countries**

Country	20- to 24-year-old women married*:		Minimum legal age at marriage (girls)**
	before 15 years	before 18 years	
Bangladesh	16%	51%	18
Nepal	8%	33%	20
Mauritania	18%	37%	18
Tanzania	5%	31%	18

\* Sources: Bangladesh (MICS 2019); Nepal (MICS 2019); Senegal (DHS 2019); Mauritania (MICS 2015); Tanzania (DHS 2015-16)  
 \*\*In some countries legal ages of marriage are different for boys and girls

Complete documentation of the sampling process is available upon request from Todd Nitkin ([Todd\\_Nitkin@wvi.org](mailto:Todd_Nitkin@wvi.org)).

Table A-A3.1: Sample size overview

Country	Unmarried				Married			
	12–14 years	15–17 years	18–24 years	Total unmarried	12–14 years	15–17 years	18–24 years	Total married
<b>Bangladesh</b>	435	435	415	1285	279	356	655	1290
<b>Mauritania</b>	477	428	399	1304	143	194	528	865
<b>Nepal</b>	427	441	430	1298	0	424	448	872
<b>Tanzania</b>	558	571	394	1523	25	191	816	1032
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>279</b>	<b>356</b>	<b>655</b>	<b>5410</b>	<b>447</b>	<b>1165</b>	<b>2447</b>	<b>4059</b>

members then met and discussed any discrepancies in the translated versions so that the final version was as close to the English version as possible. The first round of data collection was conducted between November and December 2022. During data cleaning, it was discovered that unmarried women in Tanzania and Mauritania had not completed the series of agency questions. In these two countries, a second round of data collection was conducted between February and March 2023. This complete data for unmarried women was then used to replace first-round data.

Enumerators participated in training via video calls on how to conduct the surveys and ethical issues including safeguarding of children. Supervisors with experience in performing quantitative surveys were identified from field office staff. Enumerators were field office and area programme staff and members of the local communities who had health backgrounds and were familiar with administering surveys.

Training was conducted immediately before the data collection began through in-person learning and video calls. The supervisors and enumerators had four days of training together. All aspects of data collection, which were covered in the training, pertained to both the enumerators and supervisors, and are their mutual responsibility. However, supervisors and enumerators take the lead responsibility for various portions of the survey (indicated below). The topics covered in the training included:

- The importance of each question in the questionnaire as it pertains to the study objectives.
- The correct protocols used in defining and choosing clusters, finding the centre of the cluster, and choosing households and then the eligible AGYW for the interviews (supervisors and enumerators together).
- Properly receiving and recording consent, maintaining confidentiality, and the safeguarding of children.
- The procedures concerning asking the survey questions properly and recording answers precisely and correctly into the KOBO questionnaire form (enumerators).
- The procedures regarding supervising the enumerators in conducting the interview and correcting any answers that may be inaccurate at the time of the interview while the respondent is still available (supervisors).
- The procedures to follow when more than one eligible AGYW is available in a household. It was decided that only one AGYW would be chosen randomly from each household. The exception to this would be if an eligible 12- to 14-year-old married girl was available. In that case, still only one AGYW would be interviewed, but it would be the 12- to 14-year-old married AGYW, because there were so few married AGYW in this age range, and the sample size was very difficult to reach for this group.
- Practice sessions in administering the questionnaire in small groups (enumerators).
- A practice session (field test) was conducted in a community that is similar to the communities that would be surveyed, but not actually in the survey area. This practice included mapping of the community, choosing clusters in the community, finding the centre of each cluster, selecting the first household, selecting the eligible AGYW, administering the questionnaire, and discussing situations that enumerators were likely to encounter.

World Vision teams in each country defined the study areas. In each area, eligible participants were recruited from randomly selected households. The field supervisor oversaw the use of the [‘spin the bottle’ method](#) for household selection as follows:

- 1) Identify the village boundaries. If the village or community is large, find or make a map and subdivide the village into areas of approximately equal population sizes and identify the boundaries of each subdivision. (Note: Subdivisions should not be selected based on any special characteristics — for example, covering parts of town that are wealthier or have just one ethnic group.) Then select a random number to identify the subdivision from which to sample. An example is dividing a village into four parts and then randomly selecting a number between 1 and 4. This identifies the subdivision.
- 2) Go to the population centre (not necessarily the geographic centre) of the village, as best as you can locate it (seek the help of the village leader, if possible). This allows a more equal chance for any household to be selected into the sample.
- 3) Using a flat surface, spin a pen or bottle. The direction it points is the direction you use to choose the first household.
- 4) Walk along the chosen line, counting all the households along that line (e.g., 3 meters on either side of the line) until you reach the village boundary.
- 5) Choose a random number from 1 through the total number of households you counted, using folded slips of paper, a currency note, etc. Return to the household represented by that random number. This is your first household.
- 6) Selecting subsequent households: After selecting the first household, the next household is the household whose front door is closest to the front door of the house where you are in any direction. If two households seem equidistant, flip a coin to choose between them. If you reach the boundary of the village, turn to the right or left (to the next closest doorway) and continue within the boundary. If all the households in the selected village/cluster site have been visited and the interview team has not fulfilled its quota, the team may continue to the next closest village/cluster site but should ensure that individuals in these households have not been interviewed by other interview teams.

The questionnaire consisted of questions falling into six sections: (1) sociodemographic characteristics; (2) marriage (customised depending on whether a participant was ever or never married); (3) dreams and aspirations; (4) health (mental health, reproductive health, experiences of IPV, and physical health); (5) empowerment and agency; and (6) access for health, social, and educational resources.

### Qualitative

Within each country, four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 6 to 10 girl participants each. Both unmarried and married participants 16–18 years of age were eligible. Two of the FGDs were with married AGYW and the other two with unmarried AGYW. The focus group discussions were conducted in the fall of 2022 using an FGD guide. FGD participants were selected using purposive snowball sampling following identification of one eligible AGYW. The ‘seed’ person could be identified from among survey participants or with the aid of local village leaders. In the latter case, recruiters were instructed to avoid selecting a ‘seed’ participant related to the village leader or their family.

Interviewers underwent virtual training covering how to use the FGD guide and ethical issues, including child safeguarding.

The FGD guide had three main sections: (1) aspirations and opportunities, (2) marriage process and agency, and (3) challenges surrounding accessing services in the AGYW’s area. Discussion guides were translated into French (Mauritania), Swahili (Tanzania), Nepali (Nepal), and Bengali (Bangladesh) using the same methods as were used for the quantitative survey (see above). For each FGD, data collectors also filled out a contextual questionnaire about the area in which the FGD participants lived and an FGD participant characteristic form to gather basic demographic information about discussion participants.

### Analysis methods

#### Quantitative

Survey data were analysed in EPI Info version 7 and Stata 15. Frequencies and means were assessed for all variables in the survey for each country separately and with a pooled data set. Differences between groups (e.g., married versus unmarried, by age at marriage) were assessed using chi-square, t-test, or regression as appropriate for the analytic approach.

