A Mixed Methods Study on Child Marriage in The Gambia

Adriana Kaplan[1], Beatriz Escaño[2], Júlia Perarnau[2], Segga Sanyang[3] & Salieu J Kandeh[3]

[1] Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

[2] Wassu-UAB Foundation, Spain

[3] Wassu Gambia Kafo, The Gambia

Correspondence: Beatriz Escaño, Wassu-UAB Foundation, Spain.

Abstract

Child marriage is a human rights violation that is often rooted in strong gender inequalities (UNICEF, 2022). This article presents the results of a mixed methods study conducted in The Gambia, deepening understanding of why the practice remains widespread throughout the country and in West and Central Africa, which have one of the highest levels of child marriage in the world. The study explores the arguments and factors that come into play to defend or take a position against child marriage, establishing for this the differences between knowledge, attitudes and practices and taking into account different variables such as age, gender, ethnicity and region of residence.

Keywords: The Gambia, Child marriage, Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices
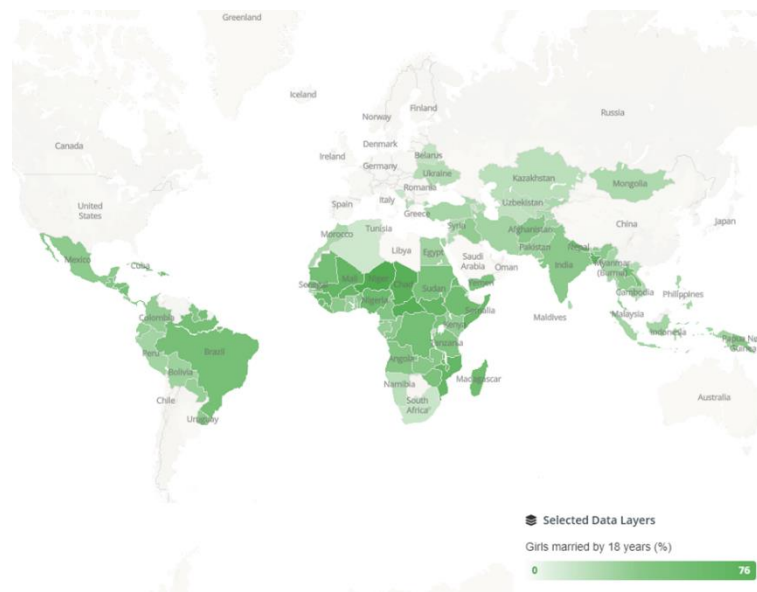
1. Theoretical Framework

Child marriage is defined as a union in which at least one of the contracting parties or both are under 18 years of age (UNICEF, 2020). Internationally, they are linked to forced marriages, since it is considered that minors are not yet able to express their free consent and have consequences for the development of children. The practice of child marriage occurs throughout the world and is affected by gender inequalities since it is five times more common in girls than in boys (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2020). Its origins differ between cultures and geographical locations, so there is a variability of causes depending on local contexts. The inability to generalise about the phenomenon, implies that the approach must be based on the particularities that each region presents, to break down the distinctions that exist between communities and adopt effective strategies (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2020; Schaffnit et al., 2021). However, several common elements enable the continuity of the practice and its perpetuation.

Child marriage carries with it health and social consequences for women and girls, including early pregnancies and complications during childbirth and postpartum, which also affect newborns. (Bicchieri *et al.*, 2014). Different studies point to its relationship with domestic violence (Abera *et al.*, 2020; Lowe *et al.*, 2020). This is because girls can find themselves in a situation of greater vulnerability due to the age difference between the spouses, limiting their capacity for decision and consent. Studies such as those by Raj *et al.* (2010) show how girls who marry in their childhood or adolescence have a greater risk of suffering violence in the sphere of the couple in adulthood, as well as suffering sexual abuse. Likewise, this practice often implies isolation from the community (Lowe et al., 2021).
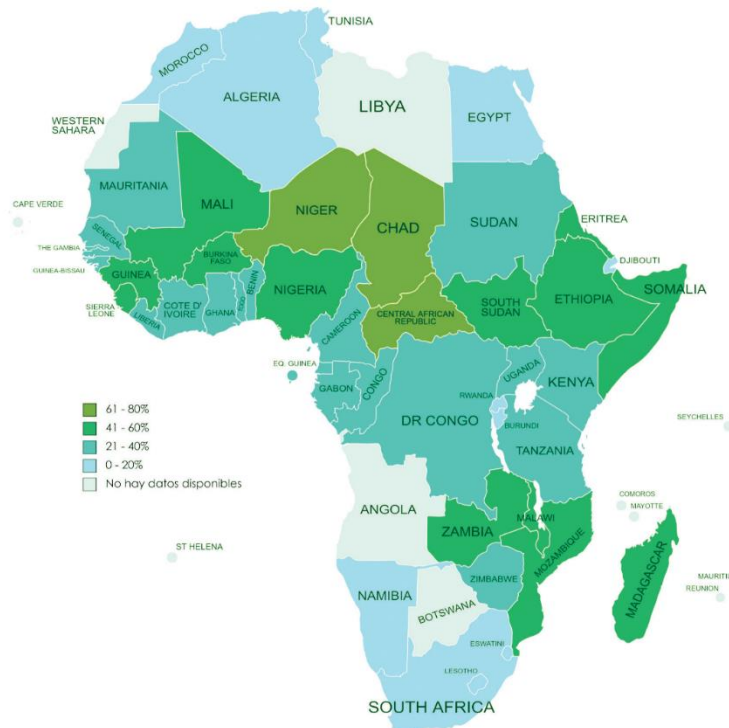
1.1 Geographical Distribution

Globally, 21% of women are married before the age of 18 and an estimated 650 million girls and women alive today were married as children, while 12 million girls under the age of 18 are married each year (UNICEF, 2020). A quarter of these girls live in sub-Saharan African countries and of the 20 countries with the highest rate of early marriage, 18 are in the African continent (UNICEF, 2015).

