

# EXPLORING THE ROLE OF MEN IN CHILD MARRIAGE DECISION-MAKING IN RURAL UPPER EGYPT

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# Introduction

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- Globally, one in five young women aged 20 to 24 years old get married before they turn 18 (UNICEF, 2023).
- In Egypt, the **2021 Family Health Survey** indicated that nearly **18%** of women aged 20–24 years old had married or were engaged to get married before they turned 18 (CAPMAS,2022).
- Despite the huge volume of literature on child marriage drivers and consequences, there is much less evidence on who plays key roles in the decision-making process, particularly the **role of men**.
- Understanding the dynamics of the decision-making process is fundamental to informing the design of policies and programs to end child marriage.

# Methods

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- A **qualitative study** was conducted in four villages in **Assiut and Sohag governorates** using the following data collection methods:
- In-depth interviews (IDIs)
- Key informant interviews (KII) , and
- Focus group discussions (FGDs)

**80** IDIs with married and unmarried girls and husbands and brothers of adolescent girls

**24** KIIs with marriage officiates, matchmakers and program managers

**14** FGDs with fathers and mothers of married or unmarried adolescent girls

# KEY FINDINGS

# Men exercise considerable choice in their marital decision-making process

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- Men consult with parents and close friends before proposing to a prospective bride.
- Often prospective grooms seek parents' approval on the wives they choose; however, parents cannot force their son to marry a girl he does not like.

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*“The male is the one who chooses his bride. If he likes someone, he will ask his mother to go and see her. If the son is abroad or isn't around, we the parents are the ones who go and meet a bride to-be, or we recommend him a bride who we believe is good.”*

**(Father, Assiut)**

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# Marrying child brides is favored by less educated men

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- Marrying child brides *per se* is mostly favored by less educated men and parents who have only one son.
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*“The man who would marry her would either be illiterate or would have finished a preparatory school education, or maybe a vocational diploma at the maximum.”*

**(Female NGO program officer, Sohag)**

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# Why men prefer marrying child-brides?

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- Child brides tend to be more obedient and submissive to their husbands and are less likely to be previously engaged or in a romantic relationship with another man.
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*“The most important reason is to marry a respectable girl who has had no previous relationships. Any girl above 18 usually has a phone and has probably talked with other guys. Thus, he would rather go for the safer option and choose a girl under 18, or even under 17.”* **(Brother, Assiut)**

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*“To serve my mother and father and serve me as well. I want her to prepare everything so I can shower every night after I come back from work.”* **(Husband, Sohag)**

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# Why men prefer marrying child-brides?

- Men believe a child bride is more fertile and healthier and thus will still be able to look after her husband when he gets old.

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*“My son wants to marry early because he wants a son who is like a brother to him and because a young girl is usually obedient and almost like dough that he can bend and shape as he likes.”* (Mother, Assiut)

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# Young men are aware of the risks associated with marrying child brides

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- Inability to adequately carry out marriage responsibilities due to the bride's young age, immaturity, and limited communication skills.

*"[There may be challenges] because she's young and immature, and she cannot judge things properly or even deal with her husband at this age. She also doesn't have the capacity to raise kids if she gives birth soon after marriage." (Brother of adolescent girl, Sohag)*

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- Negative health consequences and associated financial burden

*"She got pregnant soon after we got married. Afterwards, my life became more miserable. She needs a doctor every minute. My daily earnings are all sent on her. By the time she has to give birth, we won't have any money. I don't know what to do." (Husband, Sohag)*

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# Young men are aware of the risks associated with marrying child brides

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- Legal challenges as a result of inability to officiate their marriage.
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*“When I got married, my wife got pregnant soon after and we were blessed with a boy. For three years, I couldn’t get a birth certificate until I legalized my marriage and obtained a marriage contract. Issuing him the birth certificate was quite burdensome; we had to go to the health center and police office and we had to do many procedures to register him as the certificate was not issued at the time he was born.”*

**(Husband, Sohag)**

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# Fathers or male guardians have the authority to make the final decision when it comes to their daughters' marriage.

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- Fathers are the primary decision makers when it comes to their daughters' marriages
- if a father/male guardian disapproves of a suitor, it is very unlikely that the marriage will take place even if the girl is in favor of him.

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“ The final decision as to whether or not to proceed in a girl's marriage is left only to the father after consulting his daughter for approval.” **(Father, Sohag)**

“ A mother can share her opinion with a father but the father takes the decision for fear that he would blame her in case any problems arise in the future . **(Mother, Sohag)**

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# Fathers or male guardians have the authority to make the final decision when it comes to their daughters' marriage.