The Empowerment Scale was computed following defined methods for this [validated scale](#). Questionnaire items used to construct the scale included:

Item wording	Administered to married women	Administered to unmarried women
First, would you tell me which member of your household usually makes decisions about YOUR health care?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about your husband's health care?	<b>X</b>	
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about your children's health care?	<b>X</b>	
Which member of your household makes decisions about making large household purchases?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about making household purchases for daily needs?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when YOU will visit family/relatives/friends?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your husband will visit family/relatives/friends?	<b>X</b>	
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your whole household will visit family/relatives/friends?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about how to use the money that you bring into the household?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about how to use the money that your husband brings into the household?	<b>X</b>	
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your family will sell a large asset (like a cow)?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your family will sell a small asset (like a chicken)?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about whether YOU can work to earn money?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when you and your husband have sex?	<b>X</b>	
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about whether you and your husband use family planning?	<b>X</b>	

## Qualitative

When required, focus group transcripts were translated from the local language into English by a team of two staff members. A second set of two staff members then translated the new English version of the transcripts back into the local language. All four staff members then met and discussed any discrepancies in the translated versions so that the final English version was as close to the local language version as possible.

Translated focus group transcripts were coded and analysed using NVivo 12 for Mac by an experienced qualitative researcher [SB]. Qualitative codes were developed deductively using categorisations based on research questions and the structure of the FGD guide. As analysis progressed using this initial version of the codebook, new codes were developed inductively to accommodate emerging themes. Once codes were applied to excerpts from the transcripts, horizontal analysis was performed to find emerging themes and sub-themes across all transcripts.

Although the target of holding four FGDs per country was met, unfortunately the quality of the data from Nepal and Mauritania was inferior leading to the omission of qualitative data from these two countries from the analysis.

## Ethical approvals

Ethical approval for this research was granted by [HML IRB](#) (Study #2017, granted: August 9, 2022). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was also granted within each participating country. Local IRBs included the Ministry of Social Action for Infants and Families in Mauritania, the National Institute for Medical Research in Tanzania, the Institute of Health Economics in Bangladesh, and the National Child Rights Council in Nepal.

Parental consent was required for any participant under 18 years of age in Bangladesh, Mauritania, and Tanzania. In Nepal parental consent was required for any participant under 20 years of age.

## B. Data collection tools

The data collection tool used for the [quantitative survey was created in KOBO Toolbox](#), which allows enumerators to access programmed questionnaire records for each interview using a tablet. The programming reduces errors by incorporating skip patterns and validation rules. The raw data was then transferred into Stata for data cleaning and analysis.

A text version of the questionnaire items follows below. Response categories, skip patterns, and validation rules are not included in this version but are available upon request.

Are you currently in school?
Currently not in school
What is the highest level of education that you completed?
How old were you when you completed your education? Please respond in years.
Do you plan to continue your education at a later date?
Currently in school
What level of school are you currently attending?
How old do you expect to be when you finish your education? Please respond in years.
What level of education would you like to complete ideally? By ideally we mean if there were no barriers to attending school?
What level of education do you expect to complete?

Are you currently employed? By that we mean earning money for work you do.
Currently employed
Who decided that you were going to do paid work? You may select more than one person.
What motivated you to start working outside the home?
What is your current occupation?
Currently not employed
Would you like to be employed outside of the home?
What is preventing you from working? You may select more than one option.
Socio-economic status
OBSERVATION: Please make a qualitative assessment of this family's wealth compared to other households in the rest of the neighbourhood?
In the past four weeks, how often did you or any household member go to sleep at night hungry because there was not enough food?
Marriage status
Have you ever been married?
What is your current marriage status?
How many times have you been married?
Now I would like to ask you about your marriage. If you have been married more than one time, I will ask you about each of your marriages starting with your first husband.
Marriage questions
What is/was your first husband's name?
How old were you when you got married to \${Hus_name}? Please respond in years.
How old was \${Hus_name} when you got married? Please respond in years.
Did \${Hus_name} have (an)other wife at the time you got married? (i.e., was this a polygamous marriage?)
Has \${Hus_name} taken on more wives after you got married? (i.e., did this marriage become polygamous?)
What number wife are/were you for \${Hus_name}? (i.e., wife order)
Are you still married to \${Hus_name}?
How did the marriage end?
Immediately prior to marriage, were you attending school?
After you got married, did you continue attending school?
Why did you end school? You may select more than one reason.
Who decided that you would stop going to school? You may select more than one person.
Did you decide to end school because of your marriage?



Who decided it was the right time for you to get married to \${Hus_name}? You may select more than one person.
How much say did you have in the decision of when to get married?
How strongly did you want to get married at the time you married?
Who decided who you were going to marry? That is, who chose your husband, \${Hus_name}. You may select more than one person.
How much say did you have in the decision about who to marry? That is the decision to marry \${Hus_name}.
How strongly did you want to marry \${Hus_name}?
Never married (NM)
NM marriage decisions
At what age would you like to get married ideally? By ideally, we mean if there were no barriers to doing what you would like to do.
At what age do you think you will get married?
Who will decide when it is the right time to get married? You may select more than one person.
How much say do you think you will have in the decision of when to get married?
Who will decide who you will marry? You may select more than one person.
How much say do you think you will have in the decision of who to marry?
NM aspirations
When you think about your life in 2–5 years, how much would you like to be doing these things?
Being in school or university
Being married/living with your partner
Being a mother
Living with your parents
Working outside the home for money
Taking care of/working in the home
When you think about your life in 2–5 years, how likely do you think you will be doing these things?
Being in school/university
Being married/living with partner
Being a mother
Living with your parents
Working outside of the home for money
Taking care of/working in the home

Mental health
In the past four weeks, how often did you feel so sad that nothing could cheer you up?
In the past four weeks, how often did you feel worthless?
Health
Thinking back over the past 12 months, how is your health in general?
How many serious illnesses have you had in your lifetime? By serious we mean that your life was in danger OR you were unable to go to work (or school if you were attending school at that time) for two+ weeks OR you were admitted to the hospital.
When you have been ill, how easy or difficult was it for you to access the health care you needed?
How many children have you given birth to?
Now I am going to ask you questions about each of the children you have had. I will start with your first child.
Girls and young women who have given birth
What is the child's first name?
How old were you when you gave birth to \${child_name}? Please respond in years
Were you married when you gave birth to \${child_name}?
Did you get married because you were pregnant or gave birth to \${child_name}?
How old is \${child_name} now? Please respond in years. If less than 1, put 0.
Did you receive antenatal care when you were pregnant with \${child_name}?
How many antenatal visits did you have while pregnant with \${child_name}?
Where did you give birth to \${child_name}?
Who attended to your birth when you delivered \${child_name}?
Who made decisions about seeking the antenatal care during your pregnancy and at your birth? You may select more than one person.
Were you able to access immunisations for \${child_name}?
Violence married
When two people marry or live together, they usually share both good and bad moments. I would now like to ask you some questions about your relationship with your husband and how he treats you. If anyone interrupts us, I will change the topic of conversation. I would like to assure you that your answers will be kept confidential, and that you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. May I continue?
In the past 12 months, how many times has your husband slapped you or thrown something at you that could hurt you?
In the past 12 months, how many times has your husband pushed or shoved you?

