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Early Marriage in Mbale District, Uganda

Examining young women's perceptions, agency and the influence of The Hunger Project Uganda

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Nasimile!

Webale nyo!

ABSTRACT

The practice of early marriage is widespread around the world and in the development arena early marriage is commonly viewed as a harmful practice that violates the human rights of the girl child. Research has been concentrated on the negative effects that early marriage has on young women, often portraying women as helpless victims of cultural traditions. Yet, the voices and perspectives of young women are strongly absent in the literature. The Her Choice program, which in Uganda is implemented by The Hunger Project, aims to eliminate early marriage and hope to influence girls to become strong and capable agents in resisting early marriage practices. This research aims to address the knowledge gap by focusing on young married and single women's perspectives and agency towards early marriage as well as examining the Her Choice program's influence on their views in Mbale District, Uganda. The gathered data is based on a mixed qualitative methods approach, involving in-depth interviews, FGDs and participant observation. The main findings indicate that young women are not at all passive victims, but rather exercise agency (decision-making) in different ways in more or less confined contexts. Deciding to marry at an early age serves as a source of sustaining livelihood and attaining social companionship. The ways that women experience and exercise agency in their lives is strongly influenced by established gender roles and relations. Furthermore, women's views reveal that the Her Choice program promote gender balance and sexual morality, and the program has provided women in Mbale District with knowledge and skills to exercise agency. This research concludes that early marriage literature needs to consider local understandings of phenomena related to marriage to better accommodate successful early marriage policies and interventions. Additionally, this research recommends a stronger focus on promoting sexual reproductive health and rights as well as sexuality education, especially towards single women without children, to promote female agency and to insure that women take informed action in regards to their futures.

Key words: Early marriage, early pregnancy, agency, gender, sexuality, Mbale District

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Abbreviations

APO	Assistant Program Officer
FGD	Focus group discussion
IDI	In-depth interview
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

SRHR	Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights
SRI	Sexual Rights Initiative
STI	Sexual Transmitted Infection
THP	The Hunger Project
UBS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
UNFPA	The United Nations Population Fund
VCA	Vision Commitment and Action
WB	World Bank

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem statement

Early or child marriage is defined as a formal or informal marriage where at least one of the individuals is below the age of 18 (Nour 2009). Recent data suggests that over 700 million women worldwide are married before their 18th birthday. According to Unicef's progress report on *Ending Child Marriage*, the total number of child brides may exceed 950 million by the year 2030. Whereby, approximately half of the world's early marriages will be accounted for in Sub-Saharan Africa as a result of slowly declining prevalence rate of early marriage in combination with a rapidly growing population (Unicef, 2014). In Uganda, it is estimated that 46% of girls enter into early marriage, despite the legal marrying age being 18 years old (Unicef, June, 2015).

International organizations often frame early marriage as a harmful practice that needs to be addressed. The underlying message is that early marriage is a violation against human rights, especially towards the girl child, in regards to health, education, security and freedom from coercion. Additionally, the practice of early marriage is seen to impede a number of (national) development goals related to education, health and gender parity (Svanemyr et. al., 2015). Alongside the human rights approach that is often used by international organizations and non-governmental organizations, a line of criticism has evolved. Research on early marriage, often produced by development actors, tends to highlight causes and effects of early marriage and often lacks a contextual understanding. Researchers Callaghan et. al. (2015) and Archambault (2011) argue that early marriage literature overlooks the connection between marriage and poverty. They recommend that the early marriage discourse needs to be understood in the complex socio-economic context in which it persists. Furthermore, researchers reason that women are often portrayed as passive victims who are subject to early marriage (Murphy Graham & Leal, 2015; Hodgkinson, 2016). The literature often disregards motivations and rationale behind girls' agency in order to take informed

action, and the voices of married and single women are largely absent. This obscurity suggests that there is a knowledge gap in understanding women's perceptions and decision-making process leading up to, and within marriage.

The main objective of this study is twofold. The first objective is to gain insight into women's perceptions and agency related to early marriage. By engaging those affected by early marriage, I aim to enable a stronger comprehension of early marriage practices in Mbale District. The second objective of this study is to examine The Hunger Project Uganda's influence on women's perceptions and agency related to early marriage in Mbale District, Uganda. The academic relevance of this research is to problematize the universal human rights discourse driven forward by development actors, and shed light on women's insights and perceptions based on lived experiences around early marriage. The social relevance of this research relates to examining the issue of early marriage within Mbale District. Gaining in-depth insight into women's perceptions and agency and the practices that increases or decreases women's ability to make marriage decisions is expected to contribute to recommendations for early marriage intervention efforts. I focus on THP Uganda's work with the Her Choice program in order to offer them recommendations that may further increase women's agency.

1.2 The Her Choice Alliance

This research is within the domain of the Her Choice program, whereas the main objective is to create child marriage-free communities by supporting women to choose if, when and to whom to marry (Her Choice, 2017).

The Her Choice alliance is made up of four organizations based in the Netherlands, and is collaborating with 32 local partners in the eleven-targeted countries, including Uganda. THP Uganda is in charge of carrying out the Her Choice program in eleven epicenters within Uganda, including Mbale epicenter in Mbale District.

The Her Choice program uses six strategies to reach the common goal: investing in girls knowledge and skills; keeping girls in school; improving access to youth friendly SRHR services; strengthening the economic security for girls and their

families; transforming social norms and traditional practices; and creating an enabling legal policy environment on preventing child marriage (Her Choice, 2017). While this research is independent, it should be kept in mind that the research focus was influenced by THP's requests.

1.3 Thesis Outline

Following this introduction presenting the problem statement and relevance of the study, the second chapter presents the theoretical framework of which this thesis is based. Chapter three provides an introduction to the research location, THP Uganda and Mbale epicenter, as well as a legal overview of marriage legislation and early marriage practices in Uganda. The fourth chapter specifies the research questions, research methodology and reflects on the limitations of this study and the ethical considerations. The findings of this research are organized by sub-question into three chapters five, six and seven. Chapter eight provides the research discussion and a revision of the conceptual model. Finally, chapter nine presents the conclusions and my recommendations for further research and policy and practice.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents this study's theoretical framework. Firstly, I make a distinction between the terms 'child marriage' and 'early marriage' and I describe why the latter is deemed more appropriate in this research. Secondly, this chapter presents the broader debate on universalism and cultural relativism, and its reference to the early marriage debate. The following sections discuss the concepts of agency (2.4), gender and sexuality (2.5) as well as SRHR and sexuality education (2.6).

2.2 Defining child/early marriage

Policy-makers and development actors use different terminology with underlying predefined assumptions of what the practice entails. The concept of child, early or forced marriages are often used simultaneously and at times interchangeably, and the terms often lack explicit differences in definition (SRI, 2013). The term 'child marriage' is often the more commonly used term amongst international development actors, and the effective use of the term *child* in 'child marriage' suggests an unsuitable age to marry, universally defining the child as a person under the age of 18. Thus, child marriage is a marriage when one or both of the spouses is under the age of 18 (Archambault, 2011). 'Forced marriage' consists of one or both of spouses engaging in marriage without consent, which suggests lack of decision-making ability. While 'early marriage' and 'child marriage' are often used synonymously, 'early marriage' also includes the notion of evolving capabilities. This suggests that children have different maturity levels and decision-making abilities. Thus, 'early marriage' is not necessarily only defined by a specific age, and is used in broader terms (SRI, 2013). The term 'early marriage' is also used in a culturally sensitive way to insinuate when one or both of the spouses are not socially, physically, mentally or economically mature for marriage (ibid.). I suggest that the broader term 'early marriage' is a more appropriate terminology to use as this research as it takes a constructivist and interpretivist approach to the topic, as well as explores the universality of early marriage practice.

2.3 Universalism versus cultural relativism

Universalism and cultural relativism are two opposing schools of thought where universalism determines a phenomenon to be universally true or fixed, and cultural relativism rejects fixed definitions and relies on cultural and contextual variation (Healy, 2007).

Human rights rest on the notion that rights are universally recognized norms and values entitling all human beings, despite cultural or social differences, basic rights. As defended by radical universalists, culture is not attached to the legitimacy of rights, and phenomena (such as early marriage) may be objectively determined through a universal set of values (Donnelly, 1984). International organizations frame early marriage as a harmful practice that is a severe violation against (universal) human rights, especially against children's rights (Svanemyr et. al., 2015). By doing so, international organizations make the assumption that the notion of child and childhood are universal and not influenced by cultural factors. As a children's rights-issue, early marriage is framed to rob children from having a childhood and from pursuing education (Archambault, 2011). This further implies that according to universal values and norms, a universal childhood is directly related to going to school and receiving an education.

Human rights approaches to early marriage have received growing criticism for attempting to impose objective universal truths and disregarding complex local social and economical circumstances that perpetuate early marriage practices (Archambault, 2011; Buss & Burrill, 2016). In contrast to universalism, supporters of cultural relativism believe that morality and values are shaped by culture. Cultural relativism criticizes universal frameworks for over-simplifying sociocultural phenomena and processes (Donnelly, 1984). The cultural relativist approach insinuates that there is no universal truth and the approach recognizes cultural influences and contexts. This aligns well with the constructivist and interpretivist approach of this research.

2.3.1 Universal human rights approach to early marriage

The rights-based approach argues that early marriage is often strongly linked to forced marriage. International organizations highlight several negative impacts that early marriage has on children, especially in regards to the girl child. According to Jensen and Thornton (2003), young women who enter into early marriage are more prone to feelings of inferiority in relation to the husband, as well as experiencing restricted power to make decisions within the household. Women within an early marriage are also more likely to experience domestic abuse. Early marriage often shows a range of negative impact on a girl's health and social well-being. The practice is regularly associated with early pregnancy, higher rates of HIV/AIDS as well as maternal and child morbidity and mortality (Callaghan et. al., 2015; Unicef, 2017; Clark, 2004). These harmful effects imply that there is a sense of urgency on the international development agenda, meaning that early marriage needs to be eliminated on a large-scale, worldwide.

2.3.2 A critique: Cultural relativist approach to early marriage

Critique of the universal human rights-based approach has emerged. Some researchers find that concepts, related to early marriage, are not universal and should not be treated as such. As well, cultural specific motivations to marry early should be highlighted in order to understand the complexity of early marriage.

Chantler (2012) argues that the rights-based discourse regarding early marriage fails to incorporate non-western notions of childhood, marriage, love and agency. Cultural constructions of childhood need to be considered, as the idea of childhood varies in different parts of the world (Bunting, 2005). Willis (2011, p. 156-157) argues that the 'carefree' sense of childhood fails to recognize lived experiences for many children around the world in regards to household work and care taking. Therefore, it is problematic to imply that early marriage prevents an objective idea of 'normal childhood'. As well, Eurocentric norms of what 'love' and 'marriage' mean often steer general assumptions and research on early marriage by using universal definitions in various sociocultural contexts (Chantler, 2012). Thus, concepts related to early marriage should not be understood as universal.

Local understandings and voices, especially women's voices, are generally lacking within the human rights-based discourse and early marriage literature, and cultural specific understandings and motivations for early marriage are not taken into account. Thus, women are portrayed as passive victims rather than actors who are capable of making decisions.

Archambault (2011) reflects on universalism in her research of Maasai girls in Kenya. She recognizes that while portraying women as victims may be a successful tool to increase public support, it masks underlying structural factors that cause early marriage practices. This in turn compromises intervention program's possibility to efficiently deal with the issue at hand.

As framed in the human rights discourse, girls are incapable of making decisions for themselves and are seen as victims that need to be rescued from their circumstances. However, according to Archambault (ibid.), early marriage should not only be seen as a harmful practice that is forced upon the adolescent girl child. It is unlikely that young women do not exercise any level or form of agency or resistance (which can be understood as exercising agency as well). As further understood by Archambault (ibid.), early marriage can be examined as a response to livelihood insecurities. For instance, within poor living conditions, early marriage can be a way of securing an improved livelihood and gain access to various resources. Parents of a girl may not have sufficient funding to pay for her education or basic needs, and therefore a girl may marry at a young age to receive this support from a husband who is expected to sustain her. In some societies, such as in Uganda, parents are also meant to receive bride price from the husband or his parents, which can also be an incentive for the parents to marry off the daughter (Svanemyr et. al., 2012).

Murphy-Graham and Leal (2015) found that cultural traditions often play a role in terms of determining appropriate adolescent sexual behavior. In communities where premarital sex is prohibited or strongly advised against, early marriage may serve as an alternative choice or be forced upon a young couple that wishes to be sexually active. Also, early marriage may be perceived as an acceptable practice

within the community and considered as a cultural or traditional normality of family formation (James, 2010). In other words, in a setting where relatives and community members perpetuate the practice, early marriage may appear as an unproblematic type of marriage.

2.4 Agency

In research agency is commonly described as ‘the ability to define one’s goals and act accordingly’. Formulating a motivation and purpose of one’s goals are as well incorporated in the act of exercising agency, decision-making and participation (Mahmood, 2012). Being able to distinguish one’s motivation and goal and capacity to act upon those goals is likely to bring personal happiness, sense of fulfillment and increased self-esteem (Kabeer, 1999).

According to Mahmood (2012), exercising agency and free will happen when a person makes decisions without external constraints. Sociocultural customs and traditions within society may strengthen or impede level of agency. As the idea that humans act completely independently from norms and values is highly doubtful, I refrain from imagining that exercising agency equivalents exercising free will. Agency should be understood in relation to moral codes, without the presumption that self-determination is equivalent to agency (ibid.).

As perceived through structuration theory, the levels of agency are more often pre-determined by structural factors within society. These factors may be found in dimensions related to social, political, economic and cultural norms, which may strain or enable agency. For this sake, I expect that the participant’s agency be influenced by several factors in the community. Therefore, I look into women’s views on gender and sexuality in order to examine if these understandings influence the way the women make decisions. The study will not measure women’s degree of agency from a Eurocentric point of view, but will rather allow the women to define what agency means to them in their lives. I refer to Klocker’s theory (2007) on forms of agency, as I deem it most relevant in understanding women’s agency in regards to (early) marriage. I argue that there is an agency continuum

ranging from thin and thick agency, which contributes to understanding under which circumstances individuals make decisions.

Klocker (2007) examines agency through structuration theory by defining agency in 'thick' and 'thin' terms. According to Klocker's theory, all people are capable actors who possess an ability to make decisions. People's options depend on contexts, relations and structures that vary over time and space.

In settings where the individual experiences a variety of choices, and are able to act upon those choices, is described as thick agency. Thin agency represents agency that may appear to be non-existent that is exercised in highly restricted contexts under challenging circumstances such as poverty (ibid.). Murphy-Graham & Leal (2015) identify that people who exercise thin agency do in fact make choices for themselves, even if they may seem unwanted or uninformed by external observers. Even within thin agency, there are options or opportunities available to act upon. To illustrate this, I incorporate Johnson-Hanks' categorization of 'opportunity agency'.

Johnson-Hanks (2005) introduces 'judicious opportunism' as a reaction to limited choices that young women may experience. The idea revolves around individuals planning for their life and future, nonetheless under difficult circumstances, which will trigger that person to take opportunities when they arise and adapt to emerging possibilities. This may offer some insight into understanding young women's reasoning and motivations behind marriage decisions at an early age. As proposed by Archambault (2011), judicious opportunism may explain women's decision to marry early as a source of livelihood.

