

Empowering young girls? Questioning assumptions about early marriage, gender and the role of CSE

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The workshop titled 'empowering young women? Questioning assumptions about early marriage, gender and the role of CSE', which was organized by the University of Amsterdam, started with three presentations of recently completed research on child marriage and CSE. They addressed:

- * [gender-based and socio-economic reasons for child marriage](#) and how to tackle this at multiple levels;
- * the importance of recognizing the [forms of agency and young \(married\) women](#) exercise in their environments, hence questioning assumptions of 'girls-as-victims' in relation to child marriage; and
- * the gendered structures and gender exclusion in the CSE classroom, which complicate addressing structural (gender and sexual health) inequalities including child marriage (publication forthcoming).

An interactive exercise in which the audience was invited to discuss possible actions to tackle issues of child marriage at multiple levels (from community to international) through which a balance could be found to address both structural barriers and inequalities, and foster/tap into young people's agency or their capacity to make their own choices/ pursue their own goals. Important conclusions and recommendations from the workshop were:

- Schools are not neutral spaces. This needs to be recognized in school-based initiatives aimed at addressing gendered structures in society, and alternative spaces need to be sought to support the school-based initiatives at multiple levels;
- More research and knowledge is needed about the relation between child marriage, education and CSE and the views and lived experiences of young (married) girls and boys;
- When designing initiatives, it is important to recognize the balance between (gender and socio-economic) structures and the various forms of agency that young people exercise;
- Deeply embedded gendered hierarchies are a major driver of child marriage. Other related SRHR-topics such as female circumcision, (onset of) menarche and virginity, as well as wider societal, political and economic contexts, also need to be taken into consideration when addressing child marriage, as the question of child marriage does not exist in isolation (in fact, it is debatable whether child marriage is (primarily) a symptom or a cause of gender inequality). Therefore, programmes might include a livelihoods approach, involving communities, 'champions';
- CSE remains an important means to tackling issues of child marriage, yet needs to be supported by interventions at other levels, including addressing the deeply entrenched gender inequalities in societies;
- Change takes time. Make an effort to actively lobby for long-term funding for (research) projects.