In the past 12 months, how many times has your husband hit you with a fist or with something else that could hurt you?
In the past 12 months, how many times has your husband kicked, dragged, or beaten you?
In the past 12 months, how many times has your husband physically forced you to have sex when you did not want to?
In the past 12 months, how many times has your husband had sexual intercourse with you when you did not want to because you were afraid to say no because your husband might hurt or leave you?
Violence unmarried
When people live together or are in a relationship, they usually share both good and bad moments. I would now like to ask you some questions about how you are treated within your home. If anyone interrupts us, I will change the topic of conversation. I would like to assure you that your answers will be kept confidential, and that you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. May I continue?
In the past 12 months, how many times has someone in your household or a partner slapped you or thrown something at you that could hurt you?
In the past 12 months, how many times has someone in your household or a partner pushed you or shoved you?
In the past 12 months, how many times has someone in your household or a partner hit you with a fist or with something else that could hurt you?
In the past 12 months, how many times has someone in your household or a partner kicked, dragged, or beaten you?
In the past 12 months, how many times has someone in your household or a partner physically forced you to have sex when you did not want to?
In the past 12 months, how many times has someone in your household or a partner had sexual intercourse with you when you did not want to because you were afraid to say no because he might hurt you or leave you?
Agency married
Now I would like to ask you about who usually makes decisions in your household. You can respond: yourself, your husband, you and your husband together, or someone else. May I ask you these questions?
First, would you tell me which member of your household usually makes decisions about YOUR health care?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about your husband's health care?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about your children's health care?
Which member of your household makes decisions about making large household purchases?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about making household purchases for daily needs?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when YOU will visit family/relatives/friends?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your husband will visit family/relatives/friends?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your whole household will visit family/relatives/friends?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about how to use the money that you bring into the household?

Which member of your household usually makes decisions about how to use the money that your husband brings into the household?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your family will sell a large asset (like a cow)?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your family will sell a small asset (like a chicken)?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about whether YOU can work to earn money?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when you and your husband have sex?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about whether YOU can work to earn money?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about whether you and your husband use family planning?
Decisions unmarried
Now I would like to ask you about who usually makes decisions in your household. You can respond: yourself, your father, your mother, your father and mother together, you with your father and/or mother, or someone else. May I ask you these questions?
First, would you tell me which member of your household usually makes decisions about YOUR health care?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about making large household purchases?
Which member of your household usually makes decision about making household purchases for daily needs?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when YOU will visit family/relatives/friends?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your whole household will visit family/relatives/friends?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about how to use the money that you bring into the household?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your family will sell a large asset (like a cow)?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about when your family will sell a small asset (like a chicken)?
Which member of your household usually makes decisions about whether YOU can work to earn money?
Difference pre and post marriage
Now I would like you to think about the household you lived in before you got married for the first time and the household you lived in during your first marriage. I would like to know how your life is/was different in these two homes. May I ask you these questions?
How has your access to money changed since you got married?
How has your power in making decisions within your household changed since getting married? By this we mean things like making decisions about what food or clothing you buy, medical care for yourself, what you wear, etc.
How has your ability to access antenatal care changed since you got married?
How has your ability to access sexual and reproductive health services (e.g., contraception) changed since you got married?

How has your ability to go to school changed since getting married?
How has your ability to go to work outside the home changed since getting married?
How has your status within your community changed since getting married? By that we mean how people in your community respect or treat you.
Now we are going to ask you about some specific types of health care you might receive. We will ask about contraception, antenatal care, accessing skilled birth attendants, and post-birth care. May we ask you these questions?
<b>Contraception services</b>
Do contraception services exist within your community?
Is this service available for girls your age in your community?
Have you needed to use this service?
Were you able to access this service?
Was there anything that made it difficult to access this service?
What made it difficult to access this service? You may select more than one option.
What made it difficult to access this service?
<b>Antenatal care access</b>
Do antenatal care services exist within your community?
Have you needed to use this service?
Were you able to access this service?
Was there anything that made it difficult to access this service?
What made it difficult to access this service? You may select more than one option.
What made it difficult to access this service?
<b>Skilled birth attendance</b>
Do skilled birth attendance services exist within your community?
Is this service available for girls your age in your community?
Have you needed to use this service?
Were you able to access this service?
Was there anything that made it difficult to access this service?
What made it difficult to access this service? You may select more than one option.
What made it difficult to access this service?
<b>PNC services</b>
Do post-natal care services exist within your community?
Is this service available for girls your age in your community?

Have you needed to use this service?
Were you able to access this service?
Was there anything that made it difficult to access this service?
What made it difficult to access this service? You may select more than one option.
What made it difficult to access this service?
Protective services
Are there places within your community you could go for help if you experience violence?
What is the place you would go?
Is this service available for girls your age in your community?
Have you needed to use this service?
Were you able to access it?
Was there anything that made it difficult to access this service?
What made it difficult to access this service? You may select more than one option.
What made it difficult to access this service?

## C. Supplemental descriptive analyses

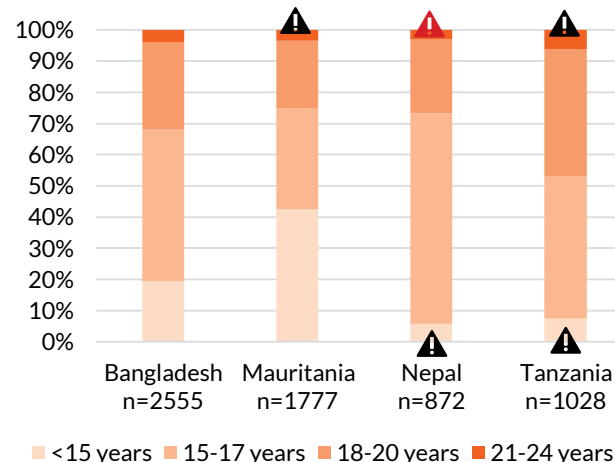
### Age at first marriage

The sampling method for the study encouraged a target sample size of 424 for each of three defined current age groups. Since age at first marriage is strongly correlated with current age, the distribution of age at first marriage cannot be taken as representative of the underlying distribution for this characteristic in the population in each country.

Among married AGYW, the age distribution varied by country (Figure A-C1). In Nepal and Tanzania there tended to be more AGYW who married at older ages, and in Mauritania, more who married at younger ages.

In a few cases, the sample size within age groups was quite small. The black alarm sign indicates that there were fewer than 100 AGYW in the sample for that age at first marriage group. The red alarm sign indicates fewer than 50 AGYW in the oldest age at first marriage group for Nepal (n=27). This limited some analyses

**Table A-C1: Birth experience and child health measures by country among married AGYW (per cent)**



that breakdown any factor by age at first marriage. Breakdowns based on current age on the other hand, are not problematic with respect to sample size.

## Birth experience and child health

Birth experience and child health patterns among married AGYW are summarised by country in Table A-C1. Marriage prior to the birth of the AGYW's first child was high in all countries and nearly universal in Bangladesh (99%). The proportion married prior to a child's birth was lowest in Mauritania (79%) and the proportion reporting getting married due to pregnancy or birth was also the highest in Mauritania (23%). Getting married due to pregnancy or birth was at a comparable level in Tanzania (22%) but lower in Bangladesh (14%) and rare in Nepal (4%).

The proportion of married AGYW who made the recommended minimum of four antenatal care visits was high in Tanzania (80%) and Nepal (74%) and modest in Mauritania (58%) and Bangladesh (47%). Skilled birth attendance was above 75% in all countries and above 90% in Mauritania and Tanzania. Report of having accessed an unspecified set of child immunisations was above 95% in all countries.

Married AGYW reported having married due to pregnancy and childbirth most often in Mauritania (23%) followed by Tanzania (22%), Bangladesh (14%), and rarely in Nepal (4%). When examining whether this pattern was associated with age at first marriage, the link was only observed for Bangladesh with higher levels of marriage due to pregnancy or childbirth seen among AGYW aged <15 years or 15–17 years at first marriage (14% and 17%, respectively, compared to 11% and 0% in the older two age-at-first-marriage groups).