2.5 Gender and sexuality

Academic research on early marriage usually incorporates the notion of gender (roles and relations) and sexuality as it touches upon topics of family/relationships and sexual activity. Additionally, the practice of early marriage is generally recognized to reinforce gender inequalities and vice versa (Unicef, 2005). Thus, I

deem it to be relevant to examine early marriage practices with a gender perspective.

Gerson and Peiss (1985) define gender as a phenomenon that references to biological differences and socially constructed notions related to masculinity and femininity.

Gender relations illustrate division of institutional and discursive power between men and women, which is revealed through dimensions of labor and ideas of men and women (Argawal, 1997; Connell, 2002). Gender relations should be assumed as a multidimensional relationship between and amongst women and men, and different relations can function simultaneously (Schofield et. al. 2002). Such power relationships emerge in settings where one group or individual has structural advantages over another group or individual by dimensions such as class, gender or sexuality (Andersen 2005). Adding on to this, Goicolea et. al. (2010) suggest that as gender structures are socially produced, and exist within institutions such as family, school and state, the meaning of gender roles and relations at a specific time and place varies.

People are socialized from a young age, and pressures from family, community members or peers ensure that individuals act accordingly to these traditions. In other words, gender roles are often collectively defined. In line with this reasoning, the common power superiority among men over women will in turn influence the degree of female agency, such as individually deciding over one's choice for sexual activity and engaging in marriage (Andersen, 2005).

Gendered division of labor highlights the structure of duties and responsibilities connected to gender roles, which is often recognized in both the developed and developing world. The domestic household work and childcare is more often considered as women's duties and is a women's role within the family while the men's role within the household is to be the breadwinner and make sure that the family is provided for. This creates an unequal financial relationship between men and women as the division of labor is more often divided into paid work for men, and unpaid work for women (Webley 2012).

Perceptions and behaviors related to sexuality can be influenced by social and cultural norms and traditions as well as controlled by the rule of law within a society such as an age that allows people to become sexually active. Common ideas of sexuality in societies generally grant men sexual liberty and constrain women's sexuality (Connell, 2014). Young women's sexuality is often related to risk of early pregnancy as well as ideas of immorality. The framing of 'good girls' in society is regularly strongly related to abstinence from sexual activity before marriage (Froyum, 2010).

Cultural norms and traditions often determine timing of women's sexual activity, and these norms and values also determine the standard of sexual legitimacy within a society. Sexual legitimacy and 'appropriate' sexual behavior varies across societies and may consist of procreation, intimacy, consent, heterosexuality, personal fulfillment or religious responsibility. If procreation is the goal of one's sexuality, procreation may become a main reason for marriage and sexual activity may be normalized by the time a woman reaches puberty and can procreate (Miller & Vance, 2004). According to Kesby et. al. (2006), sociocultural norms and values influence youth's sexual activity and the context in which youth make decisions in regards to sex are usually complex.

By recognizing the influence that social and cultural processes have on young women's decision-making, not to mention in relation to early marriage, it is inevitable to take local understandings of gender and sexuality into consideration. I argue that notions of gender and sexuality are not universal concepts, and therefore the cultural relativist approach is more suitable as this allows for contextual understanding.

2.6 Sexual and reproductive health and rights and sexuality education

It has become increasingly important for development actors to invest in sexual and reproductive health and rights' education as it has positive effects on reducing mortality and poverty rates (Altinyelken & Olthoff, 2014). As well, SRHR and

sexuality education encourages gender parity and empowers women to make informed decisions about their own bodies and lives (Aggleton & Campell, 2000).

The term sexual and reproductive health and rights¹ combine all aspects of the interrelated concepts of sexual health, reproductive health, sexual rights and reproductive rights.

Women who participate in SRHR and sexuality training tend to have more knowledge about family planning and methods of protection against HIV/AIDS and other diseases (ibid). According to Muhanguzi and Ninsiima's (2011) findings from Uganda, the formal sexuality education in school for youth increases responsible sexual behavior and demonstrates a decrease in number of sexual abuse. However, as many young girls and boys are out of school, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is necessary to pursue SRHR and sexuality education in other settings as well.

There are three main approaches to SRHR and sexuality education, and the local social and cultural context usually determines which approach is deemed more appropriate (Altinyelken & Olthoff, 2014). The approaches consist of a morality approach, health approach and a rights-based approach. The morality approach to SRHR and sexuality education emphasizes cultural morality norms concerning sexual practices. This approach has traditional and conservative characteristics where values and norms come prior to addressing health-related issues. The priority within the health approach is directly related to promoting healthy sexual behavior to prevent exposure to sexual transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS as

1. SRHR: a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and...not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. Implicit in this last condition are the right of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice, as well as other methods of their choice for regulation of fertility which are not against the law, and the right of access to appropriate health- care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant (para 72).(UNFPA, 1994)

well as unwanted pregnancies. This approach is often used as the core message of preventative programs against HIV/AIDS and STI's, and is seen to be fairly unbiased and disconnected from cultural values.

The rights-based approach aims to promote empowerment and individual agency in terms of making decisions about one's sexuality. This approach promotes open discussion about sexuality (Altinyelken & Olthoff, 2014).

Based on the recent study by Muhanguzi and Ninsiima (2011) involving Ugandan youth, sexuality education in Uganda is based on traditional values. This indicates a commitment to heterosexuality and abstinence before marriage, which is therefore closely connected to the morality approach of SRHR. In Uganda, the rate of contraceptive use is low, and is understood to be the result of lacking access to family planning services (Guttmacher Institute, 2017). Minimizing access to contraceptives can be seen as a fixed effort to limiting youth's opportunities to act immorally and have premarital sex (Kaye, 2006).

Women are more often targeted with information portraying sexual activity as a dangerous practice, and therefore promoters of SRHR knowledge often suggest abstinence as an alternative to sex. Furthermore, Muhanguzi and Ninsiima's (2011) findings suggest that the participants experience sexuality education as judgmental. The scholars argue that sexuality education is often not representative of youth's experiences with sexuality. As a result, youth question the relevance of the information, as the information does not match the youth's needs. Aggleton and Campbell (2010) propose youth-friendly health services and SRHR education in order to close the gap between sexuality messages and youth behavior. By doing this, SRHR and sexuality education may become more effective and successfully promote satisfying and healthy practices.

This research will examine the type of sexuality education, and young women's experiences with and perception of the SRHR and sexuality education facilitated by the animators from THP in Mbale District. I will examine how women's access to sexuality education and SRHR knowledge contribute to or limit women's ability to

make choices concerning their sexual reproductive health and rights in relation to early marriage.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter illustrates the theoretical background and discusses the concepts that this research is based on. I choose to use the term 'early' marriage as it permits a broader understanding as it relates to notions of maturity that are not directly associated with the age 18. As early marriage is regularly framed as a human rights issue, I include the debate on universalism versus cultural relativism, which reflects the different standpoints towards framing and understanding early marriage. Furthermore, the chapter includes a discussion on agency, gender and sexuality, as well as SRHR and sexuality education in order to capture the complexity of early marriage practices in Mbale District.

3 RESEARCH CONTEXT

3.1 Introduction

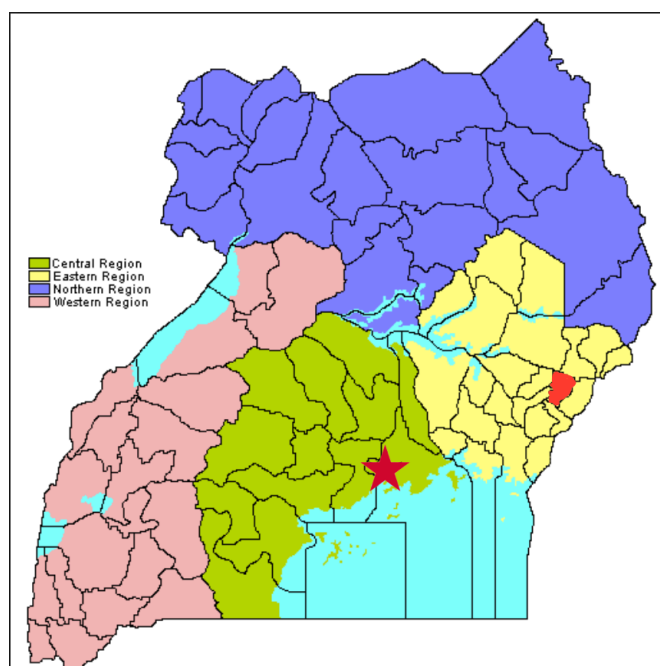
The following chapter provides the context that is relevant for the research site and the research topic. Firstly, section 3.2 presents an a background to Uganda and Eastern Uganda. This chapter gives an overview of the economic development, the legal context of marital law and its contradictions and early marriage practices in Uganda. The succeeding sections offer contextual insight into THP Uganda and their work in Mbale District on eliminating early marriage.

3.2 Background information on Uganda and Eastern Uganda

The Republic of Uganda is situated in East Africa, bordering South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania and Kenya. The country is divided into four regions; Central, Western, Eastern and the Northern region (see Figure 2.). In turn, these regions are further divided into 111 districts excluding the capital, Kampala. Uganda has 32.9 million inhabitants, of which roughly 85 percent resides in rural areas where early marriage practices are more prominent. Almost the entire population (roughly 99 percent) affiliates to a certain religion. Approximately 66 percent belong to Christian denominations; 16 percent are Muslim; and roughly 18 percent follows traditional (indigenous) religion

(Government of Uganda, 2016). There are no regional statistics on religious affiliation available for Mbale District. However,

Figure 1. Map of Uganda highlighting the four regions, Mbale District (Eastern Region) and the capital Kampala (Central region)



during fieldwork it appeared as though different types of Christianity were dominating in the area. All participants of this study were part of a Christian denomination.

3.2.1 Economic development

During the past two decades Uganda has shown a positive economic growth and a significant reduction in the national poverty rate due to reestablishment of peace and stability in the country. Agriculture, the dominant sector in the economy, was the cause of 79 percent of the dropping poverty rates. Thus, family agricultural activity accounted for the largest income increase per household (World Bank, 2016; UBS, 2014). Despite progress in economic development and political stability over the past years, other dimensions of development, such as schooling and access to public amenities are lagging behind. While the rate of children enrolled in primary education has increased to a level of 96 percent, the rate of completing primary school remains among the lowest in the world, with approximately 53 percent (World Bank, 2016.). Only one quarter of Ugandan youth are enrolled in secondary school, and according to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 16.9 percent of girls complete secondary school (Unicef, 2016; UBS, 2014). Improved sanitation facilities are often scarce, and the quality of physical infrastructure and access to electricity remain low, especially among rural populations (World Bank, 2016; UBS, 2014).

This research was conducted in Mbale District, within the Eastern region of Uganda. The population of Mbale District is approximately 490.000 inhabitants and roughly 75 percent of the population lives in rural areas, which is in line with the national average (City Population, 2014; UBS, 2014). According to World Bank data (2016), poverty rates are decreasing nationwide, however, the poverty rate is increasing in the Northern and Eastern regions of the country (see Figure 2.). Roughly 37 percent of the population in the Eastern region is estimated to live below the national poverty line (ibid.).

During my time in Makhai Village, I learnt a way to look at poverty gradation in relation to the number meals a day, and what type of food a person eats.

A person who is able to vary his/her diet with *matooke* (mashed banana), homegrown beans, and *posho* (boiled maize flower) is understood to be more fortunate as opposed to a person who only eats one meal of *posho* every day. Variety in diet usually indicates that a 25 person/family has access to a bit of

3.2.2 Marriage legislation in Uganda

The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995 states in Article (31.1) that the legal marrying age is 18 years old and above for both men and women. However, there are different sets of legislation governing marriages in Uganda related to civil, religious and customary marriages (see Table. 1).

Firstly, the Marriage Act 1904² regulates formal civil marriage and marriage within the Christian church and is in line with the Constitution in regards to the minimum age of marriage. This legislation also requires parental or guardian consent for intended marriage for parties under twenty-one years old. The Marriage Act 1904 further criminalizes bigamy (Article 41.) and marriage with a person who is knowingly already married (Article 42.). Furthermore, The Marriage and Divorce of Mohammedans Act 1906³ governs marriages within Islam and suggests that marriage between minors⁴ is possible with parental or guardian consent (Article 5.). Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act 1961⁵ requires the man to be 18 years old, while the girl may be married at the age of 16 with parental or guardian consent. The Customary Marriage (Registration) Act 1973⁶ suggests that a couple may register for a customary marriage in any part of Uganda, which is celebrated according to customary African traditions (Mujuzi, 2013). This legislation also contradicts the Constitution, allowing marriage between a girl of 16 years old and a man of 18 years old. The Customary Marriage Act also permits polygamy, which culturally allows men to have more than one wife though it is unacceptable for a woman to have more than one husband.

According to Ssenyonjo (2007), these contradictions in Ugandan legislation demonstrate that there is a lack of political will to establish regional laws that will enforce the constitutional responsibilities of gender equality and human rights. As

² Marriage Act, Chapter 251

³ Marriage and Divorce of Mohammedans Act, Chapter 252

⁴ The Marriage and Divorce of Mohammedans Act 1906 does not define the age of a minor. The Marriage Act does not define minor in this case, and does not set the minimum age for marriage.

⁵ The Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act, Chapter 250

⁶ The Customary Marriage (Registration) Act, Chapter 248

of now, three of the Ugandan marital laws go against the Constitution in regards to the legal marrying age being 18. The contradicting marital legislation in place seems to obstruct progress of eliminating early marriage practices in Uganda as several marital laws allow early marriage.

Table 1. Summary of marriage legislation in Uganda

Marriage Legislation	Year	Description	Legal marrying age		Polygamy
			Male	Female	
Constitution of the Republic of Uganda	1995		18	18	N/A
Marriage Act	1904	Civil Marriage in Christian Church	18	18	Criminalized
The Marriage and Divorce of Mohammedans Act	1906	Marriage within Islam	Minor (no specified age) with parental/guardian consent	Minor (no specified age) with parental/guardian consent	N/A
Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act	1961	Marriage within Hinduism	18	16 with parental/guardian consent	Accepted
The Customary Marriage (Registration) Act	1973	Traditional African marriage	18	16	Accepted

4.4 Early marriage in Uganda

In the whole of Uganda, 10 percent of women, aged 20 to 24, were married by the age of 15 and 40 percent were married before turning 18 (Unicef, 2015). According to UNFPA data (2011) the percentage of women, aged 20 to 24, who married before turning 18 account for roughly 51 percent in the whole Eastern region, which is significantly higher than the estimated country average. Between 8.6 to 16.3 percent of the population aged 10 to 19 years old has ever been married in the sub-counties of which this research takes place (UBS, 2014).

Poverty is often recognized as a common factor that perpetuates early marriage practices in Uganda. When a daughter marries, her family is freed from the

economic responsibility of raising her. Receiving a beneficiary bride price may function as a further incentive for the girl's family to marry off their daughter (Lee-Rife et. al., 2012). According to the global partnership *Girls not Brides* (2017), traditions and sociocultural norms also act as influencing factors on early marriage and women are expected to realize their role as a wife and mother at a young age (ibid.). However, less is known about the actual situational circumstances and under which sociocultural influences that women, themselves, make decisions to marry at a young age.

3.3 The Hunger Project Uganda

THP Uganda intends to play a strong role in promoting child marriage-free communities in Uganda. THP was founded in 1977 as a global non-profit organization with the goal to eradicate poverty and hunger around the world. THP assumes that development in communities will be sustainable when everyone in the community is equally participating and when local governments collaborate with local initiatives to reach common goals (The Hunger Project, 2017).

