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# Early marriage and cultural constructions of adulthood in two slums in Dar es Salaam

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines under-18 marriage in urban Tanzania from an ethnographic perspective. Due to poverty and high unemployment, some girls aspire to early marriage. Two pathways to early marriage are identified: first, poverty and gendered economic disparities motivate girls to begin transactional sexual activity at an early age, leading parents to favour early marriage as a risk-reduction measure. Second, educational opportunities are often closed off to girls before marriage, as a result of which early marriage becomes the only culturally approved pathway that allows girls to present themselves to others as a self-sufficient agent. These pathways are reinforced by cultural and religious concepts surrounding the transition from childhood to adulthood. The study finds that, in urban Tanzania, two important factors associated with early marriage are the prevalence of premarital sex leading to out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and the relatively high cost of secondary schooling, which blocks educational opportunities for girls after the age of 15.

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## Introduction

Despite decades of campaigns to restrict or forbid it through legislation, marriage under the age of 18 years is still common in sub-Saharan Africa, and the continent is predicted to have the largest global share of child brides by the year 2050 (UNICEF 2015, 6). Human rights discourses define ‘child marriage’ as marriage involving a spouse under 18 years of age (Bunting 2005; Bunting, Lawrance, and Roberts 2016).<sup>1</sup> This definition carries with it the notion that persons under this age are unable to give informed consent regarding their future.

The notion of age 18 as the upper limit of childhood draws upon cultural assumptions of childhood and adolescence that have emerged under specific historical, social and economic conditions in the West. These notions of the individual do not easily fit ‘more fluid and complex African concepts of personhood’, which can change and have different entitlements over the life course (Bunting, Lawrance, and Roberts 2016, 32). Discourses that sensationalise and vilify early marriage may only serve to implicate African women in ethnocentric discourses as oppressed ‘victims’ to be rescued by western conceptions of human

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rights, itself part of a colonial project of governance (Bunting 2005; Mohanty 1988). This study uses ethnography to examine how women themselves view adolescent marriage in two low-income urban neighbourhoods in Tanzania.

Dar es Salaam is Tanzania's most populous city with an estimated 4.5 million residents. I studied two city neighbourhoods located roughly five kilometres from the city centre. These neighbourhoods meet the United Nations' (UN-HABITAT 2010, 14–15) criteria for a 'slum', being informal settlements in which residents lack access to tenure, safe water, sanitation, durability of housing, and sufficient living area. Many residents live hand to mouth and earn only enough money each day to eat two meals.

Africa is predicted to be an urban continent by 2030, a process lacking the industrialisation that characterised Asia and Latin America's urban transition. The result has been over 60% of Africa's urban population living in slums (UN-HABITAT 2013, 151). Between 2000 and 2011, 19% of women aged 20–24 in Dar es Salaam had married or entered into a conjugal union by age 18 (UNFPA 2014, 2). Although this number is lower than the 37% for Tanzania as a whole (UNFPA 2012, 23, 74), disaggregated numbers do not reflect the deep inequalities within the urban population, and poorer women residing in disadvantaged areas are at great risk of violence and marginalisation (Chant and McIlwaine 2016). Most research on early marriage in Africa focuses on rural areas, leaving a gap in our understanding of the urban dynamics underlying this practice. Ethnographic, in-depth, local-level studies of early marriage are also scarce in the literature. To the best of my knowledge the present article represents the first ethnographic study of early marriage among slum dwellers in Dar es Salaam.

Using 171 interviews in Dar es Salaam conducted during eight visits between 2010 and 2017, I ask: how are early marriage practices in the context of chronic poverty grounded in local concepts of childhood and adulthood? What are the factors underlying, and pathways to, under-18 marriage for girls? Nearly all of the persons I interviewed on this topic were of the opinion that they or others who married before age 18 had married early, but would probably have disagreed that a young female Tanzanian who marries between the ages of 15 and 18 is a child. For this reason, the term 'early marriage' rather than 'child marriage' is used here.