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- Other family members including mothers, brothers and grandfathers, have also an influence on fathers' decisions related to marrying off their daughters.
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*“My father initially took part in the decision-making and my uncles also supported my father on that. A girl cannot get married without her uncles asking about the suitor first. Before any marriage takes place in our family, this should happen first.” (Married girl, 19, Assiut)*

*“I spend most of the time home while my son goes around the village all the time and knows everyone. If he tells me that the suitor isn't suitable, I will surely listen to his advice.”*

**(Father of adolescent girl, Sohag)**

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# Why do some families in rural Sohag and Assiut marry off their under age daughters?

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- “Sutra” (Girls’ protection against inappropriate behavior)
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*“Marriage is sutra for a girl because she’s now with her husband so nobody will talk about her whereabouts or comment on how she is dressed. She’s now a married woman and her father is no longer responsible for her.”* **(Unmarried girl, 18, Sohag)**

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*“If a father has several daughters, he will want to marry them off as marriage is sutra. A father will not live long enough for them, so he is keen about his daughters’ sutra.”* **(Husband, Assiut)**

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# Why do some families in rural Sohag and Assiut marry off their under-age daughters?

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- Poverty

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*“If a suitor is well off and has money, the father will approve of the marriage and let him marry his daughter despite any other problems he has.”*

**(Husband, Sohag)**

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# Why do some families in rural Sohag and Assiut marry off their under-age daughters?

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- Consanguinity i.e. marriage to a cousin or close relative
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*“Relatives also get married at an early age. Even if a girl is still young, she can marry her cousin.” (Husband, Sohag)*

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- Fear of “Spinsterhood” daughters.

*“Some families have the inherited traditions of marrying their daughters off at an early age. They believe it is better for their daughters to get married rather than stay at home. If she gets older, she may miss her chance to get married.” (Unmarried girl, 18, Assiut)*

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# Fathers and brothers are well aware of both legal and health consequences of child marriage

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- Fathers and brothers of girls are more concerned about legal rather than health implications of marrying their daughters/siblings at an early age.
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*“If he divorces her, she has no rights, and her children won’t have any rights either as they aren’t registered and don’t have birth certificates.” (Father, Sohag)*

*“It once happened here in our village. A husband passed away before the marriage was legalized, and his family put the wife out of their house when she was pregnant. When the child was born, he was registered under the girl’s father’s name. The child was her brother and son at the same time.” (Brother, Assiut)*

*“A girl can die from having sex and getting pregnant at this young age. She is still young and her body cannot tolerate this at such a young age.” (Brother, Sohag)*

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# Negotiations around marriage arrangements are the sole responsibility of male figures in the groom and bride families.

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- Female figures, including the bride-to-be, are totally excluded from discussions related to marriage arrangements and financial guarantees.
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*“The fathers of the bride and groom are the ones who are responsible. Females do not get involved in those discussions, and nor do the groom or the bride have a say. Our uncles were asked to contribute to the discussions, so my father can consult them. However, the final say is left to the fathers of the groom and the bride.” (Married girl, 19, Assiut)*

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# The extent to which adolescent girls were making informed decisions pertinent to their own marriage is questionable.

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- Though it is claimed that parents cannot force their daughter into a marriage, often girls succumb to their parents' decisions regardless of their own opinion.
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*“Nobody forces his daughter to marry a certain suitor. You cannot force your daughter to get married, and you have to consult her even if the suitor is her cousin. (Father, Sohag)*

*“I was doing the laundry when he came and asked for my father. I was passing by and he saw me and I’m not used to that. My father came to meet him, then he asked me to greet him, and I was confused because I never come out when there are strangers. After some time, his mother and aunt came to propose, and I was shocked as I had no idea about the whole matter. I asked my father, and he said that he asked about him and found him to be respectful and from a good family.” (Married girl, 19, Assiut)*

# The extent to which adolescent girls were making informed decisions pertinent to their own marriage is questionable.

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- Some girls succeed to mobilize support from some family members to stop unwanted or early marriage.
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*“I refused and indicated that I didn’t want to get married until I finish my diploma. It was my decision, but my father disapproved [of the decision to marry] as well. My grandmother and uncles wanted me to get married, but my father refused.”* (Unmarried girl, 19, Sohag)

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# CONCLUSIONS

- ❑ Fathers/ male guardians are the primary decision makers as to when a girl gets married and to whom. Other family members such as mothers, brothers and uncles could play a role in influencing the father's decision.
- ❑ Poverty and fear about the girl's reputation push them to marry off their daughters at early age.
- ❑ Men seek to marry child brides to ensure their subordination and good health and fertility.
- ❑ Girls often have no choice but to succumb to their families decisions and 'accept' to get married at an early age even without their full consent.
- ❑ When girls have enough agency and skills, they are able to mobilize support from other family members and manage to stop an early or unwanted marriage from happening.

# THANK YOU



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