The work of THP builds on three main pillars. The pillars include: empowering women to be successful agents of change in the community; activating communities to become self-reliant from a local bottom-up perspective; and developing efficient relations and partnerships with local governments. In Africa, THP has developed a strategy to mobilize rural populations by creating several community-led epicenters. At the epicenters, THP staff and community members collectively organize action to meet the basic needs of the people. The epicenter strategy incorporates programs to secure food and nutrition, empower women, as well as improving hygiene and securing clean water among other efforts (The Hunger Project, 2017).

THP distinguishes four phases in creating sustainable self-reliant epicenters over a period of eight years. The first phase is to mobilize the communities. In this phase, community-members are invited to the epicenter for a workshop involving envisioning the future. THP staff carries out Vision, Commitment and Action (VCA) workshops that involve community members in training in leadership. A key

purpose of VCA workshops is to identify a clear (combined long- and short-term) action plan for the epicenter. THP staff encourage active participants of the communities to become THP volunteers i.e. animators who become leaders of their own development in the community.

Phase Two consists of mobilizing the physical construction of the epicenter, in which community members work together. When the physical space has been created, the community moves on to Phase Three where the work towards meeting basic needs, women empowerment and education continues through training and workshops. Finally, in Phase Four, the epicenter should be self-reliant and work beneficially on its own, without further THP funding. The THP monitoring of the epicenter continues for another two years in order to ensure that the epicenter is functioning (The Hunger Project, 2015).

THP Uganda works together with 2362 unpaid animators. The organization selects animators by choosing active citizens who maintain a good reputation in the community and who share THP's vision. The animators are divided into nine different sections of focus areas: food security & agriculture; education and literacy; health & HIV/AIDS; microfinance; monitoring and evaluation; VCA/mobilization; water sanitation & hygiene; and women empowerment projects. The animators receive training for specific targeted projects and leadership every quarter from THP Uganda in order to continue leading workshops and training in the community and epicenter (The Hunger Project, 2016).

THP has been working in Uganda since 1999 and they have created eleven epicenters, reaching almost 290,000 people across 494 villages (The Hunger Project, 2017).

The initial contact with THP Uganda was established prior to my arrival. The personnel at the country office provided me with valuable feedback and guidance in regards to the research content and enabled my contact with the Assistant Program Officer (APO) at Mbale Epicenter.

3.3.1 Mbale Epicenter

Mbale Epicenter, organized in 2007, connects 128 villages in the Eastern region of Uganda, attending to roughly 50,000 people within Mbale District (NGO Aid Map, 2017). The epicenter is in Phase Three, which means that animators are carrying out multiple programs: Community Mobilization/(VCA); Microfinance; Health and Nutrition; Education; Women Empowerment; Water, Sanitation and Environment; Food Security and Production; and Business and Entrepreneurship. During the time of research, there were three main ongoing projects: Food Security Project (targeted towards farmers), Moringa Project (within the program of Health and Nutrition), and the Her Choice program (an independent program consisting of training and workshops to influence women to decide if, when and who to get married to).

At Mbale Epicenter, the animators use six strategies to carry out the Her Choice program (summarized in Table 2.) The first strategy is to mobilize communities and create dialogues between animators, parents, teachers and religious and cultural leaders etc. The purpose of these dialogues is to change the mindset of people and to inform community members of the (health) risks of early marriage.

Secondly, the animators invest in girls' knowledge, skills and participation by involving women in capacity-building training and workshops. These training sessions consist of debates and discussions around early marriage and the animators encourage the women to actively participate to boost the women's confidence and assertiveness. The workshops include giving women practical skills such as creating own craftwork e.g. making sanitary pads or baskets. Other workshops include teaching about defensive skills such as karate, in order to enable women to protect themselves from sexual coercion.

Thirdly, the animators aim to create youth-friendly learning environments. For instance, the animators arrange training at the epicenter where they show various learning videos about e.g. sexual transmitted infections (STIs), HIV/AIDS and abstinence. The animators hope to engage youth by involving different types of learning methods.

The forth strategy the animators use is to improve access to economic security. The training consist of teaching women to become economically independent by learning about money-generating activities and savings. The epicenter has a bank where community members can make deposits and younger (often school-going) women are given piggy banks to put money in so that they can save for a future goal.

The fifth strategy is conducting peer education training (shown in Photo 1.). In school children, and sometimes teachers, are invited to discuss the consequences of early marriage through active participation in a larger group and public speaking. The participating students are chosen to be peer educators who are expected to share the insights from the discussions with their fellow students. The peer educators are often highly dedicated to their schoolwork and are well liked by their teachers and peers.

The final strategy concludes enabling an open environment for the Her Choice participants to openly discuss early marriage practices.

Photo 1. Newly appointed peer educators for Her Choice after Peer Education Training at Mbale Epicenter



Table 2. Summary of THP's Her Choice Strategies at Mbale epicenter, Training and Workshops

Mbale Epicenter Strategies for Her Choice	Workshop/Training Content	Purpose
Mobilizing Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogues between animators, parents, teachers and religious and cultural leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change mindset of community Inform about the (health) risks of early marriage
Investing in girls' knowledge, skills and participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity-building Debates/dramas/discussions between animators and young women Practical skills (e.g. making pads and baskets) Defensive skills (karate) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build women's confidence Inform about negative impacts of early marriage, early sexuality and early pregnancy Create necessities for personal use or to sell Protection against sexual coercion
Strategy Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning videos (about e.g. avoiding STIs and HIV/AIDS or how to earn a living) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SRHR knowledge Learn to plan for the future and how to make informed decisions
Improving Access to Economic Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Money-generating activities Saving skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable women's economic independence Planning for the future
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer Education with school-going youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase information outreach - target in-school youth who are not participating in the training and workshops
Enabling Environment		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create an open environment

The goal for Mbale Epicenter is to reinforce partnerships and connection with local government to ensure the transition to Phase Four of self-reliance, which is expected to happen in 2018 (NGO Aid Map, 2017).

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has offered an overview of the context, including a general introduction to Uganda and the Eastern region where Mbale District is situated. The summary of marital law shows that there are some contradictions in terms of legal marrying age in Uganda, depending on what type of marriage it is. Moreover, this chapter illustrates THP's work at Mbale epicenter and highlights the main strategies they use to influence young women by: mobilizing communities; investing in girls' knowledge, participation and skills; strategic development; improving access to economic security; education; and enabling a youth friendly environment.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the research questions, conceptual scheme and the epistemological position, which has guided this research. Secondly, the chapter introduces the study participants and presents the methods I have used for data collection, followed by a discussion of the data analysis. The final section of the chapter describes how this research meets Bryman's (2008) five quality criteria, followed by a discussion on the research limitations and the ethical considerations.

4.2 Research questions

The research questions have been developed in collaboration with The Hunger Project Uganda. The aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of young women's perceptions of agency, gender and sexuality related to early marriage, and see how these are influenced by the THP animators in Mbale District. The research questions are presented below and will be answered in chapters five, six and seven.

MAIN QUESTION

What are young women's perceptions of agency, gender and sexuality in relation to (early) marriage, and how do The Hunger Project's animators influence these understandings, in Mbale District?

How do young married and single women define and perceive (early) marriage in Mbale District?

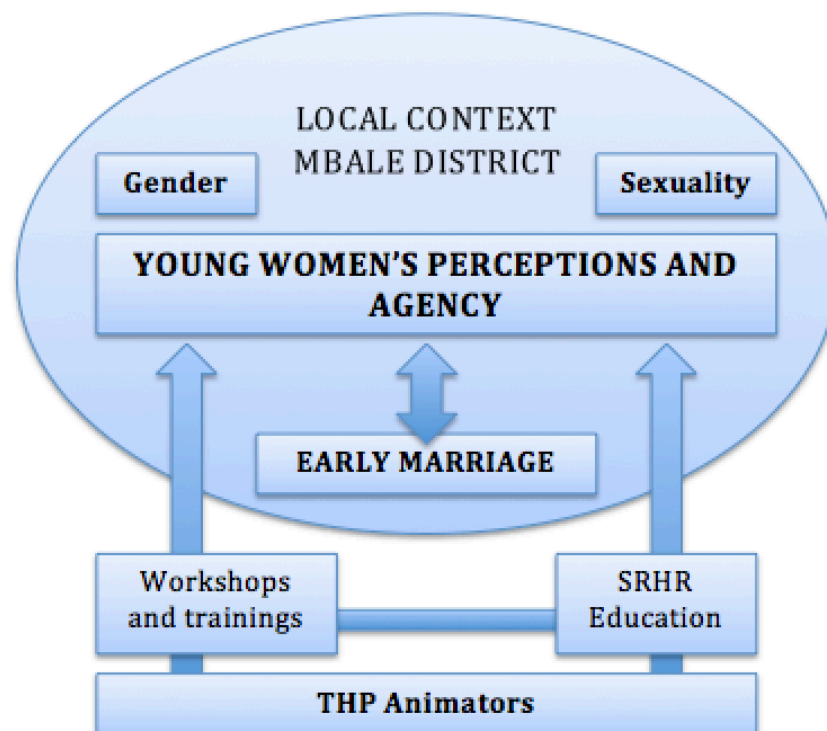
What are the gender and sexuality norms in Mbale District and how do these understandings influence the way women recognize and exercise agency in regards to their marriage decisions?

How do young women view the influence and work of The Hunger Project's animators in terms of life skills training and SRHR knowledge within the Her Choice program?

4.3 Conceptual scheme

The conceptual scheme features the main concepts that have contributed to this research and how they are related. Young women's perceptions and agency is the central focus in this research. Mbale District offers a specific local context of where gender roles and gender relations are fostered alongside sexuality norms and values. These local understandings in turn relate to young women's sexuality and understanding of gender roles/relations in regards to early marriage. The local context of norms and values, alongside The Hunger Project's animators, influence the women's perceptions and agency. There is a bilateral relationship between young women's perceptions and agency, and the concept of early marriage. A woman's understanding and level of decision-making can influence exercised agency in regards to (early) marriage. As well, women are likely to evaluate her perceptions of gender and sexuality, as well as make choices related to marriage based on her personal experience leading up to/within early marriage. The Hunger Project's animators are assumed to influence women's perceptions and agency through workshops and training, as well as SRHR education.

Figure 2. Conceptual Model



4.4 Ontological and epistemological position

This research stems from the interpretivist epistemological position, which reflects the constructivist nature of this study. The notion of interpretivist research revolves around the idea that knowledge is socially influenced and constructed, and is therefore prone to change over time and between individuals (Alasuutari et. al., 2008, p. 216).

Constructivism does not reject the notion of one single objective reality. Instead, the constructivist approach supports that perceived variations of the objective reality take form. These variations may be individual or collective, as well as more or less sophisticated. Hence, constructivists argue that variations of a single objective reality take place based on people's perceptions of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The focus of this research is to understand the different perceptions and agency of young women and the social surrounding, i.e. community and animators, that influence these perceptions and agency. For this reason it is essential to recognize the subjective meanings that derive from the women's stories and truths about marriage, agency, gender and sexuality. The basis of understanding these findings correlate with the idea that these constructed realities are influenced by community norms and values in a specific local context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). My position as a researcher lays in the realization that underlying motivations and reasons for early marriage are a highly complex. As well, understandings of early marriage (and its motivations) will alter depending on whose reality is examined. With this study I look into these socially constructed conceptions, while examining the influence of The Hunger Project's animators.

4.5 Sample of participants

The study populations consist of three groups: married and single young women who are involved in the Her Choice program's workshops and training; The Hunger Project Uganda's animators who are active in the Her Choice program; and community members (i.e. my host family, teachers, elders, cultural leaders and

health workers). I used purposive sampling technique when finding study participants in order to specifically include women and animators who participate in the Her Choice training and workshops. In addition to purposive sampling I used the snowball sampling technique. According to Bryman (2008), snowball sampling involves the participants suggesting new participants for the research. This method was found to be useful in the initial stage of data collection. Also, I received a great deal of assistance from The Hunger Project Uganda's Assistant Program Officer (APO) at the Mbale epicenter, who enabled my contact with many study participants. APO helped me to get in touch with several young women who are a part of the Her Choice training and workshops, introduced me to the Her Choice animators and helped me to set up various meetings in respective sub-county. As the Her Choice training and workshops involve women from four sub-counties in Mbale District, we considered it important to incorporate single and married women from all of these sub-counties: Busoba, Bushiende, Nyondo and Lukhonje. If I have not specified, the general term 'women' signifies that both married and single women from both IDIs and FGDs share the same views.

The first study population is presented in Table 3. which gives an overview of backgrounds of the young women participating in the IDIs. The young women were selected based on marital status, age and participation in the Her Choice activities.

The single women are defined as not married, but may be in a romantic relationship. The condition for 'age' was interpreted loosely as 'young' as I had not set a definite age range. The participants range from 15 – 28 years old amongst the single and married women. The larger portion of married participants was married before the age of 18 years old, and remaining married women were married before the age of 21.

Community members, including THP Uganda, support young mothers to return to school after giving birth, and many of the younger mothers (below 18 years old) mentioned that they are planning to complete their education when their newborn child is older. However, many of the participating single mothers explained that they are unable pay for further education, as they need to provide for their child(ren).

As shown in the Table 3., the majority of married and single participants were out of school. None of the married women attended school at the time as most of them had children and were in charge of taking care of the household. Many of the single women were also out of school mainly due to two reasons. The first reason for not attending school was not being able to afford education (e.g. paying for tuition fees, exams and/or scholastic materials). The second reason for single women not attending school was due to having a baby (see Table 2.).

Table 3. Summary of IDIs with single and married participants

IDIs		Single (N=16)	Married (N=15)	Total (N=31)
Study Location	Busoba	8	5	13
	Nyondo	5	1	6
	Bushiende	3	4	7
	Lukhonje	-	5	5
School status	In school	4	-	4
	Out of school	12	15	27
Age group	Under 18	10	2	12
	19-21	2	-	2
	22-24	4	3	7
	25 and above	-	10	10
Number of children (first pregnancy)	0	4	2	6
	Pregnant (without children)	2	-	2
	1	9	5	14
	2	-	3	3
	3	1	3	4
	4	-	2	2

The second study population includes the animators (community THP volunteers) who are active in the Her Choice program and is represented in Table 4. The animators' role is to educate community members about the risks of early marriage and encourage women to stay in school and decide for themselves if, when and who to marry. THP Uganda selects a number of active citizens within the community (Mbale District), non-related to level of education, that share THP's

vision of eliminating early marriage. The animators were chosen based on personal experience or drive to encourage young women to finish their education and wait to get pregnant and/or married (until turning 18 years old). As shown in Table 4., most of the animators are women above 30, living in close vicinity to the Mbale Epicenter in Busoba where the majority of training/workshops take place.

Table 4. Summary of IDIs with THP's Her Choice animators

IDIs		Single (N=1)	Married (N=6)	Widow/Widower (N=1)	Total (N=8)
Gender	Male	1	2	-	3
	Female	-	4	1	5
Study Location	Busoba	1	4	1	6
	Nyondo	-	1	-	1
	Bushiende	-	1	-	1
	Lukhonje	-	-	-	-
Age group	20-25	1	-	-	1
	26-31	-	2	-	2
	32 and above	-	4	1	5

The third study population includes community members: parents; teachers; cultural leaders and health workers. These participants were selected in terms of accessibility in the sub-counties, majority in Busoba where I was living.