In Tanzania there exist several forms of legally recognised marriage: customary marriage (still practised by only a few rural ethnic groups), those registered in the courts, and those recorded by religious authorities (Islamic or Christian). Court-recorded marriages were reported to occur primarily between interfaith couples. For Islamic and Christian marriages, the responsibility for recording them is given to the church or the local imam, which means that marriages are not recorded by local government officials. Due to the high rate of out- and in-migration as girls move away to marry and tenants move away due to rising rents and flooding – to be quickly replaced by new tenants – even local imams do not have the marriage records for all Muslim residents in their area. From discussions, it was clear that marriages to older, more prosperous men are not the only form of early marriage: girls also often marry young men with whom they are already in a relationship.

In practice, the relationships defined as 'marriage' in the neighbourhoods I studied were legitimised by the court, a Christian church or, most often, the local imam who presides over the marriage rite, records the marriage and provides the marriage certificate signed by both bride and groom. This has also been the case in early marriage, as long as the girl and her parents consent, because until 2016 marriage for girls under the age of 18 was not opposed by Tanzanian law. The Law of Marriage Act (1971) stated that girls could marry at age 15 with

parental consent and even at 14 with permission of the court (Ezer et al. 2006, 362–363). Although Tanzania's High Court ruled in July 2016 that the sections of the 1971 Marriage Act allowing girls to marry at 14 and 15 are unconstitutional, the ruling was made without participation from local communities. It is thus unclear whether the ruling will have any actual impact on the incidence of under-18 marriage in the country.

### **Source data and methods**

Interviews were conducted in Swahili assisted by female interpreters who shared similar socio-economic backgrounds to the interviewees, enabling them to explain the tacit knowledge behind the interview statements and descriptions given in them. Research on African gender and sexuality has noted that cultural expectations of female respectability can make it difficult to access information on intimate experiences (Luke 2003; Plummer and Wight 2011; Silberschmidt 2011). I employed the method of third-person elicitation in which people are not asked directly about their sexual activities, but are asked about what other people in their neighbourhood say or believe. This ethically sensitive method enabled participants to describe local motives and perceptions of sexuality without causing them personal shame or embarrassment, and many interviewees gave examples from their own life experiences. All names have been changed in this study to preserve the anonymity of the informants.

Two female key informants in the area were contacted through local non-governmental organisations and they 'pre-selected' persons to be interviewed. When my interpreter and I arrived in the mornings, people came to be interviewed alone or with a neighbour, as they chose. Key informants had decided that only 'safe' persons (not well-known drug users or thieves) would be invited to interviews, otherwise participants were chosen by them at random and not excluded on the basis of gender, age or other criteria. Interviews lasted one to two hours per person. Interviewees were each given a two-kilogram bag of sugar to compensate them for their time.

Informed consent was problematic due to informants' low level of education. Although each interview started with an explanation of the purpose of my research, some interviewees did not know what a university or research study was, and they remained convinced that I must work for a humanitarian or development organisation, the most familiar role for a white woman in Tanzania. Signed consent forms were not collected in order to avoid humiliating those who were non-literate or revealing to neighbours their low literacy status, which is often kept secret. Because of the ethical challenge inherent in the ambiguous informed consent obtained verbally, data from interviews were not audiotaped but were written down instead so that informants could see what I was doing with the information they provided. Translations in English were recorded as verbatim as possible (including my own questions asked and comments by the interpreter). I could review my written notes during the interview and ask clarifying questions, for example about the terms used in Swahili or about an unfamiliar practice or custom.

I began each interview using the life-situation approach to create a holistic understanding of the informant's livelihood, family and residence history, schooling, marital and parental status, and the greatest difficulties of living in the slum. My focus was on culturally shared attitudes and understandings. Open-ended questions about marriage, puberty rites and intimate heterosexual relationships, such as 'what can you tell me about girls marrying before age 18 in this area?', were also asked. The answers helped me refine and narrow my focus

and ask further questions. Rather than asking the same set of questions of all informants, I inquired about each participant's concrete life events and circumstances to encourage them to bring up spontaneously new topics and information I could not have anticipated beforehand. I pursued a single line of questioning until a 'saturation point' had been reached on that topic in which no new information appeared in responses.