The notion that getting pregnant at a very young or older age was associated with health risks was acknowledged in FGDs.



***If a girl gets married before 18, many problems are seen like they face weakness and many diseases. And if a girl gets married after being too old, they may not have babies and husband, or wife may die. The age of 18 is good regarding governmental rules and social norms. [unmarried group, Bandarban, Bangladesh]***

## Polygamy

Polygamy was assessed separately under the circumstances that it occurred before or after the respondent got married. This pattern was most common in Mauritania (12.1% prior and 9.8% after) and Tanzania (10.5% prior and 8.3% after) and rare in Bangladesh (3.6% prior and 1.4% after) and Nepal (5.7% prior and 1.5% after). There were no differences in level of polygamy according to either age at first marriage or current age.

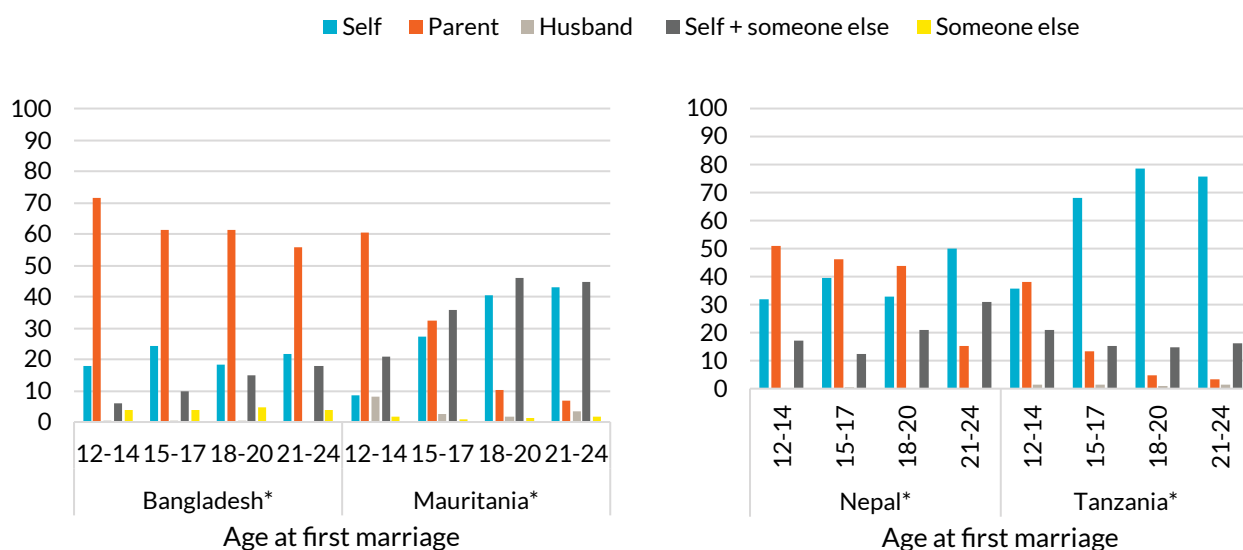
## Choosing who to marry

This measure was highly correlated with the marriage decision information presented in the main document (see section 3.3 subheading *Marriage-decision*; correlation coefficient = 0.91). Similarly here we presume when an AGYW indicates that she chose a husband herself, she has a higher degree of agency or autonomy. As with the marriage decision, the overall level of AGYW choosing a husband was highest in Tanzania (70%) followed by and lowest in Bangladesh (5%).

**Table A-C1: Birth experience and child health measures by country among married AGYW (per cent)**

	Bangladesh	Mauritania	Nepal	Tanzania
Married at birth	99.2	79.11	97.59	84.57
Married due to pregnancy or birth	14.13	23.29	3.62	21.83
Made at least 4 ANC visits	47.41	57.45	74.19	79.51
Skilled birth attendance	87.94	90.16	78.87	91.25
Accessed child immunisations	98.41	96.5	96.38	98.17

Figure A-C2: Who chose respondents' husbands by age at first marriage among married AGYW



When we examine differences within groups of age at first marriage (Figure A-C2), the patterns closely resemble those related to the decision whether to marry.

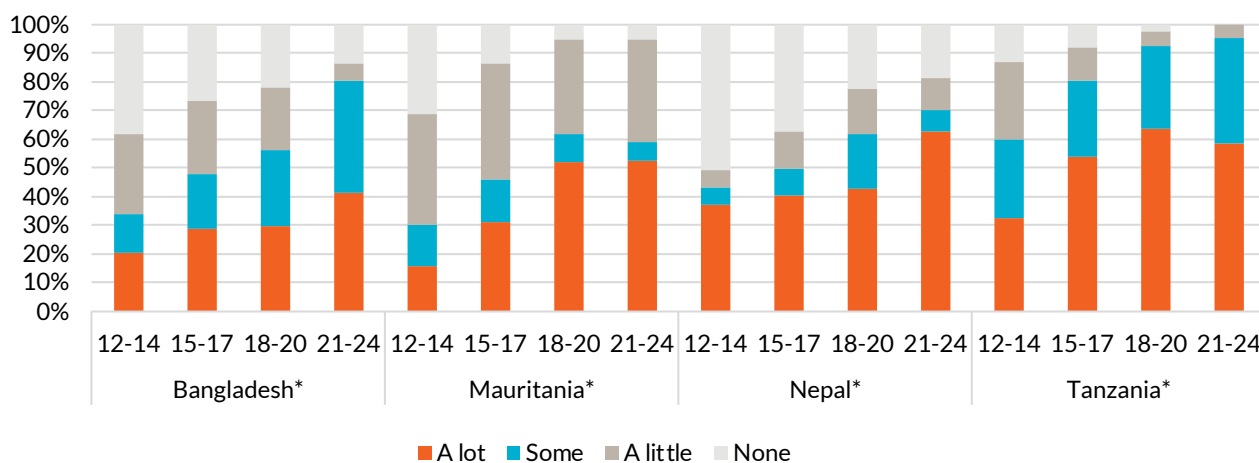
**Degree of control over who to marry**

Overall, married AGYW reported having the highest level of either strong or very strong control over the **decision who to marry** in Tanzania (85%) followed by Nepal (53%), Bangladesh (49%) and Mauritania (43%). When married AGYW were subsequently asked how much they ultimately **wanted to marry their husband**, the pattern shifted with the highest level in Nepal (80%) followed by Tanzania (75%) Mauritania

(70%) and Bangladesh (43%). These very general patterns suggest that the setting where AGYW tend to have the highest degree of control over who to marry, considering both of these measures, is Tanzania and the setting where AGYW tend to have the least control is Bangladesh.