The participants for the FGDs were chosen by APO based on the criteria of marital status, age and participation in the Her Choice activities, spread out over the four sub-counties in terms of availability. The FGDs included women who had not participated in the IDIs. (See ANNEX 1. for further details about respondents of the IDIs and FGDs).

4.6 Research methods

Given the nature of this research, I used a mixed-methods research design by combining several qualitative research methods. The methods of research include in-depth interviews with topic guide, FGDs and participant observations. During the time of research in Uganda I was staying with a local family in Makhai Village in Mbale District. This has enabled me to have many informal conversations with my host family and other community members as well as make daily observations, which I have incorporated into my research methods. The data was collected over a period of eight weeks in Mbale District.

4.6.1 In-depth interviews

The main method of research was in-depth interviews using a topic guide with married/single women and animators (see Annex XXXX for clarification). Esaiasson et. al. (2012, p. 251) argue that semi-structured interviews allow greater possibility to register answers that are open-ended and not predetermined as opposed to using a set structure. For this reason I decided to use this method, as it would allow for my respondents to elaborate on their own ideas and thoughts. Creating a topic guide before hand enabled the conversation to be aligned with the topics that are central to this research: agency; gender and sexuality (See ANNEX 3. and 4.)

I started the research process by conducting eight interviews with THP's animators for the sake of getting an understanding of what (early) marriage, agency, gender, sexuality and SRHR means according to them and the community. I met the animators at the Mbale epicenter or in the animator's home. These interviews gave valuable insight into seeing how the animators try to influence young women in terms of deciding if, to who and when to marry. On occasion, animators would interpret the interviews with women in the IDIs to overcome any language barrier.

I conducted fifteen interviews with married women and sixteen interviews with single women. In all interviews, I started with a small introduction of myself as well as an explanation about the purpose of the study. As well, informing the participants about their right to anonymity and confidentiality. Each interview lasted around 45min to 1,5 hours. These interviews captured many different

stories and played an essential part in understanding women's decision-making, sexuality, gender structures and relations and the influence of the Her Choice program.

4.6.2 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with participatory activity

After obtaining data from the IDIs and registering overall themes, I arranged eight FGDs in order to complement the interview findings. Bryman (2008) suggests that FGDs can allow participants to challenge each other's ideas that can lead to new insights that are central to the research. Each FGD involved six to thirteen women in groups organized by sub-county and marital status. Furthermore, I separated single women in groups based on having children or not. The FGDs proved to be very useful, as the women felt comfortable to engage freely within the group without being put on the spot. The FGDs took place in a relatively close proximity to the women's homes, within the sub-counties. The locations were chosen based on being remote or closed off, e.g. in a classroom, in order to avoid any disturbance from family or community members. A female interpreter assisted during the FGDs in Bushiende in order to overcome any language barrier.

Photo 2. Break time between FGDs with single and married women



For each FGD, I started off with an introduction and telling them that the purpose of my research is to study the women's perspectives, agency and experience with the Her Choice program. Thereafter, as an icebreaker, I let the women individually draw on two pieces of paper what their idea of a 'good marriage' and a 'bad marriage' is. This participatory method allowed for brainstorming about the role of men and women and power relations in a marriage. While the women shared their drawings, they appeared more comfortable in describing their own stories of experiences or expectations of marriage and they shared their hopes and visions for the future. The second part of the FGD revolved around open discussions and reflections about gender structures, being a 'good woman' versus a 'good man' and the purpose of marriage. The topic often related to ability to make decisions within the family or with the husband, which appeared connected to gender roles and power balance within families. Many topics stemmed from the initial drawing activity, which sparked a debate among the participants.

Photo 3. Focus group discussion drawing activity



4.6.3 Participant observation

Esaiasson et. al. (2012) argue that when studying people's behavior it is essential to complement interviews and discussion with participatory observation in order to come to terms with the differences between reported and actual behavior. For this sake, I used different forms of participatory observation in order to triangulate with the research findings from IDIs and FGDs.

As I was living with a family in Makhai village (Mbale District), I participated in daily village life by joining activities such as fetching water from the local well, taking care of children and participating in household chores. Additionally, I was able to have many informal conversations with my host family, community members, cultural leaders and health workers that gave me a deeper understanding of the daily village life and the context of early marriage in Mbale District, specifically within Busoba sub-county where I was staying. Through these activities I also gained further insight into gender relations. My host mother, who is highly respected by community members, and I would often discuss women's role in the community while preparing dinner in the evenings. She shared several stories of when she previously believed that women were treated inferior to men, both in school and in the home. She would also passionately refer to the positive changes towards gender equality and balance, which have been ongoing for the past decade.

During my time in the field, I was able to join a couple of Her Choice training sessions and workshops. These consisted of training about life skills where young girls from Makhai Secondary School were able to share their knowledge and thoughts about early marriage that they had learnt through Her Choice. The girls also discussed about risks that come along with premarital sexual activity. In other workshops there were debates and presentations about self-esteem and women empowerment. During these training and workshops, I was presented as a student from University of Amsterdam, but as well as a part of The Hunger Project, and therefore I was actively incorporated into the activities as a participant. Furthermore, I was welcomed to join on The Day of the African Child on two occasions. The national celebration took place in Iganga and the local celebration

took place in Mbale Town, where active participants of the Her Choice program performed dramas and songs about consequences related to early marriage and early pregnancy.

4.7 Data analysis

Data from the IDIs and FGDs were recorded and electronically stored. I transcribed the majority of interviews and FGDs while I was in the field in order to prevent losing any data. The remaining has been transcribed after returning from fieldwork. Other acquired data include field notes made in a logbook, and a daily diary reflecting on events, informal conversations and daily observations. The interviews proved to give in-depth insight into the women's personal stories and experiences with THP Uganda, while the FGDs shed light on notions related to gender and sexuality norms, and appropriate common behavior.

The main data analysis was conducted upon my return to the Netherlands. After transcribing the interviews and discussions, I printed all documents in order to conduct manual data analysis. In addition to the themes and concepts of this research, I used open coding to find other themes that I had not previously thought of. I used descriptive coding to summarize the primary message of the passage and arrange the findings based on themes. After arranging the data by theme, I used quotes from the participants to illustrate the themes. This allowed me to oversee the structure of my findings, which I arranged based on the sub-questions in the empirical chapters. The observations made during fieldwork and the drawings were used to triangulate the themes of the primary data from the interviews and discussions.

4.8 Research quality

Bryman (2008, p. 377) highlights a set of criteria in order to sufficiently value the reliability and validity of qualitative research. The criteria that Bryman (2008) has identified include: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity. I have used these criteria to assess the collected data for this research.

4.8.1 Credibility

The credibility criteria strongly relates to the level of trustworthiness of research by evaluating the findings and ensuring that they are representative of reality (Bryman, 2008). While the focus of this research refers to understand young women's perspectives, it was also important for me to have conversations with community members such as teachers, cultural leaders, parents and health workers. Additionally, I used different methods of gathering qualitative data in order to strengthen the validity of the research. As I was staying in close proximity of the women that I interviewed, it enabled informal encounters and conversations in everyday life, which helped strengthen a natural bond and trust between the participants and I. The participants felt comfortable to open up about their personal stories under non-forcible circumstances. Thus, I estimate that the findings contribute to a strong level of trustworthiness.

4.8.2 Transferability

Bryman (2008, p. 378) refers to transferability as the extent to which findings in a certain context can be representative for another setting. This research took place in the four sub-counties of Mbale District where the Her Choice training and workshops take place. As the purpose of the research was to gain in-depth contextual knowledge of a certain area, the findings of this research offer comprehensive information about young women in Mbale District. Some qualities and characteristics may be familiar amongst women in similar situations or in surrounding areas, which can offer some level of insights. However, a downside to working with using these sampling techniques is the inability to generalize the results to other cases (Bryman, 2008; Murphy-Graham & Leal, 2015). For this sake, I refrain from making claims of larger representativeness outside Mbale District.

4.8.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the reliability of research findings, which can be strengthened by sufficient documentation throughout the research process (Bryman, 2008, p. 378-379). Therefore, I decided to electronically record all interviews and FGDs as well as take notes during the conversations. Informal discussions and meetings were noted by the end of each day, in addition to observational notes. The majority of the transcribing process took place within a

short period after the recordings had been made in order to ensure that no data from the supportive field notes would get lost. As my findings are produced in a certain context and at a certain point in time I assume they will change over time. In order to replicate the findings of this research, it is probable that researchers may need access to this data collection.

4.8.4 Confirmability

The criterion of confirmability suggests that research should make great efforts to achieving objectivity (Bryman, 2008, p. 379). As a qualitative researcher in a social setting, it can be close to unattainable to reach complete objectivity. I understand that personal backgrounds and different values may interfere with the research, for this reason I found it important to stay critical of myself and to make sure that I checked with the participants if I had understood their points of view correctly. I used the help of, often female, interpreters to make sure that the women were more comfortable with speaking to me by expressing themselves in their local language.

4.8.5 Authenticity

An authenticity criterion refers to the fairness during the process of research and also means to serve a purpose for the participants of the research (Bryman, 2008, p. 379-380). I found it important to build a rapport with the young women and animators working at the epicenter, as it fostered a lot of exchange of knowledge and a greater understanding for one another. Many community members were excited to hear that I was staying in the field, and they often invited me for small social gatherings which could entail preparing for dinner, or helping to take care of newborn babies while conversing. I experienced that many people were very curious to hear more about the research and were open to critically discuss early pregnancy and early marriage. For this reason, I have promised to share my research findings with the Mbale epicenter, so that community members can find and discuss my results. As this research has been conducted under surveillance of The Hunger Project Uganda, the research findings will be shared with them as well.

4.9 Research limitations

A research barrier that I experienced was the language, as I only learnt basic words of Lugiso while in the field. All but one animator spoke sufficient English for the interviews to be held in English. In most cases the young women's level of English was high enough to carry out interviews and discussions in English, however, in other cases I was dependent on a Lugiso to English interpreter to assist me. By using an interpreter it is probable that some words or interpretations were lost in translation. The interpreters were also animators from The Hunger Project Uganda, which can be seen as having a positive or negative effect on reliability and validity. Using animators as interpreters may influence how comfortable the women feel in answering questions truthfully, and the women may give socially desirable answers in the interviews. Some of the younger single women (below 18) became more quiet and timid while answering questions in the company of a man. In this case I would ask the woman if she wanted to discontinue the interview, but the participants expressed that they want to share their stories. In an effort to try to make them feel more comfortable, I rescheduled the interview with an assisting female interpreter as it appeared as some of the topics were sensitive to discuss in the presence of a man. By inviting a female interpreter, the women felt more comfortable to express themselves and share their personal experiences. For this sake, I decided to only involve (a total of three) female interpreters from then on.

While I made sure of presenting myself as a Master student from the University of Amsterdam, I assumed that my association with The Hunger Project Uganda was inevitable. The connection with The Hunger Project Uganda may have influenced my relationships with the respondents, e.g. if the participants experienced me as an assessor of their knowledge related to Her Choice, they may have chosen to answer in a certain way. This may also have been the case during workshops and training when I was at times presented as a representative from The Hunger Project, which may have biased the answers of some respondents.

4.10 Ethical considerations

Throughout the research process, the aim has been in line with ethical research values of not doing any harm or putting people in risk. I recognize that my research

revolves around sensitive topics regarding early marriage, gender structures and relations, as well as SRHR and sexuality. For this reason I found it important to not expose my opinion, and instead be a non-judgmental listener. I ensured that the respondent's identities will be kept anonymous.

In some cases I found that sexuality was especially difficult to highlight as it can be seen as a topic that should not be openly discussed. When it came to the topic of contraceptives, I would only discuss this with single women with children or married women, as the tradition is to abstain from premarital sexual activity.

If a single woman would bring up the topic herself, I would include further questions regarding sexuality in the interview.

I aimed to be considerate of who I was addressing, and I would change my vocabulary based on how open I experienced the respondent was towards me. For example, instead of asking about sexual relations I decided to ask solely about relations, which turned out to be very effective and a more appropriate approach. If a woman seemed uncomfortable around certain subjects I would refrain from asking further questions regarding the matter. I also tried to overcome the sensitivity barrier by encouraging the participants to choose the location of the interviews in order to let them feel more open and comfortable in a neutral setting. As a result, interviews would take place at the Mbale epicenter or in a woman's home, when the parents or husbands were not around. As Mbale District is quite conservative, with an exception of Mbale town, I decided to follow the dressing code for women, which consisted of loose-fitted clothes covering shoulders and knees, and preferably a long loose skirt or dress. By following the dress code while in Mbale District, I was met with a great deal of respect from community members, especially the elders. I would also plan my schedule in order to make sure that my participants and I were home before dark.

A more difficult ethical choice that I faced while in the field was to what extent I should interfere with the women's personal lives. On occasion a woman would ask for either personal advice or financial assistance. However, by previously consulting with The Hunger Project's animators, we came to the conclusion that I

should only offer advice or emotional support, but avoid giving financial assistance for the sake of not causing any disorder among the community members.

5 WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF (EARLY) MARRIAGE

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the research findings that illustrate women's perceptions and definition of (early) marriage in Mbale District. I present the women's views of purpose of marriage and appropriate marrying age, and highlight a structural reason as a driver for women to marry at an early age.

5.2 Purpose of marriage

In Mbale district, women describe a good marriage as an informal or formal union between a man and a woman. Most women suggested that marriage above 18 years old is legal; hence early marriage is understood as illegal. The women generally see marriage as an important stepping-stone in life, and all participating women expressed that they want to marry and have children. Marriage and family are central aspects of life and are experienced to be something that everyone would undoubtedly aspire towards and is seen to ultimately lead to a better and happy life. A 17-year old married young woman described marriage as follows:

“Marriage is like an agreement or a union, and everyone who grows up needs to get married so you can leave your parent's home. You need to join together with one man and stay with him; it even says so in the bible.” (R6. IDI)

Her description implies that marriage is for woman a rite of passage into adulthood by leaving the childhood home behind. A woman's entering into marriage was commonly described as gaining independence from her parents and becoming a responsible woman in charge of taking care of her own husband and children. The purpose of marriage, as seen by the participants, can be grouped into three main categories: reproduction; economic support; and responsibility and obligation.

Photo 4. Married woman with her children 1



5.2.1 Reproduction

The participating women and animators underline that the significance and main purpose of marriage is to create a family and produce children. However, the married animators and community elders generally view having children as a special blessing rather than a necessity in marriage. While both married and single women expressed the importance of having children in a satisfactory marriage, the single women in the IDIs and FGDs also stress the expectation of having the first-born baby rather quickly after getting married. A single woman illustrated this during a FGD:

“It is very difficult if you are not able to have children. It does not matter how much money you have, the husband will leave you or get a second wife if you do not produce soon. You might have a nice marriage, but it will not be a good and respected marriage unless you have children together.” (FGD 3.)

The previous quote highlights the social pressure on women’s reproductive ability and that the blame and shame of not having children is placed on the woman, rather than on the man.

Having several children serves as a source of respect for the husband in the community and the married women stress that, *“the clan will respect you more if you have many children. Even your parents might gain something [gifts]”* (FGD 7). However, as discussed in the FGDs, there is a clear tension regarding the ideal number of children. On the one hand, parents (and grandparents) will gain status in the community by having many children. On the other hand, the community will lose respect for a family that produces more children than they are financially capable of caring for. Participants explained that it is essential to regulate the number of children based on the family’s financial capabilities. Traditionally a couple should aim to have as many children as possible. However, the women argued that having between 2 to 5 children, with an adequate space between them, is a more preferable alternative. Generally, the single women (the single mothers in particular who receive little or no financial help from the family or the child’s father) argued that having a maximum of three children is desirable due to economic reasons. The ability of paying for children’s school fees and notebooks, as well as providing children with basic needs plays a role in determining the preferred number of children.