Of the interview participants, 76% were women, and 24% were men. More women were interviewed due to the fact that they were at home at least part of the day, unlike men who were outside the neighbourhood at work or seeking work. By interviewing a broad age range, I accessed multiple perspectives on social norms and cultural attitudes regarding early marriage. Age categories of informants are given in Table 1. A 13-year-old informant who asked to be interviewed, and for whom permission was obtained from her mother, is included in the category of 15- to 20-year-olds.

Of those interviewed, 78% were Muslim and 19% were Christian. One man self-identified as both Christian and Muslim, based on his parents' religions. Among female informants, 70% ( $n = 90$ ) had only a primary education (age 7–14) or less; for male interviewees this number was only 27% ( $n = 11$ ). Eight women self-reported as having no education at all. However, the only interviewees with some college education ( $n = 2$ ) were women. Members of just six coastal Muslim ethnic groups (Kwere, Luguru, Makonde, Ndengereko, Zaramo and Zigua) made up 58% ( $n = 99$ ) of the total number of those interviewed, while the remaining 42% ( $n = 72$ ) was composed of 31 other ethnic groups.

Data analysis consisted of reviewing the interview notes after each session and thinking of continuation questions to ask the next day. Handwritten notes were transcribed to a digital format, and after multiple close readings of interview responses recurrent themes in the data were noted and categorised thematically. Informants' explicit statements and spontaneous statements were given extra weight in interpretation. I strove to understand these statements in the context of information provided about family, livelihoods, inheritance, religion, politics, crime and so forth, to better identify causal links and dynamics. Although multiple perspectives were understandably offered by informants from different life situations, conclusions presented here are based on opinions and ideas expressed by the majority of interviewees.

The main limitation of this study is the gender imbalance of interviewees due to men's absence from neighbourhoods during the day. In addition, further research is needed on the role of local imams in early marriage. Although I did not interview imams specifically on this topic, I spoke with the local imam at length about the youth and marriage, from which I understood that he perceived his own role to be that of a guidance counsellor rather than

**Table 1.** Age distribution of interviewees by gender.

Age category	Women ( $n = 130$ )	Men ( $n = 41$ )
	% (n)	% (n)
15–20 years	19% (25)	39% (16)
21–25 years	19% (25)	29% (12)
26–30 years	27% (35)	17% (7)
31–40 years	18% (23)	5% (2)
41–50 years	10% (13)	2.5% (1)
51–60 years	2% (3)	0% (0)
61–70 years	5% (6)	7.5% (3)

an authority in family-related matters, in part because he must adhere to Tanzanian secular law where it applies.

### ***Early marriage as an aspiration***

Interviewees made it clear that even chronically poor Tanzanian men in the city have better access to earning opportunities and informal day-labour than do women (Plummer and Wight 2011) and are therefore perceived to be able to support themselves, whereas women are often dependent on men because they find it difficult to subsist on the basis of small-scale neighbourhood vending alone. Since alternative sources of income are extremely difficult for women to access, and in East African societies men are expected to support wives financially (Hunter 2010; Plummer and Wight 2011, 211; Silberschmidt 2004; Wamoyi et al. 2010), for most girls marriage is not a question of if but when.

During the first fieldwork period in 2010, I was told that some girls were forced by parents or guardians to marry a man of the parents' choice after completing primary school at roughly age 15. According to a local government official, it is predominantly the ethnic groups from the Muslim, Swahili-influenced coast of eastern Tanzania who seek to arrange such marriages for their daughters. Members of these groups represented the majority of respondents.

Although the local government intervenes in cases of forced marriages of girls under 18 that are brought to their attention, parents can simply arrange to have a daughter marry a husband elsewhere, or pressure her to consent so that the marriage has been legal under Tanzanian law, in which case the local government never learns of it. An unknown number of coerced early marriages thus take place in the neighbourhoods, rendering difficult any reliable measurement of whether their rates are decreasing or not.