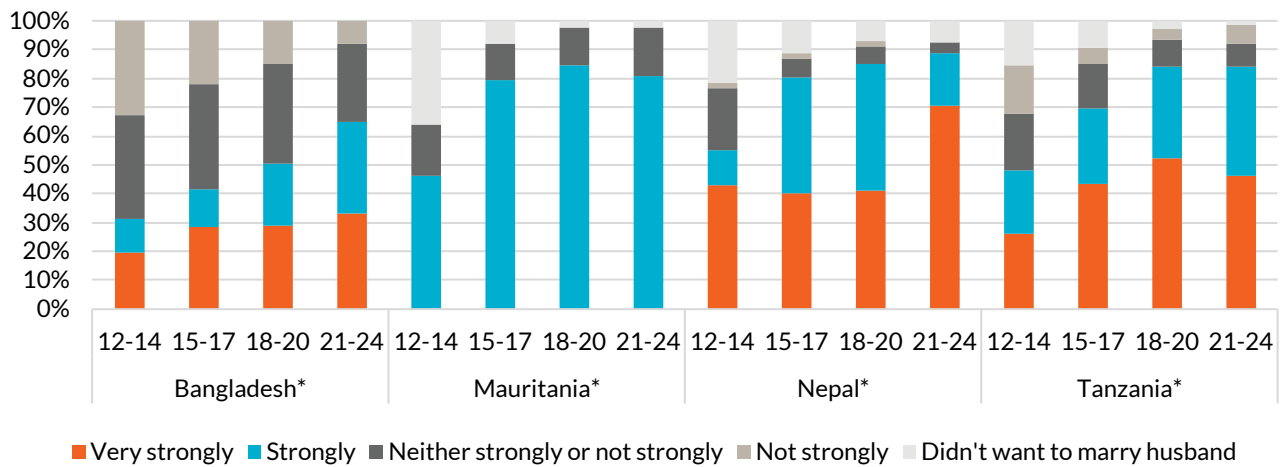
The breakdown by age at first marriage for these two measures is summarised in Figure A-C3 and A-C4. There are a few noteworthy patterns that emerge from these two figures. Firstly, the most strongly negative viewpoint representing either 'no control over the decision who they marry' or 'didn't want to marry the designated husband' was uncommon except for the youngest age-at-first-marriage group — 12-14 years

Figure A-C3: Gradient from no control to a lot of control over the decision who to marry within each group of age at first marriage among married AGYW





**Figure A-C4: Gradient from didn't want to marry to a **very strongly wanted to marry** the designated husband within each group of age at first marriage among AGYW**



old — in Bangladesh (38%), Mauritania (31%), and Nepal (51%). For the second measure (Figure A-C4), the pattern shifts, highlighting that the AGYW did not want to marry her designated husband emerging as most common in the youngest age-at-first-marriage group in Mauritania (36%) followed by Nepal (22%). Compellingly, the perception that the married AGYW did not want to marry her designated husband fell by half or more in the next oldest age group (to 8% in Mauritania and 11% in Nepal among those who

first married at 15 to 17 years of age). A similar but not as dramatic drop-off was seen for Tanzania (15% for 12–14-year-olds and 8% for 15–17-year-olds).

### Agency since marriage

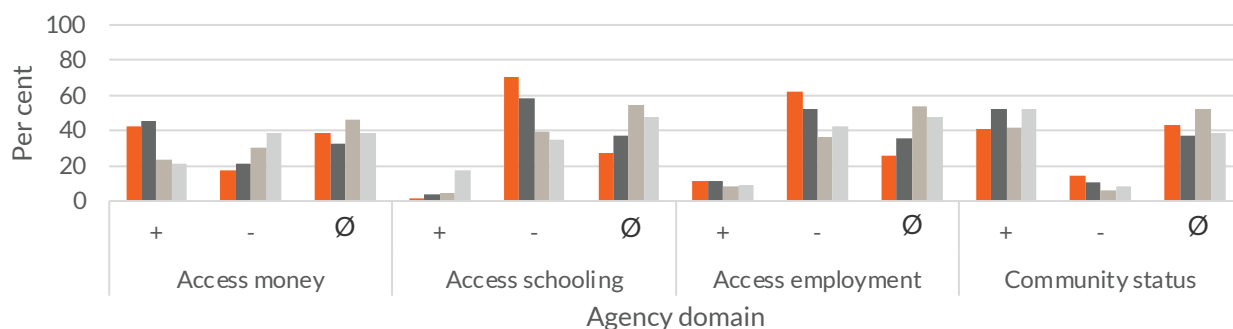
Figure A-C5 is an alternative presentation of the same information summarised in Figure 3.3.7 in the main body of the report.



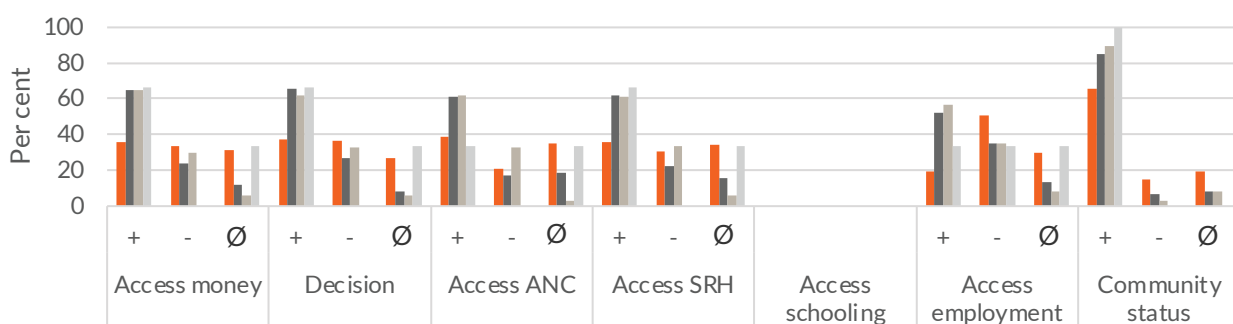
Figure A-C5: Patterns for seven agency-related domains within each age at first marriage among married AGYW

Symbols: + better or 'more able to..' - worse or 'less able to' Ø no change 'in my ability'

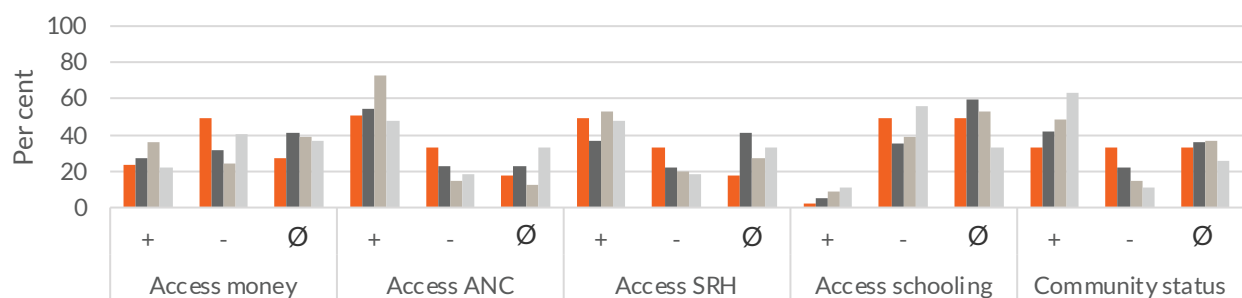
### Bangladesh



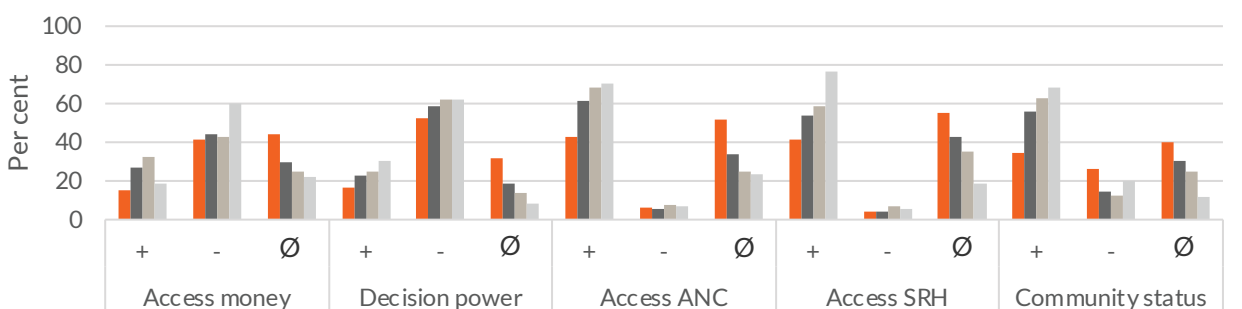
### Mauritania



### Nepal



### Tanzania



Legend: <15 years (orange), 15-17 years (dark grey), 18-20 years (medium grey), 21-24 years (light grey)