5.2.2 Economic support

The women’s accounts indicate that marriage serves as a source of livelihood as economic support is a central aspect. The participants described this support in terms related to basic needs, including clothing; food; and shelter, as opposed to money. Generally women found that a good marriage is having a husband who can provide the family with a good house and other essentials (e.g. toilet, ‘tip-tap’ for hand hygiene and a rubbish pit), and children are able to go to school and play (see Photo 5.). Single and married women in the FGDs shared that a bad marriage is when a family lives in a badly constructed house, where the husband mistreats the family and is not providing for them financially (see Photo 6.). Moreover, several young single women shared their fear of being in a polygamous marriage for two

⁷ By ‘gaining something’ the woman referred to parents that become grandparents often receive riches from relatives or community members in celebration.

reasons: not being the husband's priority, and not being adequately taken care of (both financially and emotionally).

The expectations of getting married varied across the women. Single women out of school and married women understood marriage to lead to a better life where the basic needs are met and there is an ability to financially plan for the future: *"I believe that you will be better off when you are married, and your husband can help to support and take care of you and build you a good house". (R19. IDI)*. Single women, who had reached secondary school, generally found that women should partake in providing economic support for the family: *"Husbands should help their wives to develop and build a business so that they can contribute [economically] to the family. It is important for women to be able to buy soap and other small things in order for the family to stay in good health."* (FGD 8). The level of satisfaction with marriage appeared to be related to whether the basic needs were met in the family, as illustrated by the experiences of a 23-year old married woman who was married at 16:

"When I got married at first I thought I would be rich (laughs). We are not rich, but my husband is a farmer and is able to provide the family with basic things, so we are happy in our life." (R26. IDI)

In Mbale District it is common for the nuclear family to stay together in a home, within the same village or in fairly close proximity of the man's relatives. The main economic activity of most families is small-scale agriculture and husbandry and having a large nuclear family enables economic support for the family as a whole. Children have their function in helping around the house and in the fields: *"it is good to have daughters that can help you with household chores and help you in the garden". (R27. IDI)*. Besides being present as strains for the family's economy, children are seen as important sources for future support of the parents. Due to tradition, a man lives in close proximity to his family, while a woman leaves her childhood home in order to stay with her husband when she gets married. Therefore, boys are seen as especially valuable for sustaining the parent's future, as illustrated in a FGD by a married woman:

“It is not like before when giving birth to a boy was better. But, boys will get a job and will always come back and assist the family [financially]. The sad thing with girls is that they move away and are not able to help you in the same way.” (FGD 5.)

Photo 5. Drawing of a good marriage by FGD participant

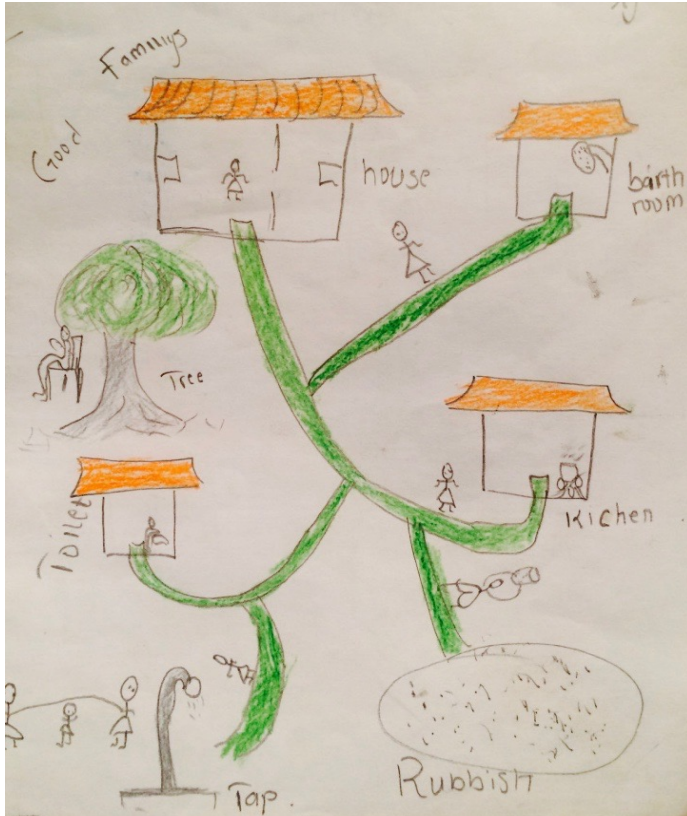


Photo 5. Signifies the importance of economic security within a good marriage. The young woman illustrated sufficient facilities in the home; a well-kept compound where children play and elders relax. The husband is not home as he is away working in order to provide for his family.

Photo 6. Drawing of a bad marriage by FGD participant

Photo 6. Illustrates a bad (and polygamous) marriage where the compound is not taken care of (woman's responsibility). The husband abuses his wife and children, and does not take care of the animals. The daughter (on the left) is running away to find peace. Eventually the husband passes away or leaves the family, and the big nuclear family is not being



5.2.3 Responsibility and obligation

In addition to supporting your family, marriage was described as a source of responsibility and obligation towards the institution of marriage itself and to the husband. Marriage is described as a 'natural urge', which is accompanied by fulfilling gendered roles and economic and social responsibility (e.g. see Photo box 3 & 4 with short description of expected gender roles). Generally the participants assume marriage as overall positive, but not exempted from difficulties. As one young married woman implied: *"You go through struggles and ups and downs in marriage, but you have to learn to endure. It is not always a good thing, but you just have to endure both the bad and the good."* (R23. IDI). This quote illustrates the obligation of marriage and highlights women's general acceptance of its positive and negative aspects. The married women expressed that they feel satisfied with their marriage when the husband ensures that the family's basic needs are met. Negative aspects of marriage were often related to having fights with the husband or if the husband becomes mentally or physically abusive towards his wife or children. In several of the IDI's with married women (mainly women who married

before turning 18), negative aspects are something that the wife has to accept. These participants argue that leaving your husband and a bad (abusive) marriage may be a worse alternative than staying married, as it is not socially acceptable to divorce.

5.3 Appropriate time to marry

When I asked about the appropriate age to marry, the married and single women gave slightly different answers (see Table. 5). All the women refer to an appropriate marrying age when a woman is mature. The women base maturity on three aspects: being mentally mature to make good decisions; having obtained practical (household) skills; and being physically mature for reproduction. These three aspects of maturity are deemed to come with education and age. However, single and married women's views of at what age a woman reaches maturity varies. As Table 5. illustrates, most single women in the IDIs and FGDs deem it appropriate to marry at an older age, as opposed to the married women.

Table 5. Ideal marrying age according to participants

Ideal age to marry	Total participants (n=31)	Percentage of single women	Percentage of married women
18-19	8	19%	33%
20-21	5	6%	27%
22-23	2	6 %	7%
24-25	12	44 %	33%
26 +	4	25%	-

Generally, the women view the ideal age to get married at 25 years old. The motivation behind getting married at a later age, mid- twenties, was that women aspire to reach higher education prior to marriage. By doing so, women are believed to get a job, which enables the woman to help provide for the family. This is in line with the meaning of marriage as a source of economic support. The women's accounts insinuated that there was no specific level of education that needs to be reached, but rather a higher education implied greater employment

opportunities. Thus, a higher education leads to increased opportunity to be financially secure. A young single woman who is in secondary school illustrates the connection between education and ideal marrying age with following answer:

“You need to finish your education first, that is the most important thing. When you are educated you are able to find a better husband who is also educated. Then you will get a good job and you can make sure to provide for your children.” (R14. IDI)

According to young single women still in school, having a university degree would increase the chances to attain a well-paid office job. However, young married and single women out of school more commonly expressed that it is important to attain a secondary education and then continue with a vocational course in tailoring or hairdressing. As voiced by a young single mother:

“I want a course in hairdressing so that I can take care of my baby. My old boyfriend (baby’s father) did not help to take care of the baby or me, so I know that I need to have a little income in life before I marry. It is not good to be only dependent on your husband.” (R1. IDI)

The above two quotes suggest that while women expect men to provide for the family in marriage, some women recognize that it can be necessary to having a personal income in order to make sure that the family is being taken care of. Income-generating activities for women are therefore becoming increasingly important. The fruits of education are associated with an increased chance of having a higher income as well as decreased dependency on the husband. The women refer to education as having less of an association with a ‘universal childhood’, but rather describe education as an essential stepping-stone in preparing oneself for the responsibilities of marriage and adulthood.

Women commonly understood that they are in charge of making their own marriage decisions. As well, when a woman is above 18 years old she is more likely to make long-term and positive choices in life. This was deemed important, as it is generally not socially acceptable to separate from the husband: *“You need to be able to decide well, because you have to live with your decision. Marriage lasts forever so it*

is better to marry when you know what is right.” (R4. Married woman). Women’s accounts suggest that being mentally mature (capable of making good decisions because of older age and being educated) is important considering that women can make their own marriage decisions.

Maturity also relates to practical skills. Women are expected to learn practical household skills from the home that will be useful within marriage as household chores are seen as the wife’s responsibility. These include: how to cook; wash the dishes; and wash clothes. If a woman is not mature it is likely to cause problems within marriage: *“When you are too young to get married then you do not know how to do the household chores and that will make you fight with your husband because you cannot cook or clean for him.” (FGD 5, Married woman).*

Another part of maturity concerns physical development, as a woman has to be mature enough for having a baby. This reasoning is reflected in the quote stated by a young single woman: *“Even if you are ready and mature to get married and have children it is important for your body to be ready as well to avoid risks.” (FGD 1, Single woman).* The quote suggests that it is not enough to be mentally ready to get married, a woman needs to be physically ready to carry a baby as well. The reasoning of health risks is in line with the human rights approach which highlights the negative health consequences that are often related to getting married too young. In Mbale District, this view appears to have been shaped by teachers in school as well as the animators who highly focus on informing girls without children about the risks and dangers associated with early pregnancy and marriage.

According to the young women’s accounts it is suitable to marry during the reproductive age: *“You should not get married when you can no longer have children. But if you have been married before and your husband has passed away then it is okay to get married when you are older”. (FGD 7, Married woman).* Thus, this quote reflects back on the reproductive purpose of marriage and creating a family. However, as the quote illustrates, widows are exempted for marrying at an older age because marriage also serves the purpose of economic security.

5.4 Poverty as a driver of marrying early

Overall, the women participating in this study came from ‘poor’ socioeconomic circumstances, which often contributed to women deciding to marry at an earlier age. According to the women’s experiences, several reasons contribute to women marrying early, and the most common reasons relates to poverty. In many cases, the woman’s family is not able to pay her school fees for completing secondary education, which means that many women stop their education at the end of primary school or beginning of secondary school. In the FGDs with single women it became evident that there is strong concern regarding job availability for women without a high school/university degree or a practical (tailoring/hairdressing) education. The women therefore consider education to be a high priority in their lives.

Women also expressed their concern of being an economic burden to their family and not having their basic needs (of basic clothing, sanitary pads, soap etc.) met. If there are limited funds for education and girls’ necessities, the married women understood marriage to be a realistic option for a better future and well being in order to gain financial security. A 28-year old woman explained her motivation behind getting married at the age of 15:

“My father was very poor and could not pay for my school fees or basic needs. So the time came, and I met my husband on the way home from school. I did not have proper clothes or even knickers, so I thought it was a better idea to marry the boy since he said he could provide for me”. (R27. IDI)

Other married women referred to their experiences of being ‘tricked’ by financial means into early marriage. In these cases, men are assumed to take advantage of girls’, often vulnerable, situation by offering small gifts or tokens (e.g. food, knickers or soap) to make the girls become dependent on these gifts. The women expressed that men would try to lure women on their way to or from school by making fake promises of a better future and giving small gifts in exchange for sex or marriage. On these occasions the women found themselves to be deceived and lured into

Chapati (a Ugandan pancake) is a common gift in exchange for sex or marriage. The cost of chapati is usually 500 Ugandan Shilling, roughly equal to 0.10 EURO.

marriage. A young single woman expressed her concern about early marriage as follows:

“Children want to eat breakfast and lunch, and some men take advantage of them by offering them something. Then the girls are diverted and they are tricked into receiving help. Once they have done that it is difficult for them to help themselves.” (R13. IDI).

This quote illustrates the circumstances of not having enough resources while growing up, which is a reality for many young women in Mbale district. It also further demonstrates an increasing understanding of the issue of dependency. THP animators promote self-dependence in order for women to make informed decisions about their future and decision to marry. As Her Choice animator Sandra explains, “ *In our culture we are dependent on our families to pay and get everything for us, and when we finish school we need a man to support us since we have always been dependent on others. This needs to change if we want to end child marriage*”. In accordance with this reasoning, THP Uganda argues that the prevalence of early marriage will decrease when women have more tools to support themselves financially and become less dependent actors.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the meaning and purpose of marriage as threefold: reproductive, economic support, and responsibility and obligation. The appropriate marrying age suggests that the ideal time to marry is when a woman has reached maturity (in terms of mental maturity to make good decisions, has learnt practical skills, and is physically mature to carry a baby). The findings suggest that married and single women have slightly different views of what age is deemed appropriate. Following, this chapter highlights that poverty, as a structural reason, influences women’s decisions to marry early.

6 GENDER AND SEXUALITY NORMS, AND WOMEN'S MARRIAGE DECISIONS

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I detail the gender roles and expectations placed on a young woman growing up in Mbale District. Following section describes the women's views of gender balance. Finally, I present the sexuality norms and how (early) sexuality and pregnancy relates to women's decision-making in regards to marriage.

6.2 Growing into the role of a good woman

The women participating in this research identified the differences in growing up as a girl as opposed to growing up as a boy. These differences become clear through the different sets of expectations, tasks and taboos for girls and boys, as summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of gender norms and roles, reported by the participants.

	Girls/Women	Boys/Men
Expectations /Tasks	Household chores	Graze animals
	Help parents and siblings	More free time
	Take care of children	Provide for family (Men)
Taboos	Walk around when dark	Drink alcohol or gamble
	Sex for money or gifts	Smoke cigarettes
	Go to discos	Trick girls into marriage
	Have sex before marriage	Have sex before marriage
	Spend too much time with other men while married	Adultery

Women in the FGDs described being a 'good woman' as someone who is hard working in the home, is respectful towards her husband and shows overall good character. At an early age, women are taught to show respect, help out in the household and live by the Ten Commandments in order to become a good woman in the future.

Girls and boys start practicing for their gender roles in marriage at an early age. According to the women, during childhood girls have more responsibilities in the home than boys. As illustrated in Photo 6., girls are expected to take part in the household chores after school, including cooking (simpler) dishes, serving the food/setting the table, washing dishes and fetching water while a boy helps his father to graze animals. Many of the women understood that boys are free to play and relax after their chore, while girls continue to help the parents in taking care of the siblings. In a marriage, the wife often helps out in the field, and then carries on with her duties in the home. A good wife is welcoming towards her husband when he comes home from the field by fetching him water to bathe in and preparing dinner.