Yet coercion is not the whole story of early marriage. Both male and female interviewees stated that many girls from poor families wish to marry: they dream of a better life with a husband who can give them more than their parents can. Girls were said to believe that 'maybe the life in their husband's house will be different' [Musa, 32-year-old Muslim male, father of one child, primary education, Makua ethnic group], or that they would they would be free to eat and dress as they wanted. Such hopes are kept alive by a small minority of girls who do manage to marry wealthier men from outside their home neighbourhood and thus – at least in the imaginations of those they leave behind – enjoy a more secure and consumption-oriented lifestyle after marriage.

Early marriage can also represent an economically motivated aspiration for the girl's parents. Brideprice is still paid to parents in the neighbourhoods I studied, especially if a daughter can be married at a young age to an older, wealthier man. The amount of brideprice was said by interviewees to generally range from 50,000 Tzs (= 20 Euros) to 500,000 Tzs (= 200 Euros). Wealthy men were said to be interested in marrying poor girls because their families requested a lower brideprice, but I also heard of cases in which a girl who knew what brideprice her boyfriend could afford might convince her parents to request a smaller sum. Parents were said to hope for a son-in-law who could not only provide for their daughter, but who could also assist them financially. Twenty-five-year-old Zainabu and 23-year-old Omari described this situation when I asked about early marriage:

Maybe the prospective husband is rich and can take care of the family, so the parents try to force her [to marry]. I know many of these cases, but the girls no longer live here. (Zainabu, 25-year-old Muslim mother of one child, primary education, Zigua ethnic group)

For the parents who push their daughters to marry, they are poor, the father might just have a small business selling mangoes outside his door, he does not have enough money to put his daughter back into school [after she finishes primary school]. So, if someone come and offers to marry his daughter, he says OK....

[Interviewer: Is brideprice a motive for poor fathers?]

It is true, these poor parents think about brideprice. And that brideprice belongs to the father. Another thing, when the daughter marries, the father thinks that maybe life will be a little easier, because now the son-in-law will help him with money. These fathers feel that it is a heavy burden to take of the daughter – if she marries, it is easier for him to take care of himself. (Omari, 23-year-old Muslim father of one child, primary education, Zaramo ethnic group)

According to informants, however, girls and their parents are often disappointed by early marriage. Interviewees estimated that only 5–20% of early marriages succeeded, with the rest ending in the divorce or abandonment of the wife. When early marriages fail, they often leave the young woman – with no skills or education – to raise her small children alone. Increasing unemployment has made it impossible for many African men to provide long term for female partners in the context of marriage, and many young men have been unable to provide for the children they father (Chant and Evans 2010, 354; Silberschmidt 2004). Some girls return to live with their birth families and are seen to be a financial burden to the same parents who allowed or pressured them to marry early in the first place, as 49-year-old Mwajuma pointed out:

You can make your child marry, but after two or three years you can hear that she is divorced with two or three children, so she will be coming back to you with her children. It is hard for us to take care of our own family and someone else's family too. (Mwajuma, 49-year-old married Muslim mother of four children, primary education, Zigua ethnic group)

For girls or young women with children, returning to school is difficult due to childcare responsibilities and the high cost of secondary school (Haram 2000; Setel 1999). Those who have been abandoned by boyfriends or husbands often engage in sexual relations with different men in order to feed themselves and their children. For instance, Jamila (25-year-old Muslim mother of one child, primary school education) told me that she had married at age 15, but that her husband had abandoned her when she was pregnant: 'He never came back, never cared for his family, never sent money. I get money from other men. I am scared of diseases but I do it anyway.' Interviewees thus recognised that even if early marriage is a tempting solution in the face of high unemployment and discouraging earning prospects for women, it involves considerable risk. Even for those who aspire to early marriage, finding a man prosperous enough to provide for a wife and pay brideprice has become increasingly difficult, making early marriage an ideal that often cannot be achieved.