Figure A-C6: Head of household patterns for unmarried and married girls and young women

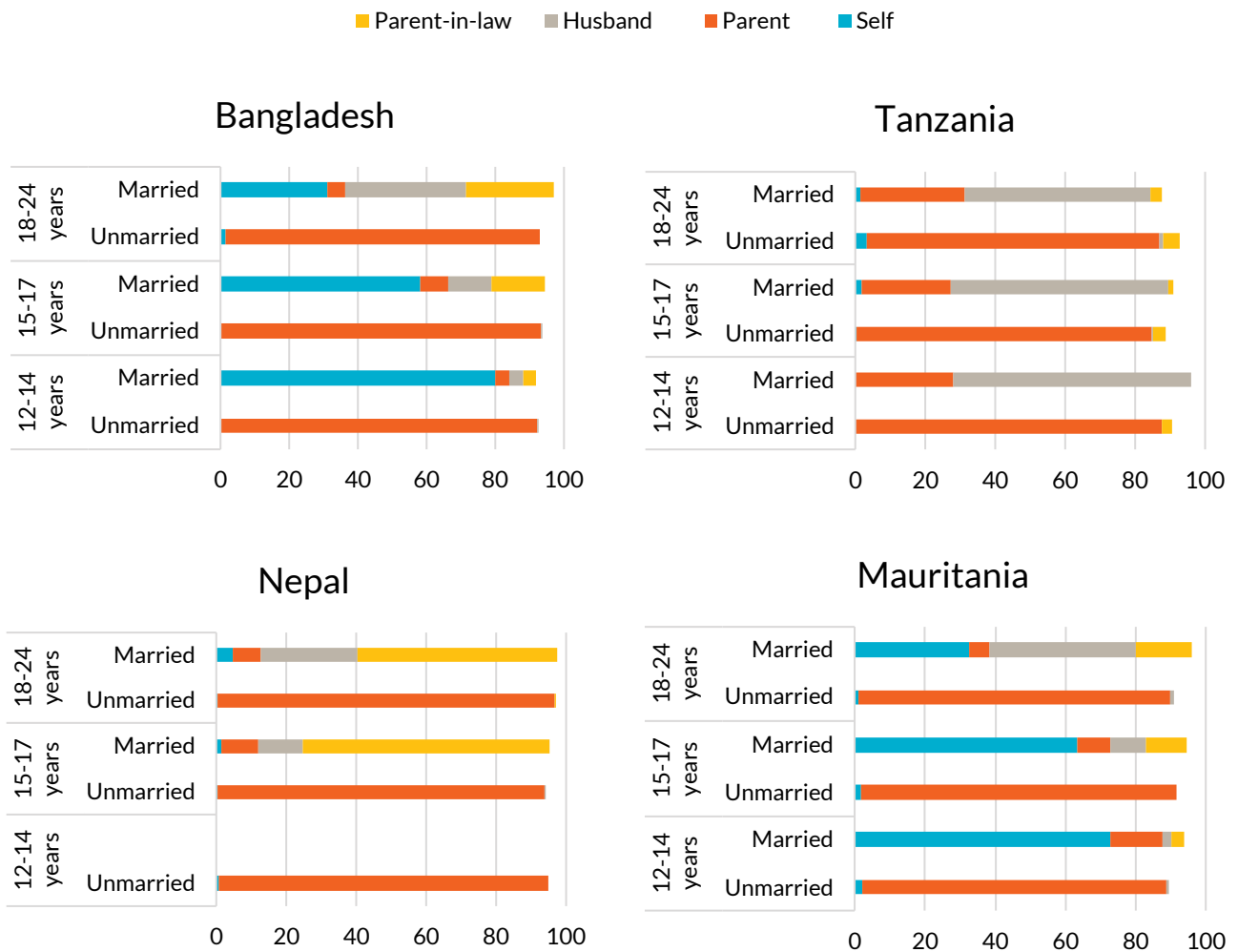
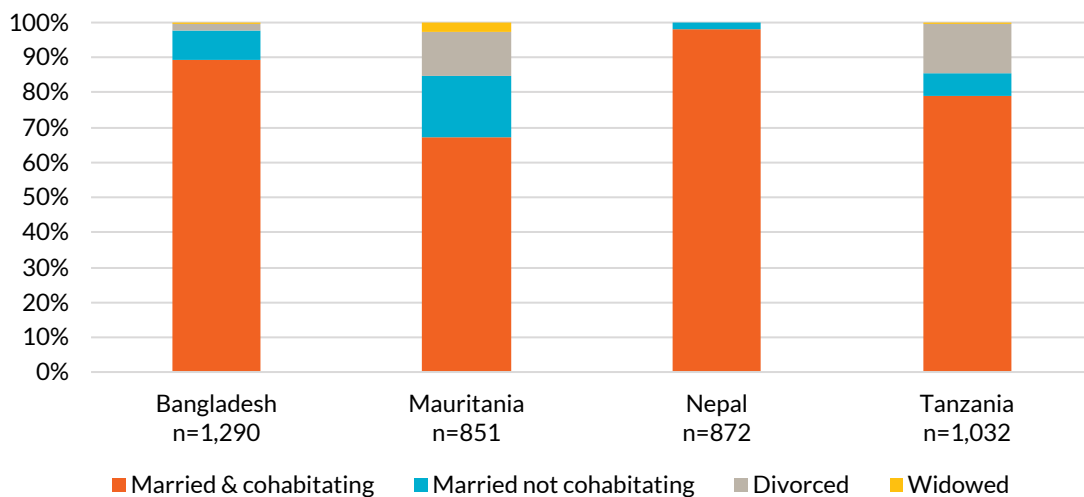
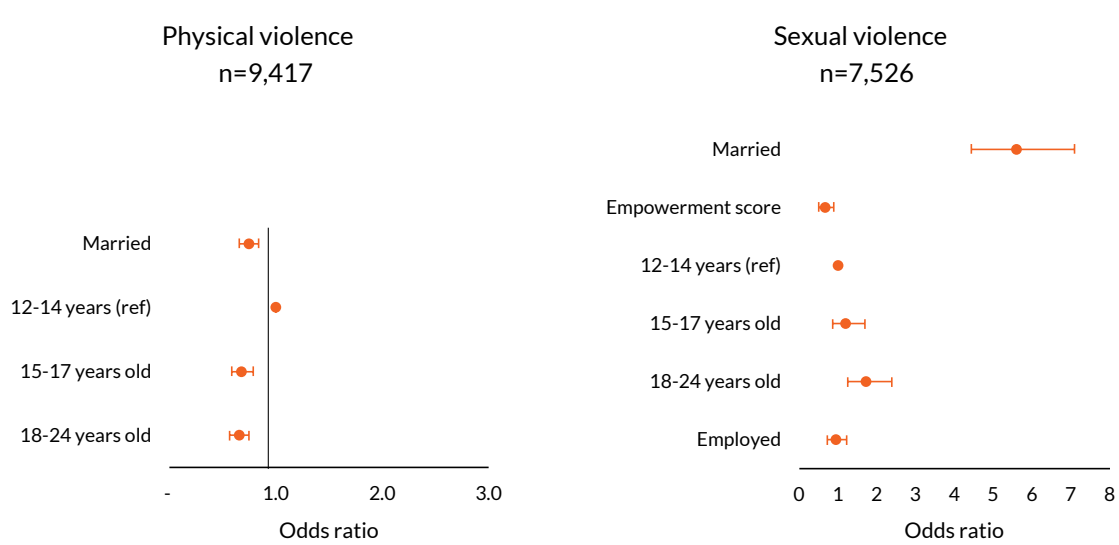