Photo 7. Girls fetching water in Makhai village



Furthermore, the women thought that being part of bad peer groups would increase women's risk of making uninformed choices or becoming exposed to sexual assault. Bad peer group behavior, such as drinking alcohol and smoking, is therefore highly criticized and looked down on in the community. For the sake of

minimizing the risk of rape or 'bad peer group behavior' (which is expected to often take place at night) women are supposed to stay inside after dark.

Both married and single women considered girl's social contact with boys as positive in order to make men and women more comfortable with each other at an early age. Therefore, girls and boys (younger than 18) are most likely allowed to spend time with the opposite sex as long as the relationship is not romantic or sexual. A young married woman in an FGD shared her thoughts about contact with boys:

"It is important for girls and boys to play together with football or netball in order to get used to each other. They should discuss and debate about important things in life. If you keep them separate then they will eventually get spoiled [have sex before marriage] because if you do not know the behavior of a boy then you will not know when he crosses the line." (FGD 2)

This quote illustrates the women's understanding of relationships with boys before marriage. According to the women it is important for boys and girls to spend time with each other and it can be acceptable for girls to have boyfriends, as long as they are able to abstain from sex before marriage.

Additionally, married women are not supposed to spend too much time with a man that is not her husband. This behavior often leads to community members talking about a woman's promiscuous and immoral behavior, while a man behaves immorally if he is unfaithful in marriage.

6.3 Gender balance in the home

Women perceive clear gender roles that men and women are expected to fulfill. When asked about gender equality the women explained that women and men are different and are expected to do different things in life. The key message is that men and women are equally valued, but have different gender roles and duties in life. Gender equality was rather described in terms of gender balance as interplay between women and men's responsibilities. Gender balance entails seeing the family as one unit where men and women assist and help each other in terms of

decision-making and duties. If a husband and wife fulfill their separate responsibilities, there is gender balance in the home.

As for education, the women considered it equally important for men and women to go to school. However, getting a job was deemed more important for a man as his main responsibility in marriage is to provide for the family. The women had a clear view of gendered division of labor, and they undoubtedly recognized the woman's role of taking care of the household and children. There was a strong consensus among the women that a woman has the right to do formal work. However, formal work would be an addition to rather than replacement of the woman's original responsibilities.

In the home, the man is considered to be the head of the household, which entitles him to be in charge of making decisions. Women are often responsible for making smaller decisions within the family, such as deciding what to eat for dinner or what the children should wear, while the man makes all bigger decisions in regards to the family finances. Most of the married women in the FGDs explained that it is important to make bigger life decisions together with the husband, such as purchasing land. However, if there is a disagreement between the husband and wife, the husband should have the final say, as illustrated by a young married woman:

"I feel powerful and capable in my marriage now. I know that we have to sit down and talk things through together, and my voice also matters. It is not only the husband who should decide, but if we disagree, I often have to listen to my husband." (R30. IDI).

Many of the married women acknowledged a changing norm within the gender structure in families, *"Before [I got married] I thought that women are bought with bride price and that she will be like a slave in the home, but that is not the case since men can help out with some chores as well."* (R11. IDI). The women saw change in men's behavior, as it since recently has been more common for husbands to help their wives with household responsibilities. As an example, if the wife is

overwhelmed with chores in the home and the children are sick, the husband may take the children to the health center for treatment. In other words, lately it is more common that the husband helps out if his wife is unable to fulfill all her duties. This process of change towards gender balance, which was highly encouraged by the animators, was often considered by the women to be one of the most valued features of a good and happy marriage.

The general view is that women choose their own husbands, however, are expected to consult others while making the decision. A recently married 27-year old woman illustrates this view with the following quote:

“Marriage will not be reversed so you need to decide for yourself who you want to marry. If your parents or a relative disagrees with the person you want to marry then you should respect them enough to ask why. But it is ultimately your choice, because you will have to live with it.” (R25. IDI)

In the FGDs, the young single and married women reflected on what traits they value in their (future) husband. The findings indicate that being God-fearing is essential. The women argue that fearing God serves as a suitable measurement of a person’s character and behavior. In an interview, a young single woman shared her view of the importance of being God-fearing: *“Living by the ten commandments is most important in life. You are well mannered and live in a good way. If you want a good husband he should also live by God’s way.”* (R31. IDI). When talking about fearing God, the women recognize that good morals and behavior means respecting elders; the spouse and family; and community members.

A man who shows respect to his wife and family is expected to fulfill his gendered role as the breadwinner of the family. The following answer by a 16-year old single woman illustrates the expectations women generally have on their husbands: *“Before I decide to marry, I will need to study the boy a bit to see if he is a good person to marry. It is important that he is well behaved and will make sure to take care of our children and me.”* (R2. IDI). The women also expressed that the men consider women’s behavior as a good housewife before marriage, as illustrated by a young single woman: *“You need to show that you can cook and take care of the home in a*

proper manner if you want to get married. That is why you practice when you are home” (R19. IDI).

The women view making family decisions together with the husband as highly valued. Commonly understood, a husband should be the head of the household but show respect and appreciation towards his wife by consulting her in decision-making processes. A young married woman shared her view: *“I think it is good if the husband allows his wife to do things and to help make her own choices. It allows you to be free in a marriage.” (FGD 2, Married woman).* This underlines women’s aspiration to transition from being a child under parental care, into becoming an adult in marriage and gaining independence.

6.4 (Early) sexuality and pregnancy

Within Mbale district, sexuality is considered having a reproductive purpose within marriage. Depending on the context, producing children would at times be a euphemism for sexual activity. If the overall conversation were purely about having children, then producing children would refer to the literal meaning.

The participants did not make any reference to sexual pleasure or desire, when talking about sexuality. According to the participants, sexual morality is equivalent to abstaining from sex before marriage; hence, the women understood marriage to enable socially accepted sexual activity and childbearing. A young married woman illustrates this when she shared her experience of getting married at 16 years old, *“I fell in love with my boyfriend when we were at school, and since we wanted to start producing children we decided to get married.” (R26. IDI).* This shows that some women take informed action to get married in order to be sexually active. Furthermore, narratives in the community indicated that youth’s involvement with bad peer groups leads to early sexual activity as well as early pregnancy, as experienced by a 17-year old single woman:

“It is often the children who make mistakes. My friends and I were drinking alcohol and going to dance halls, and that is when you start thinking about sex. You will end up being in a trap of early pregnancy.” (R14. IDI)

Largely, the women's understandings were involvement with bad peer groups leads to immoral behavior, where early pregnancy appeared to be of stronger concern as opposed to sexuality itself due to associated risks of child birth. Early pregnancy is a clear indication that a single woman is/has been sexually active before marriage which goes against righteous behavior.

According to women's secondhand accounts and informal conversations in the community, there is a shared concern of early pregnancy and sexuality that take place during the biannual circumcision ceremony. The ceremony is an important celebration that symbolizes boy's transition into adulthood, followed by music and dancing where the participating boys, followed by young women, walk great distances. The participants in this study mentioned that many young women find themselves far from home when it is dark, which often leads to them spending the night with the boys. Traditionally, the final step of becoming a man it is to engage in sexual activity during this night. Much of early sexual activity (voluntarily or forced) therefore takes place in the night after the local celebration, which regularly result in accidental early pregnancy. Pregnancy was described as 'early' if a girl became pregnant when younger than 18.

The women's accounts suggests that early pregnancy and childbirth is an issue that might cause severe health complications for girls as well may lead to early marriage, as experienced by a woman who married when she was 15-years old:

"My parents are very tough so I was afraid to tell them about my pregnancy. Instead I ran away, and when my parents found me I had a son and I was married." (R24. IDI).

This quote illustrates an early marriage that has occurred without formal introduction or registration of the marriage. The single mothers in IDIs commonly mentioned that getting pregnant before marriage was accompanied with a level of shame. Several single mothers mentioned feeling ashamed and embarrassed for being seen as 'irresponsible' and being labeled as immoral in the community. Women and community members referred to girls who get pregnant early as

lacking values, less educated and being ill equipped of taking care of the baby. 17-year old pregnant woman shared her experience of being single and pregnant:

“Some community members laugh at me because I am pregnant. They say that I am a bad girl and that I do not understand. I feel sorry about it, because it was an accident and I wish it was different.” (R5. IDI).

This quote illustrates the judgment around women with early and premarital pregnancy that many women experienced from their families and society. According to the women, the best solution is to get married to the father of the baby in order to stay away from the stigma of being a single mother. Parents in informal conversations also shared concerns of their daughters not being able to take care of themselves. The women expressed that parents often advise their daughters to marry the father of the baby. In an interview, a 17-year old single woman described her experience when she shared her pregnancy news with her parents, *“When I got pregnant with my boyfriend my parents were very angry with me. They told me to go live with my boyfriend instead since it was his fault of making me pregnant, and now I am his responsibility.”* (R15. IDI).

Single women often suggested that boys ‘spoil’ girls by getting them pregnant. Often young boys were described as being scared away from responsibilities of becoming a father and sole supporter at a young age, so many women are left alone to take care of their babies, which appeared common in the area. In these cases, parents can put pressure on the boy for ‘spoiling’ their daughters, which may then end in early marriage:

“My parents threatened to imprison my boyfriend since he made me pregnant, so he decided to come to our home and have a conversation [marriage negotiation] with my parents” (R23. IDI).

This story demonstrates that parents have a lot of power in deciding about a marriage if their daughter is pregnant, and often the women agreed that marriage is the best option under the circumstance of being pregnant. In these situations, women exercised ‘thin’ agency due to limited realistic options available.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented women's understanding of gender and sexuality norms in Mbale District. The women refer to traditional gender roles and gendered division of labor as being the norm, and they also highlight an attitudinal change towards gender balance. Sexuality norms in the community suggest that single women should abstain from premarital sexual activity, and early sexuality and pregnancy can lead to a woman deciding to marry early due to feeling morally obliged to.

7 THP'S HER CHOICE PROGRAM IN MBALE DISTRICT

7.1 Introduction

THP's Her Choice activities have been taking place since 2015 in Mbale district. The activities include training and workshop sessions for young women in order to empower them to decide if, when and who to marry (see Table X for training and workshop overview). Most of the Her Choice activities take place in school with school going children, and at the Mbale epicenter with out of school women and various community members. On occasion, training sessions with specific target groups (e.g. training in leadership with animators) take place on location in the sub-counties.

The training sessions promote positive and healthy choices in various aspects of women's lives, as well as including boys, parents and teachers in the dialogue. Information about the negative effects of early marriage and early pregnancy is integrated throughout the Her Choice training (especially in regards to capacity building training) and workshops. This chapter presents the animator's role and influence and it is organized by following sections: (7.2) Educating for a better future, (7.2) Income generating activities and savings and (7.3) SRHR knowledge and services.

7.2 Educating for a better future

The interviews with animators and young women who are attending school revealed the importance of promoting education as an alternative to early marriage and pregnancy. The animators place a great emphasis on influencing school-going children to not get married too young, or to engage in risky behavior that can lead to early sexual activity. On a regular basis, teachers or animators organize debates and discussions around early marriage in order to engage the participants and allow them to share their thoughts or ask questions around early marriage. For example, a THP animator arranged a training session, formed as a discussion group, at a primary school in Busoba. The participating girls (aged 13-15) came up with own ideas on how to be assertive and abstain from sex when a boy wants to

start a romantic relationship. The training concluded with the girls writing down their sensitive questions (e.g. related to relationships or sex) on a piece of paper, which the animator would gather together and answer collectively in the group.

The teachers encourage the girls to be assertive and to actively participate with their own ideas around the topics. In an interview, a 17-year old school-going girl shared her views about the Her Choice activities in class:

“I enjoy the debates that we have, we raise a lot of important questions and talk about our opinions. It is important to raise your hand and share your opinion. You gain knowledge and life skills that will make you last in life”.
(R14. IDI).

Mostly, the young women participating in this study highly praised the teaching methods and the content of the Her Choice training and workshops. The single women expressed that they had learnt to participate in class or in public discussions and are now realizing their own voice. The participating aspect in itself made the women feel more assertive to trust their own capabilities and opinions.

As well, the participating women deemed the key messages of the discussions and activities deemed central. A school-going girl shared her thoughts on the content as a *“proper plan for our future and that makes us set up goals. You learn how to live in this world and get knowledge about how to receive a bright future with happiness”* (R18. IDI). For the single women going to school the first key message was to keep pursuing education in order to make better life decisions, get a good job and an educated husband. The second key message was to abstain from any sexual activity before marriage. Women should not engage in risky behavior associated with bad peer groups such as drinking alcohol or going to discos, as this is understood to increase the risk of women having sex early.

As for married women and single women out of school with children, the key messages differed slightly. A 19-year old married woman in a FGD expressed her view of the training content: *“You learn life lessons that help you make good decisions for yourself for the situation that you are in. You are protected, respected*

and you have options in the future.” (FGD 2). In this FGD, it became evident that learning skills to have a small income or learning how to properly take care of a child’s health was most relevant. The training content therefore shifts according to the participating women’s circumstances, as illustrated by a 17-year old single woman with a newborn baby:

“I was very depressed when I got pregnant and my boyfriend left me. I thought about killing myself because I could not see a solution and I did not know how to take care of my son. But Her Choice helps you to think positive about the future. They have helped me to know more about how to take care of my baby and make some small earnings to give him a better future.” (R1. IDI)

This quote illustrates an example of the positive influence the program has on women’s perceptions of themselves and ability to take control of their lives, even after having a baby at an early age. Young women who have previously given birth at an early age are as well empowered as peer educators. In an interview, a 17-year old woman who had returned to secondary school after giving birth shared her insights:

“ I enjoy talking to others and giving them advice. I advise fellow girls to not go through what I went through, to stay away from peer groups and avoid early marriage. Others listen to me and appreciate my stories, and that gives me hope and I know that I am doing something important.” (R14. IDI).

A married woman mentioned that, *“Her Choice has empowered women to talk and stand up for themselves. Women now also have a say, and it is good to stand up for yourself and give others advice when you can help them”.* (R26. IDI). This quote also suggests that in addition to sharing personal experiences to help others, it also shows that the training strengthens women’s self-esteem.

Furthermore, most of the participating single women out of school deemed it most essential to learn certain life skills beneficial to participating in income generating activities, as an alternative to marrying early.

7.3 Income generating activities and savings

As expressed by the women, income generating activities and skills to learn how to save has proved to be valuable life lessons. The Her Choice training and workshops promote women's independence by teaching women to provide for themselves, and to save money for the future so that they do not need to rely on men to take care of them. Therefore, the animators argue that independence is essential in enabling women to decide for themselves. If women are financially independent, women will not be as easily tempted to marry for economic purposes. Many women expressed that learning income-generating activities helped them gain financial independence from their husbands, as illustrated by a woman who married at 16:

“Thanks to my skills with making baskets I can sell them and make some money for myself so that I can take care of myself and my children better. It has helped me to improve my life situation in marriage.” (R28. IDI).

According to the women, the husband's role in marriage traditionally means being responsible for taking care of the family financially. However, in cases where the family resources are especially scarce or the husband spends the money elsewhere, having a small personal income enabled the women to make sure that the children and themselves are being taken care of. Women said they previously had limited understanding of long-term saving, as illustrated in the following quote by a 16-year old single woman:

“Before I did not know much about saving because I did not have much. But when I learnt some skills to sell small things, the program gave me a piggy bank to save my money in so I would not waste it on unnecessary things. I still have not opened the piggy bank, and I am still saving to buy a goat for my family.” (R2. IDI).