### **Cultural constructions of adulthood**

For many community members, marriage is seen to be a natural life event following closely upon puberty, a notion supported by both Islamic teachings and older Tanzanian cultural norms (see Bledsoe and Cohen 1993). Although some women spoke of how their families had not prepared them for the realities of marriage, some families have strived to prepare their daughters for the responsibilities of early marriage at age 15 or 16 through an initiation/puberty rite known in Tanzania as *unyago*, *mkole* or *msondo* (see also Caplan 2000; Halley 2012; Swantz 1995). According to female interviewees, a girl in *unyago* spends a certain

period of time – from a week to a year – living in a specially prepared room. Either during or at the end of this time ‘inside’, girls received teachings on proper behaviour and respect for self and others from an older woman, usually an older sister, aunt, grandmother or traditional female teacher. Older interviewees mentioned that *unyago* was seen in their ethnic group as a process that transformed a girl into an adult woman:

I was ‘inside’ for 2 weeks... Then on the fourth day they gave me local medicine in order to vomit all the ‘dirt’. It is our tradition that when we vomit, we remove all the childish things, going through *unyago* means the girl becomes an adult. I was 15. (Neema, 58-year-old widowed mother of six children, Muslim, no education, Chinga ethnic group)

When a girl has completed her time ‘inside’, her family holds a public celebration with food, drink, traditional dancing and gifts for the girl to congratulate her and her parents for having raised her ‘in a good way’, meaning she has not become pregnant before *unyago*. According to Zawadi (35-year-old married Muslim mother of four children, primary education) from the Kwere ethnic group, men may propose marriage to the girl after she has gone through *unyago*.

The majority of the women I interviewed who were over the age of 20 and belonged to coastal Muslim ethnic groups had undergone *unyago*. Some adolescent girls in the neighbourhood still go through *unyago*, usually during a temporary stay in the home of a rural relative, but the practice is seen to be gradually dying out. The most common reason given was that many children are thought by parents to be already engaging in sexual relations – or at least ‘know a lot about sex’ – before the age at which they would normally undergo *unyago* (14–16). I was told that girls as young as nine years of age are compelled to engage in transactional sex in order to eat if parents are away from home at work during the day. Many parents therefore consider it too late to try to teach daughters proper behaviour through *unyago*, and see no reason to celebrate their daughter being raised ‘in a good way’:

*Unyago* teaches you not to have many relationships but just to be married with one man. But nowadays children [= girls] are already having relationships with many boys or men already before the age of *unyago*. (Fatuma, 47-year-old Muslim mother of three children, married, primary education, Zigua ethnic group)

Indeed, one reason why parents want their daughters to marry early is premarital transactional sex, meaning that girls and young women engage in sexual relations in return for money and material gifts from boys and men (Chant and Evans 2010; Hunter 2002, 2010; Maganja et al. 2007; Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001; Swidler and Watkins 2007). Although Clark, Poulin, and Kohler (2007) found in Malawi that premarital sex involved marital aspirations often understood in romantic terms, for my informants the most important component of premarital sex (*zina*) was men’s giving of money to women, even if love, caring and commitment could also be involved (Stark 2017). Both young men and women understood that the female partner is economically dependent on her boyfriend. According to informants, a man who is not a relative would never give money or gifts to a woman without the expectation of sex in return, and a woman who gives sex for free would be laughed at by other women (Deane and Wamoyi 2015, 443–444; Maganja et al. 2007). I was told that most unmarried girls had begun to engage in transactional sexual relationships by age 16 at the latest, for the simple reason that transactional sex is seen as the easiest way for girls and women to obtain money. According to one informant, girls are often tempted to begin sexual activity when a man first offers a girl 2000 Tzs (= 1 Euro), and if rejected, 5000 Tzs, and finally 10,000 Tzs, nearly enough for a girl to buy food to feed herself for a week.

Although informants described premarital sexual activity as both ‘normal’ and ‘everywhere’ in their neighbourhoods due to the ‘hard life’ of residents, Islamic teachings oppose sexual intimacy outside of marriage. Parents explained that they are expected to provide moral guidance as long as children are in their care, and that they are seen to be responsible in the eyes of God for their children’s behaviour. Thus, parents feel they should urge their daughters to marry before they become sexually active. Additionally, marriage is the only way to ensure that the man’s family will recognise the woman’s children as belonging to their kin group. A union legitimised by an imam and recognised by both families as a marriage makes it more likely that in the event of the wife being divorced, abandoned or widowed, the husband’s extended kin group will help provide for any children from the marriage. A mere relationship of sexual intimacy, by contrast, does not carry such guarantee of support from the male partner’s extended family.