Figure A-C7: Marital status in each country

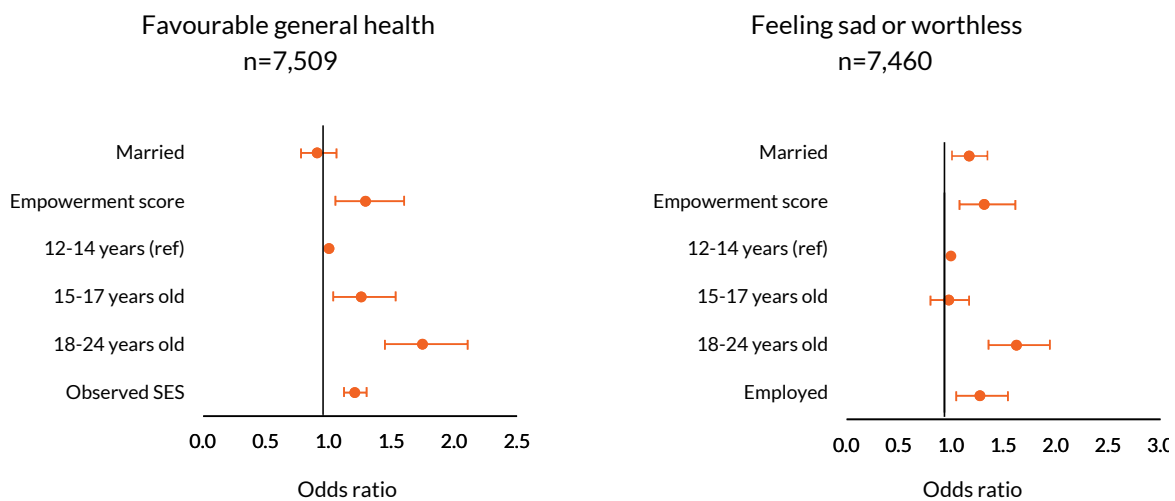


**Figure A-C8: Predictors of physical and sexual violence**



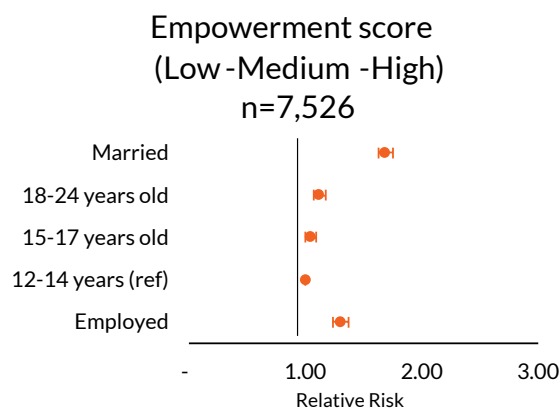
NOTE: Both models are adjusted for country and observed household socioeconomic status. Employment status is included in both models but was not significantly associated with either outcome.

**Figure A-C9: Predictors of favourable general health or feeling sad or worthless**



NOTE: Both models are adjusted for country and observed household socioeconomic status. Employment status is included in both models but was not significantly associated with either outcome.

**Figure A-C10: Predictors of higher empowerment score**



NOTE: Model is adjusted for country and observed household socioeconomic status.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> (OAU) O of AU. The African charter on the rights and welfare of the child. 1990.
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- <sup>4</sup> Muthengi, 2021.
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- <sup>5</sup> The empowerment score is based on this [validated scale](#), and incorporates girls' levels of agency, decision-making power, and social capital.
- <sup>6</sup> This was defined as violence perpetrated by their husbands for married girls and incidents of violence perpetrated by a family member or partner for unmarried women. The sociocultural context of violence, especially sexual violence, was not captured by this study and may potentially affect the approach to defining, measuring, and interpreting the experience of sexual violence.
- <sup>7</sup> Adolescent girls and young women reported both positive and negative changes to agency after marriage. In general, they felt their agency to access school or to work outside of the home decreased after marriage. Countries with the greatest magnitude of worsened agency were Bangladesh (55% for school and 51% for work access), Tanzania (53% for work access) and Mauritania (43% for school and 39% for work access).
- <sup>8</sup> The exception to this was Tanzania, where girls frequently dropped out of school to work prior to marrying.
- <sup>9</sup> On a country level, the increased feeling of sadness and worthlessness among married girls was predominantly in Bangladesh, Mauritania, and Tanzania.
- <sup>10</sup> In this report, we use the term 'child marriage' to refer to early and forced child marriage, mirroring the terminology used for the Sustainable Development Goals.
- <sup>11</sup> UNICEF. 'Child marriage'. [accessed 21 Jun 2023]. <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>.
- <sup>12</sup> Nour, NM. 'Child Marriage: A Silent Health and Human Rights Issue'. *Rev Obstet Gynecol.* 2009;2(1):51–6.
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- <sup>20</sup> Lokot et al., 2021.
- Miedema et al., 2020..
- <sup>21</sup> Schaffnit et al., 2020.
- Baraka et al., 2022.
- Muthengi, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Muthengi, 2021.

Al Akash et al., 2021.

<sup>23</sup> The research covered a fairly representative geographic spread of districts in each country, based on World Vision's programmatic footprint. Research sites by country were:

Bangladesh: Dinajpur, Barishal, Bandorban, Sunamgonj, Dhaka, Rajshahi, Bagerhat, Cumilla, Mymensingh, Sylhet

Mauritania: Nouakchott-South, Brakna, Gorgol, Assaba

Nepal: two districts from each ecological region — Jumla District and Bajhang District (Mountain), Doti District and Achham District (Hilly), Mahottari District and Rautahat District (Terai)

Tanzania: Handeni, Korogwe, Mkinga and Kilindi Districts (Tanga Region), Itilima and Maswa Districts (Simiyu Region) Kishapu District (Shinyanga Region), Buhigwe, Kakonko and Kasulu DC Districts (Kigoma Region).

<sup>24</sup> The total sample size was calculated to allow each age group to be compared to any other group in the same or different country at 90% power and evaluate 10-point differences, so a confidence interval of +5 would be obtained. The total sample size was slightly less than the 10,176 planned because, in all countries, fewer married girls and young women aged 12 to 14 years were available, which limits some findings, especially for Nepal and Tanzania (Table 3.1 in Appendix A, highlighted in yellow).