Income generating activities provide women with personal financial resources, which the animators explain should be directed towards specific long-term goals. As the above quote mentions, this young woman's goal was to help support her family which was a common goal for many of the young women who felt grateful towards their parents. Overall, the women considered the income-generating

activities to be important for their personal development and independence. For the near future, many of the women hope that these training sessions develop further and incorporate training in entrepreneurship.

7.4 SRHR knowledge and services

The workshops and trainings for women and other community members emphasized general SRHR knowledge sharing certain sexuality messages. At the epicenter's health center, women can receive information about contraceptives and how to maintain a healthy pregnancy from animators specialized in health & HIV/AIDS. However, the interviews, FGDs and informal conversations around the community revealed that SRHR knowledge was overall very limited, and sometimes completely absent. Almost all women were unfamiliar with the term *sexual reproductive health and rights* and especially single women without children had difficulties referring to SRHR knowledge (e.g. contraceptive use and family planning methods). However, according to the participants, women generally have more knowledge, especially related to family planning and maternal health since the health center was established at the epicenter, and animators started conducting trainings informing women about SRHR.

According to the animators and informal conversations, training sessions, and workshops and in school discussions about sexuality (also sexual health and rights) were highly restricted. Overall access to SRHR knowledge and services is limited to married or single women with children. The teachers place almost no attention on sex education in primary school, and the information provided by the teachers in secondary school mainly focuses on promoting a healthy lifestyle. As many of the women did not reach secondary school, they were excluded from receiving formal sex education and had very little knowledge of this information. In line with the community norm of sexual morality, animators highlighted that only women above 18 years old are supposed to learn about SRHR, and overall sexuality messages should be limited to married women or single women with children. As for young women under 18 years old, sexuality education does not address general SRHR knowledge. Instead, teachers in school and animators focus on promoting abstinence before marriage. So, married women and women receive knowledge of

sexual and reproductive health while single women without children learn about abstinence (to avoid STIs and early pregnancy) and feminine hygiene (a part of reproductive health).

7.4.1 Abstinence

At large, the participating women and animators expressed abstinence from sexual activity before marriage as the moral norm, especially in regards to women without children:

“It is only the mothers who receive training about family planning and using contraceptives. We try to scare the children by telling them the bad things that happen with sex so that they will wait until they are married” (Animator).

This quote illustrates the animators’ sexuality discussion with single women, which focuses on informing women about STIs and risks involving early pregnancy. Yet, if a single woman proves to be sexually active before marriage then that woman should be informed about how to prevent pregnancy and diseases by using contraceptives.

Both interviews and FGDs made it clear that many women fear the repercussions of having sex before marriage. Not only do the women fear getting infected by STIs or having an early pregnancy, but having sex before marriage was also seen to hurt the woman’s reputation in the community. According to the single women, abstaining is the only way to keep one’s dignity and avoid having community members discuss one’s lacking morals, *“A boy may tell you that he wants to have sex with you but you might not be ready. People will look at you in a bad way if you do not abstain, they will think that everybody can just go and take you”*. (R15. Single woman).

Single women in school are informed about the benefits of abstinence, and in the Her Choice training they practice several dramas to convey this message. For example, schoolgirls at Makhai Primary School presented the *Chapati Drama*, where girls pretend to be selling the traditional flatbread *chapati* to boys. One girl is trying to sell chapati with holes, while the other girl sells perfectly whole chapati. The drama shows that boys pay less for something that is ‘damaged goods’ or

‘spoiled’ and they pay a lot more for the complete version. The message in the drama is that young women should stay away from sex before marriage, in order to find a better husband who respects and takes care of his wife.

However, the message of abstinence appeared not to be taken by many girls out of school as most of the participating women, younger than 18 years old, were either pregnant or had children. Out of the participants, seven out of nine of young women under 18 had children or were pregnant. Additionally, 14 of the young mothers above 18 explained that they had given birth to their first child before turning 18 years old. In these cases, the women’s behavior did not appear to align with the message to abstain and the community norm. A young woman shared her thoughts on sexuality education, *“Not everyone has the right information, and the ones without any information will end up with early pregnancy and early marriage. That is why it is important to educate everyone about their options to protect themselves.”* (R2. Single woman). This illustrates a struggle that young women go through if/when they decide against the moral sexual norm. If single women do not have information on family planning and contraceptives, they may end up pregnant.

7.4.2 Family planning and contraceptives

According to the animators and married women, family planning methods and use of contraceptives is a high priority. In order for women to decide if, when and how often to reproduce children. Married women value family planning as it enables them to decide if, when and how often to reproduce children, for the sake of being capable of providing for them:

“SRHR teaches men and women to plan for their future by using family planning methods and contraceptives. It is important to decide on this together so that you do not cause problems for the future and you are able to care for all your children” (R10. IDI).

Access to family planning information and methods is determined by a woman’s circumstances. During the interviews and FGDs I realized that single and married women have very different perceptions of contraceptive use, and the appropriate age to use contraceptives was often determined by the woman’s marital status or if

the woman had given birth. An example of this uttered itself during a conversation with two young girls, both 17 years old. The single girl without a baby insisted that the use of condoms would cause severe health problems to a girl if she were younger than 18 years old:

“Before marriage, or when you are still young there are certain chemicals that can be dangerous to the uterus, so that is why it is important not to use them [contraceptives].” (R5. IDI).

Therefore, the only way to protect oneself is to abstain from sexual activity. At the same time, her married friend with a baby saw no problem in using contraceptives for protection. This illustrates the different set of information and approaches towards sexuality and contraceptive use for single and married women. However, on a couple of occasions, some women with children explained that there is a slight shift in attitude towards greater tolerance around single women using contraceptives as a result of women’s actual sexual practices. A young married woman explained that, *“if you [single woman] cannot abstain you should use contraceptives, even if you are young, to avoid unnecessary problems [having a premarital pregnancy].”* (R. 26, IDI)

According to married women, it appeared highly honorable to discuss family planning together with the husband. Women say they have an active choice in making decisions about family planning, but they deemed it unethical to start with family planning without the husband knowing. The women acknowledged that these discussions could lead to disagreements between the husband and wife, and should be preferably solved by further discussion. In other cases, a few of the married women believed that they had the authority to use family planning methods anyway without the husband’s knowledge, even if it contradicts the husband’s wishes. As for young single women, it appeared as though decisions were made a little differently. Single women may choose to want to use contraceptives, but often it is the man who decides whether or not to use contraceptives. Single women in IDIs and FGDs expressed that men may lie about using contraceptives, or men simply refuse to use contraceptives, as illustrated in the story of a 17-year-old single woman:

“I knew about protecting myself from pregnancy and diseases, but my boyfriend refuses to use protection. But I will make sure that my future husband and I get tested for HIV before we marry.” (R15. IDI).

It was generally understood by the single women that when men sometimes do not want to use contraceptives in order to have a child and gain status in the community. Many of the single mothers explained that the man did not want to use protection while having sex in order to have a baby, but once the woman revealed her pregnancy the man would get scared and run away.

7.4.3 Maternal health and sexual health

Alongside family planning methods, maternal health practices appeared key within the training regarding SRHR. At the Mbale epicenter, women had access to the health center that provided information and guidance in regards to healthy pregnancy, safe childbirth and postpartum period. A young single mother shared her thoughts on the help she received from the health center:

“When I first heard that I was pregnant, I was really scared. I had been going to trainings before and when I told them about my situation [being pregnant] they told me to go for check-ups at the health center to make sure that I am healthy and have a balanced diet for my baby. I am grateful because my baby is healthy.” (R25. IDI).

Many of the participating women shared similar experiences of being pregnant at a time in their lives where they did not know how to be healthy and take care of a baby. Essentially all participating mothers had at some point received help and advice from the health center, and understood the health center to be very valuable in securing maternal health. As a part of sexual health at the epicenter, the animators teach the young single women about menstruation, intimate hygiene and how to make sanitary pads. One of the younger participants in this study shared her thoughts on the health center’s sexual health:

“They taught me about menstruation periods and how to keep ourselves clean in a good way. Some girls do not go even to school when they have their period because they are embarrassed that people notice, and some girls even think it is dangerous. So for that reason I am very grateful to know what I should do.” (R31. IDI).

This quote helps describe how the animators have been helping young women to learn more about their changing bodies. Earlier, information about menstruation was often left out in school. Several of the young women explained that the information that they had previously received came from home or from other friends, but there was very little concern for intimate hygiene. Nowadays, teachers in primary school incorporate some tips for intimate hygiene. The participating women who had received information on sexual health from either primary school or Her Choice trainings were all informed on how to maintain good intimate hygiene.

Moreover, the training sessions regarding SRHR focus on the promotion of sexual health free from coercion. This training concentrates on what women should do to prevent sexual assault. The Her Choice animators arrange several opportunities for women to practice self-defense and karate for the sake of escaping sexual coercion. This training allowed the women to feel more confident and capable of protecting themselves in an unwanted situation.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter offers data that suggests that women are generally satisfied with THP Uganda's teaching methods and efforts in influencing women's ability to make marriage decisions. The findings present the influence of training in regards to educational skills and knowledge, income generating activities, and SRHR and sexuality education. The data suggests that different training sessions appeal to different women depending on women's circumstances.

8 DISCUSSION

Based on the previous empirical chapters that present the research findings, this chapter combines a discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework (chapter two). The first section (8.1) presents a discussion on the meaning of (early) marriage, thus answering the first sub-question. The second section (8.2) discusses agency, gender and sexuality norms in relation to women's marriage decisions (sub-question 2). Section 8.3 presents a discussion on THP Uganda's training and workshops related to life skills and SRHR (sub-question 3). Lastly, the chapter concludes with a reflection of the conceptual framework that has guided this research.

8.1 The meaning of (early) marriage

Marriage is defined as a union that legitimizes a relationship between a man and a woman and symbolizes the participation in a religious sacrament by fulfilling the will of God. Not only has marriage a religious purpose, but also functional purposes for of creating a family (rearing children), securing a source of livelihood (the husband secures the family's basic needs), source of domestic care (the wife maintains the domestic work of the home and of the children), as well as a source of social companionship that is expected to lead to a sounder life.

Women's preparedness to marry is determined by notions relating to 'childhood' and 'adulthood' and marriage signifies the transition into adulthood. In Mbale District, local understandings of childhood are associated with education and girls learning about 'adult responsibilities' related to the role of a mother and wife at an early age. This in turn contradicts the universality of distinction between 'childhood' and 'adulthood', and illustrates that cultural relativism is needed to understand (early) marriage practices in local context (Bunting, 2005; Willis, 2011). Getting married is seen as a natural step after reaching certain stepping-stones in life: completing education, knowing how to take care of the home, as well as being physically ready to carry a baby. As perceived by the women, a couple in an early marriage has not reached mental and physical maturity.

Less reference is given to an ideal age to get married as long as the minimum age is 18 years old, as stated in the Constitution and in The Marriage Act 1904 and neither women nor animators made a distinction of the different marital laws. This indicates that the general understanding is that marriage is legal when both parties have reached 18 years old, even though the actual legal status of the marriage is determined by what type of marriage it is. This insinuates that the women perceive early marriage as illegal.

In accordance with Archambault's (2011) findings, early marriage can be understood in relation to structural circumstances, as many of the women's firsthand stories suggest that poverty is a main underlying reason for women to marry early.

8.2 Agency, gender and sexuality norms in relation to marriage (decisions)

Supported by the relativist approach and constructivist nature of this study, the women's stories show that there is a need for understanding the context in which agency is recognized and exercised. The accounts of the women in this study confirm the idea that exercising agency is enabled or confined by structural factors and sociocultural norms in society, and can be recognized through judicious opportunism as well as thin agency (Klocker, 2007; Murphy Graham & leal, 2015; Johnson-Hanks, 2005). Women's perception of agency in regards to early marriage does not necessarily reflect in international organization's framing of early marriage as associated with coercion (Archambault, 2011). All the while recognizing that it is not always simple to distinguish voluntary from forced marriages.

In line with Mahmood's reasoning (2012) I argue that female agency in relation to marriage choices should be assumed with a background of moral codes and contextual circumstances. Women in Mbale District act and make informed choices about their lives based on the options available to them, and what is deemed appropriate in order to maintain dignity and morality in the community.

There are dominating signs of traditional gender roles and gendered divisions of labor, which suggests that men are dependent on women to take care of the children and the home, while women are dependent on men to take care of the family financially. When deciding whom to marry, the woman expects the man to live up to his role as primary provider. The findings also illustrate that women recognize attitudinal changes, where women are expected to finish education and have greater opportunity and desire to enter the formal labor force. Also, the behavioral change towards gender balance suggests that gender structures and roles are in fact fluctuant and prone to change, as expressed by Goigolea et. al. (2010).

Early sexuality leading to disease and/or early pregnancy are points of concern, and are the main reasons why youth should abstain from premarital sex. Single women who become pregnant before marriage often decide to get married as a result of feeling morally obliged to by family and community members, which supports the view of sociocultural norms influencing youth's decision-making (Kesby et. al., 2006). In these cases, women exercise thin agency, as there are limited options available to them as marriage is the only way to legitimize a sexual relationship.

8.3 Life skills training and SRHR knowledge within Her Choice program

Similar to international organizations, THP Uganda has adopted the universalist approach to informing about negative effects of early marriage. Thanks to THP Uganda, the training and workshop help participants understand early marriage to be a clear violation against human rights. In Mbale District the community members understood human rights to be reflected in the right to education, right to health and right to life without coercion, whereby marrying while younger than 18 is seen to prevent these universal rights.

All participants knew the definition of early marriage and the women were well aware of the impacts early marriage may have. However, some of the happily married young women who married before turning 18 did not recognize their own

marriage as an early marriage. This illustrates the negative associations that women have to early marriage due to its (often health) consequences, rather than identifying every marriage before 18 as early and therefore harmful. Furthermore, even though age was always mentioned in women's definition of early marriage, when further elaborated it was the 'readiness' to marry, in terms of finishing education etc., that appeared to determine if the marriage was early or not. Hence, if a woman feels ready to marry and does not experience health risks associated with early pregnancy, the marriage is not perceived as a harmful practice as framed by THP Uganda. The women's accounts reveal that they generally appreciate the content and methods of training of the Her Choice activities including: life skills training that strengthens the women's position in the community and skills to become (financially) independent from men which in turn leads to women being more inclined to marry later due to having more options available.

Participants rather talk about gender balance, as both animators and young women realize the different gendered roles and responsibilities in life and in marriage. The animators encourage husbands to help their wives with her duties, and encourage women to discuss openly with their husbands about important decisions. This illustrates a behavioral shift that strengthens the woman's position as a wife.