### ***Autonomy before age 18***

One issue that arose repeatedly in interviews was the question of where parental responsibility for children ended and where adult independence should begin. After the age of *unyago*, a Tanzanian girl is seen to be an independent adult, able to ‘depend on herself’. Both boys and girls who do not succeed in school – or whose parents cannot afford to pay their school fees – are expected to find ways of being productive: sons are expected to find work after primary school, and daughters are expected to assist in small vending businesses or work, for example, as an assistant cook in roadside eateries (see also Plummer and Wight 2011, 134, 203). Tamasha told how, even at a young age, girls are taught ‘how to not be dependent on your parents, to find something to do’ (Tamasha, 25-year-old married mother of two children, Muslim, primary education, Zigua ethnic group). If a girl is not in school and not earning income, parents can expect her to find a permanent boyfriend to provide for her or even better, to marry, since only marriage can bring both brideprice and financial security for her children. Marriage is thus considered one route to self-sufficiency, even if this self-sufficiency paradoxically entails the wife’s economic dependency on her husband.

The shift away from provision by parents or guardians to either ‘depending on herself’ economically or finding a man to provide for her was a primary marker of female adulthood. Asha commented on this as follows:

I have a friend whose mother told her, you are old enough, I cannot support you anymore, so find a man, be with him, give the men what they want, satisfy his needs, and he will give you some money. This usually happens after *unyago* ... when that is done, your family considers you an adult, so you have to support yourself, you have to find a man that you will satisfy, and he will give you money to support your needs. For all groups practising *unyago*, it is typical that the parents say to their children, now you must depend on yourself. (Asha, 22-year-old unmarried Muslim female, no children, primary education, Makonde ethnic group)

According to interviewees, some young persons themselves seek to be independent from their parents immediately after the completion of primary school at age 15 or 16. According to Simon:

... most of the young people, after finishing primary school, don’t want to continue their education, and even if they have an opportunity to do so, it might be that the family has a lot of problems, not enough money for food, so they choose to try to get a job and help out their families instead of continuing their education.... Some girls want to get married after seeing

the situation at home, no food at home, they want to responsibly help their families, they feel otherwise a burden to their parents. (Simon, 30-year-old Christian male, one child, secondary education, Gogo ethnic group)

Girls could be urged by parents to be self-sufficient at age 15 or 16 because they were perceived to have more 'needs' than boys in the form of clothing, toiletries and cosmetics, as well as fewer opportunities to pay for these needs through the informal day work that was available to young men (also Plummer and Wight 2011). Nineteen-year-old Hassan explained this situation from the perspective of his own experience:

For me, if God wishes that I have a daughter someday, she won't get married after primary school, but some parents may force or push her after primary school to marry, because girls have a lot of needs and parents don't want to pay for them.... Girls may need clothes, they go hungry more easily, maybe in their home there are meals only twice a day, so they think to marry. Men have money, for example a man can have a lot of channels to make money, it is lucky to be born a man. So, for me, even if only tea [= breakfast] is offered in my home, it is enough for me, I have other ways to get money and feed myself. For example, I can get day work in construction jobs, even from private individuals. At work I might get [breakfast] in the morning, lunch in the mid-day, and even take money home to my parents. (Hassan, 19-year-old Muslim man, no children, primary education, Zaramo ethnic group)

Autonomy and self-sufficiency represent cultural ideals that girls strive to achieve in the eyes of other women, starting in their mid-teens. At this age they are discouraged from relying on relatives for their material needs, or borrowing from friends. Zena explained that, even if an adolescent girl tries to borrow skin oil from her female friends, they might say: 'You are always borrowing from us, why don't you find your own boyfriend with money? You need to find a good boyfriend' (Zena, 33-year-old Muslim female, mother of two children, primary education, Manda ethnic group).