<sup>25</sup> Four focus groups were held per country in the fall of 2022 with 6 to 10 girls and young women between 16 and 18 years old; half of the discussions were with married girls and young women and the other half with unmarried girls and young women. Discussions focused on girls and young women's future dreams and expectations, experiences of and plans for marriage, key health outcomes, experiences accessing health and social services, and sociodemographic details. Unfortunately, the quality of the data from Nepal and Mauritania was inferior, so only findings from two of the four countries are presented here. Details of data collection and analytic methods can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>26</sup> Please see Appendix A for a full list of research questions and objectives.

<sup>27</sup> In the charts presented, the x-axis lists the predictors that were associated with each outcome. The y-axis shows either a relative risk or odds ratio, both of which indicate the likelihood that a predictor was independently associated with an outcome. In other words, this is the likelihood that a person with a given characteristic compared to a person without it will have the outcome while maintaining all other characteristics the same. For example, the likelihood of reporting sexual violence comparing married and unmarried women in the same age group, from the same country and of the same observed socioeconomic status. A likelihood greater than one indicates higher probability whereas a likelihood less than one indicates lower probability.

<sup>28</sup> Significant differences between unmarried and married girls and young women are highlighted in the 'Variance' column. Darker green indicates a greater difference with married girls and young women having a higher probability of a given outcome than an unmarried girls and young women, and orange colouring indicates either a smaller magnitude difference or the reverse pattern — that is that unmarried have a higher likelihood than married girls and young women of experiencing a given outcome.

<sup>29</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019, Survey Findings Report. 2020.

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<sup>30</sup> World Vision. Fighting for a future: an index of girls' opportunities in countries and regions with high rates of child marriage. October 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/fighting-future-index-girls-opportunities-countries-and-regions-high-rates-child-marriage>.

<sup>31</sup> Percentage of girls aged 15-19 years who are currently married or in a union: Bangladesh 33% in 2019; Mauritania 27% in 2021; Nepal 19% in 2019; Tanzania 23% in 2016; UNICEF Data Warehouse [https://data.unicef.org/resources/data\\_explorer/unicef\\_f/?ag=UNICEF&df=GLOBAL\\_DATAFLOW&ver=1.0&dq=TZA+BGD+NPL+MRT.PT\\_F\\_20-24\\_MRD\\_U18+PT\\_F\\_15-19\\_MRD.&startPeriod=2016&endPeriod=2022](https://data.unicef.org/resources/data_explorer/unicef_f/?ag=UNICEF&df=GLOBAL_DATAFLOW&ver=1.0&dq=TZA+BGD+NPL+MRT.PT_F_20-24_MRD_U18+PT_F_15-19_MRD.&startPeriod=2016&endPeriod=2022).

<sup>32</sup> UNICEF. 'Girls' education'. <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education#:~:text=Girls%20who%20receive%20an%20education,for%20themselves%20and%20their%20families>.

<sup>33</sup> In Mauritania, married girls and young women tended to be better off than their unmarried peers, which also corresponded with them being less likely to be sometimes or always hungry. Contrary to general assumptions, in Mauritania unmarried – not married - girls were more than twice as likely to say they were much less wealthy, compared to married girls the same age. Unmarried versus married: Bangladesh 43% versus 7%, Nepal 34% versus 9%, and Tanzania 31% versus <1%.

<sup>34</sup> UNESCO. 'Defending girls' right to education in Nepal'. Last updated 20 April 2023.

[https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/defending-girls-right-education-nepal?TSPD\\_101\\_R0=080713870fab20008afcb29277bfb2b1f24171c3e32a652102ac853f7ff5d7b214dd851275](https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/defending-girls-right-education-nepal?TSPD_101_R0=080713870fab20008afcb29277bfb2b1f24171c3e32a652102ac853f7ff5d7b214dd851275).

<sup>35</sup> OR=0.65 95% CI (0.56, 0.75).

<sup>36</sup> OR=0.68 95% CI (0.59, 0.78) and OR=0.65 95% CI (0.56,0.75) for the 15 to 17 and 18- to 24-year-old age groups respectively.

<sup>37</sup> OR=5.67 95% CI (4.43, 7.08).

<sup>38</sup> OR=1.73, 95% CI (1.26, 2.38).

<sup>39</sup> This finding may have been higher than previous studies would suggest, as research took place in World Vision project areas, where many programmes help to strengthen and raise awareness of these services.

<sup>40</sup> de Groot, Richard; Kuunyem, Maxwell Yiryele; Palermo, Tia; Osei-Akoto, Isaac; Adamba, Clement; Darko, Joseph K; Osei, Robert Darko et al. 'Child Marriage and Associated Outcomes in Northern Ghana: A Cross-Sectional Study.' *BMC Public Health*. 2018;18(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5166-6>.

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- <sup>42</sup> It appears that self-assessed positive health status shows a parallel pattern to report of better mental health as they both were measured in this study. The mental health outcome was framed in the negative: 'feeling sad or worthless'.
- <sup>43</sup> OR=0.9, 95% CI (0.8, 1.1).
- <sup>44</sup> OR=1.30, 95% CI (1.05, 1.60).
- <sup>45</sup> OR=1.75, 95% CI (1.45, 2.11).
- <sup>46</sup> OR=1.17, 95% CI (1.01, 1.35).
- <sup>47</sup> OR=1.32, 95% CI (1.08, 1.62).
- <sup>48</sup> OR=1.27, 95% CI 1.05, 1.54).
- <sup>49</sup> Range: 11% to 19% depending on age group.
- <sup>50</sup> National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), and ICF. Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2017-18. 2020. Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Rockville, Maryland, USA: NIPORT and ICF.
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- <sup>54</sup> For unmarried girls and young women, the data is stratified by current age, whereas for married women, the age at first marriage is used to reflect more closely the events around the time this decision was taken. All statistical comparisons are for differences across age groups for each country and not comparing unmarried to married women. The question is framed as an expectation for unmarried women whereas it captures what married women say happened. The response categories for unmarried and married women were slightly different and are clearly indicated in the legends above each figure.
- <sup>55</sup> 41% Bangladeshi girls and 47% Nepali girls aged 12–14.
- <sup>56</sup> The questions used to measure the elements of the Empowerment Scale are specified in Appendix A.
- <sup>57</sup> Worsened access to school: Bangladesh – 55%, Mauritania – 43%, Nepal – 37%; Tanzania – 22%. Worsened access to work: Bangladesh – 51%, Mauritania – 39%, Nepal – 23%; Tanzania – 53%. Improved access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH): Bangladesh – 32%, Mauritania – 48%, Nepal – 21%; Tanzania – 56%. Improved access to antenatal care (ANC): Bangladesh – 49%, Mauritania – 66%, Nepal – 59%; Tanzania – 63%. Greater community status: Bangladesh – 47%, Mauritania – 58%, Nepal – 44%; Tanzania – 58%.
- <sup>58</sup> To facilitate interpretation, the empowerment score was redefined in three levels (low, medium, and high), with roughly one-third of the sample falling into each grouping.
- <sup>59</sup> OR=1.7, 95% CI (1.6, 1.8).
- <sup>60</sup> OR=1.3, 95% CI (1.2, 1.4).
- <sup>61</sup> OR=1.1, 95% CI (1.07, 1.2).
- <sup>62</sup> Schaffnit et al., 2019.
- <sup>63</sup> Pacheco-Montoya, Diana; Murphy-Graham, Erin; Eduardo Valencia López, Enrique; Cohen, Alison K. 'Gender Norms, Control Over Girls' Sexuality, and Child Marriage: A Honduran Case Study.' *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2022;70(3), Supplement, S22–S27, ISSN 1054-139X, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.11.007>.
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