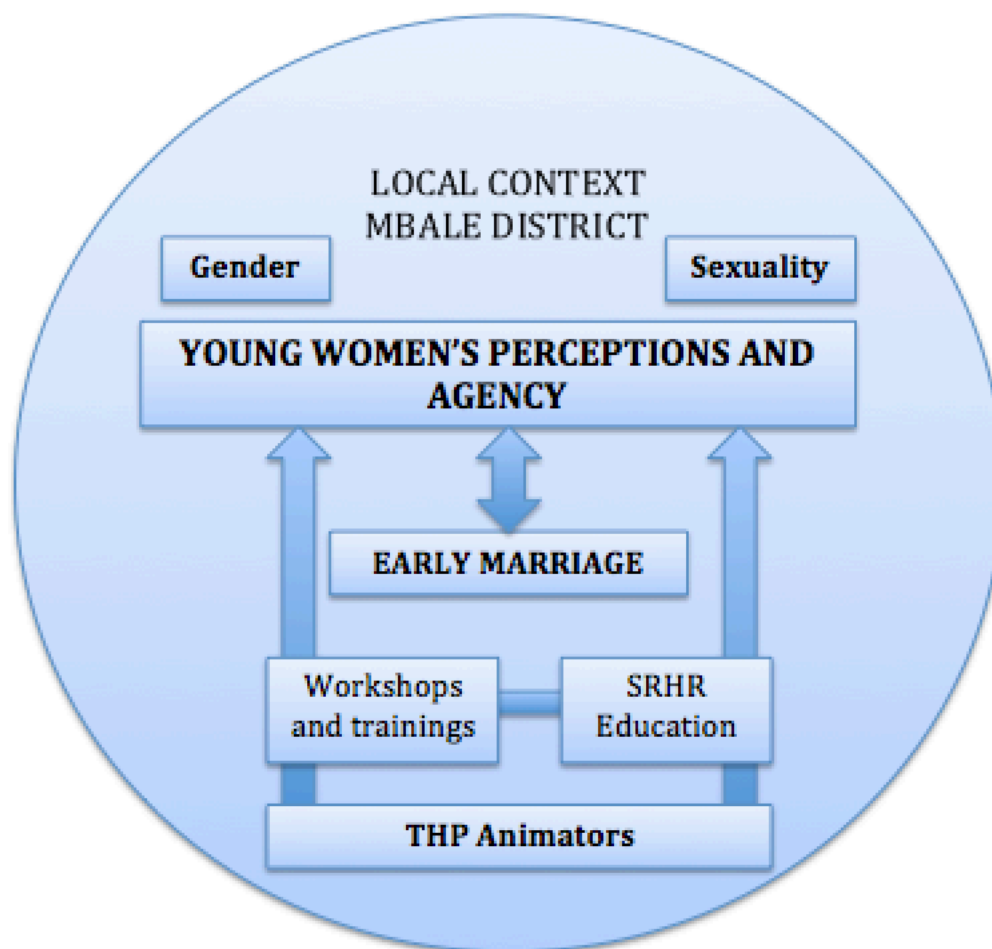
Through the Her Choice program, the animators follow the community norm by promoting premarital abstinence to prevent STIs and early pregnancy. THP Uganda uses a morality and health approach to SRHR and sexuality education, depending whom their target group is. The morality approach is directed towards single women below 18, and therefore most single women did not have sufficient SRHR knowledge, particularly regarding sexuality education and contraceptive methods. The health approach is directed towards married women and single women with children.

8.4 Reflection on Conceptual Model

In chapter 4.3 the initial conceptual model was presented and illustrated the connection between the concepts used in this research. The findings are representative of the model and the constructivist approach used in this research,

showing that young women's perception and agency are in fact constructed within a local setting. Furthermore, based on the findings I argue that The Hunger Project's animators involved with the Her Choice program do in fact influence young women's perceptions and agency in relation to early marriage. However, I had previously underestimated the local context's influence on the animators and execution of Her Choice program. Before entering the field, I suspected that Her Choice program in Mbale District would function as an external intervention program implemented by The Hunger Project's animators. Yet, it soon became clear that the animators are strongly influenced by personal experiences and local understandings of gender and sexuality. For this reason, the animators should not be excluded from the constructivist approach, and are incorporated into the local context, as seen in Figure3.

Figure 3. Adapted Conceptual Model



9 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I present the conclusion of this research. The chapter initiates with a brief answer to the main research question, followed by my recommendations for future research and policy and practice.

9.1 Answering the Main Research Question

What are young women's perceptions of agency, gender and sexuality in relation to (early) marriage, and how do The Hunger Project's animators influence these understandings, in Mbale District?

In Mbale District, young women's decision-making leading up to and within (early) marriage is determined by structural and sociocultural factors. The women do in fact exercise thin agency in different ways and under restricted circumstances, answering to what options and opportunities are available to them. Conservative understandings of traditional gender roles and relations, and sexual morality influence the way women exercise (thin or opportunistic) agency in relation to marriage.

Local understandings of traditional gender roles reveal that women are expected to take care of domestic work and care, while men are the breadwinners and providers of the family. Based on deeply rooted gender roles, marriage often serves as a source of livelihood and financial security for women. The sexual morality norms in the community indicate that women should stay away from premarital sexual activity, which can ultimately lead to women choosing to marry their boyfriend at an earlier age in order to maintain good moral in the community. Additionally, the morality approach to SRHR knowledge and lack of sexuality education, especially amongst young single women without children, also indicates that women are at risk of early pregnancy, which is strongly associated with early marriage.

The animators have played a significant role in influencing women's perceptions of agency, gender and sexuality in relation to early marriage. The animators

encourage 'universal' ideas, which are influenced by the human rights approach supporting gender equality and children's education. The animators inform young women about negative effects of early marriage practices, and they teach women life skills to make them less dependent on men to increase women's space for agency. In turn, this strengthens the women's role as a single woman, wife and/or mother and increases opportunities for decision-making. Animators within Her Choice mainly use two approaches to SRHR and sexuality education. The morality approach is primarily used to promote single women's abstinence before marriage, and the health approach is in place to teach married women and single mothers about sexual and reproductive health.

9.2 Representativeness

Adding to the discussion of transferability in chapter 4.8.2, I would like to briefly reflect on the representativeness of young women's perceptions and agency in Mbale District in general. It should be highlighted that most of the participants of this research were suggested by APO based on attendance lists from training sessions and workshops, and the women appeared to be amongst the more frequent participants of the Her Choice activities. As well, the findings in this research are in regards to women involved in the Her Choice training and workshops, which should indicate that these women are more knowledgeable of the Her Choice content, as opposed to women who are not involved in the training and workshops. Therefore, the results should not be seen as representative for all young women in Mbale District.

9.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Firstly, I recommend an in-depth study that incorporates men's perspectives on agency, gender and sexuality in relation to early marriage. Men play an active role in early marriage practices, and according to the women in this study men have different circumstances of making decisions if, when and who to marry. Based on the findings of this research men are often put to blame for early pregnancies and early marriages in general. Therefore, incorporating men's own perspectives on

decision-making and their understandings of gender and sexuality norms would lead to a more thorough assessment of marital arrangements in Mbale District.

Secondly, I recommend a focus of research into finding ways to optimize sexuality education and access to SRHR knowledge for youth within a conservative setting. It is a balance act in finding common ground between maintaining moral sexuality values in the community and offering education that serve youth's changing relations and sexuality behavior, and therefore it is an important point of research.

9.4 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Following are a couple of recommendations that I suggest for policy and practice.

1. In line with many international organizations, I agree that early marriage should be an addressed issue. However, I maintain that more attention needs to be paid to local contextualization of the problems in order to map structural reasons for early marriage. It is necessary that organizations do not solely base their programs on the assumption of early marriage as a human rights issue. Rather, organizations (for instance THP at Mbale epicenter) should recognize the highly complex nature of early marriage and adapt their intervention programs accordingly.
2. As the findings in this study demonstrate, women do exercise agency in different ways and therefore it is relevant for international actors not to dismiss women's different types of agency and capabilities. Intervention programs should strive against homogenizing women's stories and stereotyping them as victims, and instead promote their role as capable actors of change.
3. Development actors should consider the limitations that an age variable may have in determining what constitutes harmful practice related to marriage. As the findings in this study show, the women understood being ready to marry as connected with different stages in life, e.g. finalizing education, which is not directly linked to a particular age. Therefore, making the distinction at 18 years old may deny agency and aspirations for young

women who are slightly younger than 18, whilst lacking notice of vulnerable women who are married at 18.

4. The final recommendation is for intervention programs to relate to changes and behavior regarding young women's sexuality as it is closely related to the relationship between early pregnancy and early marriage. As seen in Mbale District, promoters of SRHR stress the importance of abstinence rather than informing about the options available for youth. All the while, young women are sexually active without being informed and without sufficient knowledge of how to stay protected. I argue that training animators and health service providers to offer comprehensive SRHR knowledge would be necessary to accommodate women's behavior, avoid early pregnancies, and enable women to make informed choices. Moreover, I suggest that access to this knowledge should be permissible for single women without children, and women out of school as well in order to increase their choices and opportunities.

On a concluding note, my research has provided insight into young women's perceptions and agency in relation to (early) marriage in Mbale District by involving participants of THP Uganda's Her Choice activities. I hope, with the recommendations provided above, that the animators of Mbale epicenter continue to emphasize and further develop their efforts in supporting women right to decide if, when and who to marry.

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ANNEX 1: Table Of Respondents

In-depth interviews with young women

*P1-P7 - Primary school

*S1-S6 - Secondary school

Nr.	Date	Age	Currently in school / Education level	Marital status	Children	Sub - county
1.	7/7	17	No / P7	Single	1	Busoba
2.	12/7	16	Yes / S3	Single	-	Busoba
3.	13/7	28	No / P7	Married	2	Busoba
4.	13/7	26	No / P7	Married	3	Busoba
5.	17/7	17	No / P7	Single	Pregnant	Nyondo
6.	17/7	17	No / P7	Married	1	Nyondo
7.	17/7	24	No / S2	Single	1	Nyondo
8.	18/7	24	No / P6	Single	3	Bushiende
9.	19/7	17	No / P7	Single	-	Busoba
10.	19/7	17	No / P7	Married	1	Busoba
11.	19/7	26	No / P5	Married	4	Busoba
12.	24/7	18	No / S3	Single	1	Nyondo
13.	24/7	18	No / S2	Single	1	Nyondo
14.	24/7	17	Yes / S2	Single	1	Nyondo
15.	25/7	17	No / S1	Single	1	Busoba
16.	26/7	23	No / P7	Single	1	Bushiende
17.	26/7	19	No / P7	Single	-	Bushiende
18.	26/7	19	Yes / S2	Single	Pregnant	Busoba
19.	26/7	18	No / S2	Single	-	Busoba
20.	26/7	23	No / S4	Single	1	Busoba
21.	27/7	26	No / P6	Married	2	Lukhonje
22.	27/7	25	No / P7	Married	3	Lukhonje
23.	27/7	25	No / P6	Married	3	Lukhonje
24.	27/7	27	No / P5	Married	4	Lukhonje
25.	27/7	27	No / University	Married	-	Lukhonje
26.	28/7	23	No / P7	Married	2	Bushiende
27.	28/7	28	No / P7	Married	1	Bushiende
28.	28/7	26	No / S4	Married	1	Bushiende
29.	28/7	24	No / P5	Married	1	Bushiende
30.	31/7	22	No/ S3	Married	-	Busoba
31.	31/7	15	Yes/ P5	Single	1	Busoba
TOTAL:				15 MARRIED WOMEN		
				16 SINGLE WOMEN		

In-depth interviews with THP's Her Choice animators

Nr.	Date	Name	Gender	Position	Sub - county
1.	6/7	Lorna Mubogi	Female	Animator Her Choice	Busoba
2.	11/7	Penina Nandutu	Female	Chairperson Her Choice	Nyondo
3.	11/7	Victoria Mulekhwa	Female	Treasurer Her Choice	Busoba
4.	11/7	Annet Nakopoli	Female	Secretary Her Choice	Bushiende
5.	12/7	Moses Nangoli	Male	Animator Her Choice	Busoba
6.	12/7	Augustine Mabonga	Male	Chairman Mbale Epicenter	Busoba
7.	13/7	Juliet Emen	Female	Head Teacher	Busoba
8.	14/7	Brian Watsala	Male	Youth Representative Her Choice	Busoba

* I do not have specific data regarding each animator's education level. However, overall the education level did not exceed secondary school.

FGDs with married and single women in Mbale District

Group	Nr.	Date	Age	Marital status	Sub - county
1	1	1/8	16	Single	Nyondo
	2		16		
	3		20		
	4		19		
	5		20		
	6		18		
	7		17		
	8		17		
	9		19		
	10		16		
2	1	1/8	18	Married	Nyondo
	2		21		
	3		22		
	4		21		
	5		17		
	6		24		
	7		23		
	8		19		
	9		18		
	10		20		
3	1	2/8	17	Single with child(ren)	Busoba
	2		16		
	3		19		
	4		20		
	5		17		
	6		18		
	7		17		
	8		19		
4	1	2/8	19	Single	Busoba
	2		20		
	3		18		
	4		16		
	5		17		
	6		17		
	7		18		
5	1	3/8	21	Married	Bushiende
	2		23		
	3		25		
	4		21		
	5		27		
	6		28		
	7		22		
	8		16		

	9		19		
	10		21		
	11		24		
	12		20		
	13		19		
6	1	3/8	16	Single	Bushiende
	2		17		
	3		19		
	4		18		
	5		16		
	6		15		
	7		17		
7	1	7/8	22	Married	Lukhonje
	2		25		
	3		24		
	4		21		
	5		20		
	6		22		
	7		23		
8	1	7/8	21	Single with child(ren)	Lukhonje
	2		19		
	3		18		
	4		17		
	5		20		
	6		22		

ANNEX 2: Topic Guide for interviews with young women

Personal introduction

Name
Age
Village
School (level or last grade attended)

Family

Marital status
Children
If there are children, what is the relationship with the father?
Relationship with parents/siblings

Defining marriage

What is marriage?
Why should people get married?
What are important aspects of getting married?
(SINGLE) When do you want to get married? When is the ideal age for marriage? What do you think is expected of you when you marry?
(MARRIED) Can you please tell me about your marriage and how it happened?
(MARRIED) Did you know what was expected of you for when you got married?

Defining early marriage

What is early marriage?
What type of marriage is it? (E.g. city hall, church, mosque, formal/informal etc.)
How does early marriage happen? (E.g. between families, bride price, running away from home etc.)

AGENCY

Respect/self esteem

Do you feel respected? By others/yourself?
Have Her Choice workshops and activities helped you to respect yourself?

Decision-making

Meaning of making decisions in life
Who decides within your family or with husband?
Who decides when and to who you get married?
Who decides about going to school?
(MARRIED) Who decides about contraceptives?
Influence from Her Choice workshops and training about making decisions

PARTICIPATION

Importance of participation
Attending workshops and training
Engaging in public discussion
Influence from Her Choice workshops and training about participation

GENDER

Roles

What are boys and girls supposed to do growing up?
Defining good woman / good girl
Role of women and men in marriage
Influence from Her Choice workshops and training
Do these understandings differ from society expectations in general?

Relations

What is your interaction with boys? (in school, church/mosque etc.)
How are girls supposed to relate to boys before marriage?
View on having a boyfriend

SRHR

What is sexual reproductive health and rights?
Who teaches you about SRHR?
Do you have access to information, counseling and protection methods?
Is SRHR important?
 Why / Why not?
What is the meaning of abstaining?
Influence from THP animators and workshops about SRHR topics
Do these understandings differ from society expectations in general?

Hopes for the future

Individual
Family
Husband
Children
Community
Her Choice

Concluding remarks

Is there anything that you would like to share that has not been brought up?

ANNEX 3: Topic list for semi-structured interviews with Her Choice animators

Personal introduction

Name
Age
Village
Position as animator
Worked since
Motivation for work, why Her Choice

Defining

Marriage (definition and type - arrangement)
Early marriage (definition and type - arrangement)

Early Marriage in Mbale District

Reasons for early marriage
Needs for change

The Her Choice Program

Content of workshops and training (knowledge and skills)

Agency
Self-esteem/respect
Decision-making
Participation
Gender (roles, relations, equality)
Sexuality
SRHR (sexual/reproductive health, sexual rights, family planning/contraceptives)

Perceived influence of work

Hopes for future

Women
Community
Her Choice