For many girls who have reached culturally specified 'adulthood', having a male partner is therefore crucial for her sense of self-respect, in order to project an outward image of dignity and independence (see also Plummer and Wight 2011, 204).

### ***Education and tabia as destiny***

Due to the fact that even secondary school graduates are often unable to find work, some girls lose motivation and drop out of school against their parents' wishes, especially if they have one or more boyfriends as a source of income. Even for girls who want to continue in school, parents face difficult decisions about whether or not to invest in her schooling. They may keep a close eye on her scholastic performance and on whether she shows any interest in boys. A primary concern is that she will become pregnant and be expelled from school, thereby 'wasting' the money that her parents have so far invested in her education, since she is unlikely to return to school after giving birth (also Haram 2000; Setel 1999).

An important element in this decision-making is the culturally shared notion that once a young person has exhibited a behaviour it may be impossible to alter it, since it depends on his/her character, known in Tanzania as *tabia* or *mwenendo* (Setel 1999). A good *tabia* was seen to be a form of symbolic capital necessary in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods in which people may not have their own kin living near them but must depend on neighbours for help. Godfrey explained that young men needed social networks based on trust to obtain day-work in the city. In contrast, 'the [newly-arrived] village youth cannot get a job in the

city because nobody knows his *tabia*' (Godfrey, 28-year-old married father of one child, secondary education, Christian, Haya ethnic group).

For both young men and young women, *tabia* was also viewed as symbolic capital in the marriage marketplace, as 62-year-old Rabia explained:

... in [the old] days we did not meet with the husbands before marriage, it was arranged by parents, girls did not even know whom they would marry beforehand. For example, the mother of a son sees the girl and notices that she has good *tabia*, so she goes to the mother of the girl and asks if the girl has a fiancé. If the girl's mother says 'no', then the boy's mother said, 'You know I have a son, and you have seen him, he has good *tabia*. I want my son to marry your daughter, what do you say?' (Rabia, 62-year-old widowed mother of one child, Muslim, primary education, Makonde ethnic group)

I was told by 30-year-old Yasinta that her female teacher in *unyago* had told her that 'now you are grown up, you have to change.' This meant having a good *tabia*, so that suitors will be 'attracted to you'. Yasinta elaborated:

A person with a good *tabia* may be loved by everyone. The girl is understandable, she talks well. She respects both older and younger people. A person who has a bad *tabia* doesn't respect herself, elders or young ones. She makes jokes with the children using bad words. (Yasinta, 30-year-old separated mother of three children, Muslim, primary education, Ndengereko ethnic group)

Parents used the notion of children's *tabia* or innate personality to draw a clear boundary between their own responsibility and that of their children. For example, Maimuna explained that in *unyago* girls are taught the difference between good and bad, and that once the parent had provided this education, responsibility for the girl's behaviour ultimately rested with herself:

Listen to me. You know people entering into bad behaviour or bad groups depends on their skills and knowledge, their own mind, and it is my duty as a parent to take her to *unyago* so she learns to be a good girl, it is like sending the child to school, but if she decides later to change, it is her own responsibility. She cannot blame anybody or say 'my mother did not give me a good education'. (Maimuna, 34-year-old married mother of four children, Muslim, primary education, Manyema ethnic group)

According to interviewees, *tabia* was the factor that determined whether a child or youth listened to advice or warnings from their elders and, in general, a good *tabia* was seen to enable a person to be socially acceptable, useful and productive. Success in further education and the possibility to marry early were both seen as paths to being productive, viewed as the outcome of a good *tabia*. This was contrasted with the fate of unproductive youth who were considered, due to their bad *tabia*, to have fallen into 'bad groups' and 'bad behaviour', meaning sex before marriage, theft and substance abuse. To some extent, therefore, a young person's *tabia* was seen to guide his/her success or failure in life, and not all children were seen to be suited to further education. In Maimuna's opinion, parents could do nothing if a child's *tabia* did not predispose him or her for success in school:

All parents want to support their children. When you have found a child who has the kind of *tabia* [that they want to quit school], it means that her mind is not for study, it is for other things. For a child that wants to study, even if you were to beat her, she would still continue to study.

The fact that a girl's marriageability can be enhanced by a reputation for a good *tabia* implies that early marriage is an outcome that reflects well upon the bride's moral character and thus enhances her social respectability within her kin group and community.

## Discussion and implications

### *Adolescence depends on the family's economic status*

If adolescence is understood as a socially approved, post-puberty time of financial dependence on one's birth family, then adolescence in the low-income urban areas of Tanzania studied may be said to exist only for those girls whose families have adequate means to pay for their schooling. In more impoverished families, children are expected soon after puberty, at roughly age 15–16, to become adult men and women capable of 'depending on themselves'. A girl at this age who quits school or whose family cannot invest in her education moves quickly from the status of 'child' to that of adult, and is expected to support herself financially. The economic self-reliance that she is expected to display to others, however, can often only be obtained through conjugal or sexual links to men.

### *Parental control in a dearth of options*

The findings described here call into question the assumption that parents have decision-making power over their daughters and profit economically from daughters' early marriage. The question arises regarding who is forced to accept early marriage: the girl or her parents? The girls studied begin sexual activity early and many become pregnant at an early age. Parents often lose control over their daughter's sexual activity and, because their investment in her education only pays off if she finishes school without getting pregnant, they must seek clues in her behaviour as to her *tabia* and scholastic motivation. Transferring responsibility for the girl's needs and her possible pregnancies to a long-term male provider is one solution, albeit a short-sighted one. Many young husbands cannot provide for families and abandon them, leaving them to return to the wife's parents and creating an even greater economic burden for the natal family. Thus, parents usually gain little in the long term, a fact of which many are aware. Yet the alternatives are equally unwelcome in a society in which health and education are costly for the poor and informal income-generating opportunities in the city are heavily skewed in favour of men. Early marriage in urban Tanzania is less a 'traditional' choice of parents than an aspiration emerging from high unemployment and poverty, especially since it can be viewed as proof of a girl's good *tabia*, a reputation that boosts her standing among relatives and neighbours.

### *Two pathways to early marriage for girls*

In this study, two primary pathways to under-18 marriage are identified for girls in low-income families. In the first path, poverty and gendered economic inequality push girls to engage in transactional sex at early ages, and parents to strive to uphold their moral role defined by Islam and mitigate the risks of premarital sexual activity by arranging for their adolescent daughter to marry. In the second pathway, factors such as high costs of education, high unemployment even for secondary school graduates, and the fact that girls perceive transactional sex as the most sustainable means of income generation mean that girls often do not continue their education after primary school. After this, early marriage is often viewed as the only culturally approved way of becoming a productive adult. Barriers to education for girls thus encourage early marriage, not the other way around. The two pathways are often intertwined when parents refuse to invest further in the education of daughters they fear are sexually

active. Given these pathways, there is a disconnect between local realities and human rights approaches that focus on 18 as the proper minimum age for marriage. As Rashid (2011, 9) points out for early marriage in Bangladeshi slums, women may not necessarily perceive the universal rights promoted in development policies as rational or desirable, given the constraints they face in their daily lives.

### **Recommendations**

Two recommendations follow from this study: first, employment opportunities need to be created for women living in the poorest informal areas. Employment-oriented education policies and greater efforts to ensure gender equality in labour markets are of vital importance to motivating girls and their families to continue studying. These are issues over which the interviewed persons themselves (both men and women) have little control; thus, structural change needs to come from elsewhere. As long as girls and their families see the most viable (and morally acceptable) option for a girl's economic survival to be early marriage with a male partner whose earning opportunities are greater than women's, the practice of early marriage is unlikely to decline among the urban poor. Second, in order to prepare girls for employment and to provide alternatives to early marriage, greater efforts need to be made to alleviate the hidden costs within the primary school system and the high costs of secondary education for the majority of poor students.

### **Note**

1. Following Article 1 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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