Map 1. Distribution of Child Marriage under 18 years of age

Source: Girls Not Brides, data extracted from UNICEF global databases 2020. Retrieved from https://atlas.girlsnotbrides.org/map/?_ga=2.165973886.1546238170.1620299943-1756649377.1616512983

In West and Central Africa, the prevalence of child marriage varies between countries. In some, such as Senegal, there has been a decline in the practice, while in others there is no evidence of its reduction, for example, in Angola, Burkina Faso or Cape Verd. From a broader perspective, 4 out of 10 young women are married as children in this region and it constitutes one of the areas with the highest levels of child marriage in the world (UNICEF, 2017).

Map 2. Child Marriage in Africa under 18 years of age

Source: Afri-dev.info (2015).

These countries, in addition to having a high prevalence, have a slower rate of decline than other areas of the world (Lowe *et al.*, 2019; Jouhki & Stark, 2017). This implies that, in population growth projections, the forecast of married girls in the region will increase from 6.4 million in 2015 to 7.1 by 2030 (Lowe *et al.*, 2019).

1.2 Marriage in Gambian Society

In order to offer a broader qualitative analysis of the Gambian context, supported by fieldwork in space and time, the doctoral thesis of Dr. Adriana Kaplan "From Senegambia to Catalonia. Processes of acculturation and social integration" (1998). This research allows the data to be contextualised, systematised, given meaning and to know the relationship between different social and cultural aspects.

Population and Social Structure in The Gambia

Currently, the population of The Gambia has a total of 2,486,937 people, with a density of 246 inhabitants per km2 (World Bank, 2021). This population is made up of different ethnic groups, among which 36% is Mandinka; 22% Fula; 14% Wolof; 11% Djola; 8% Serehule; 9% others (World Bank, 2020). In addition, the most professed religions in the country are: Islam (90% of the total population), Christianism (9%) and Animism (1%).

In The Gambia, as in other African societies, there are traditional value systems and codes of behaviour, which alongside with the old social stratification, have been maintained despite political, economic, religious, cultural and colonial pressures; both in rural and urban areas. The social organisation of the different ethnic groups that inhabit the Senegambia region follows a well-defined hierarchy in terms of age, sex and class (Kaplan, 1998).

Social structures in The Gambia are based on community life, which continues to be of great importance, since belonging to the family comes first, followed by attachment to the community and the feeling of strength and protection. This means that the activity of all individuals in the community responds to a type of responsibility within social and political structures. It is for this reason that human activities related to the life cycle of each person often take place in spheres that are outside state and individual control. "This structure allows individuals a feeling of security and self-confidence that is developed based on strong kinship ties. They always know what their role is within society and the role of each of its components." (Kaplan, 1998: 31).

Family Composition and Structure

The different ethnic groups that inhabit the Senegambia region form extended families that have a polygynous marriage regime. To understand the importance of this kinship structure, reference must be made to the establishment of marriage ties, since marriage is "an institution that orders reproduction and establishes paternity, while establishing alliances" (San Román & González Echevarría, 1981; cited in Kaplan, 1998). As already mentioned, the weight of the community has precedence over individual activities, so in the case of personal relationships the same premise is followed, because in these societies what gains strength is marriage understood as institutional alliances between families, where the foundations of the social networks are sustained by kinship relationships.

Therefore, the different ethnic groups that inhabit the area continue to maintain themselves as strongly inbred groups in the establishment of marriage ties. Cross-cousin marriages are very frequent, especially in Mandinka, Fula and Serahule groups, with the aim of continuing kinship networks and maintaining the proximity of offspring and investing in one's own family (Kaplan, 1998). These alliances tend to occur more frequently in rural areas, where it is understood as an agreement between relatives and in which the preferences or personal choices of the future spouses do not intervene, and they are often agreements made since childhood.

Marriage agreements are sealed at the time of commitment through the bride price. In communities where economic transactions are involved in the marriage process, dowry or bride price negotiations can become a strategy for supporting poor families (Centre for Human Rights, 2018). But this price "should not be understood as the purchase of the woman itself, but as a guarantee that grants the husband and his group the rights over the reproduction of the wife" (Kaplan, 1998: 40). This amount is compensatory for the transfer of an active member with reproductive capacity from one family to another. The kinship system in The Gambia is patrilineal and with virilocal residence, so the children that the woman will have will become part of the father's patrilineage. Marriage, then, allows the circulation of active members and enables the establishment of new alliances through future sons and daughters. For this reason, in polygamous societies, the bride price is higher.

Regarding polygamous marriages, importance is given to the woman who is first to marry, as she plays a specific role and has some rights over other women. The co-wives must obey the first wife and it is the responsibility of the husband to be equitable with each wife and resolve possible conflicts that arise between them. This is his job as a good husband following the scriptures of the Koran, since it is stipulated that a man can marry up to four wives, if he can offer the same treatment and pension to each of them. The successive marriages to the first can be

a more personal choice of the man and it is not so necessary that the social rules are followed. This greater freedom (also given because a more adult man is more economically independent) often means that the last woman he takes as his wife is usually the man's favourite, among other things because she is also usually younger than the previous ones.

Since 2016, marriage has been prohibited in The Gambia below the age of 18 for both men and women, and variables such as ethnic origin, religious practices and the schooling of girls are allowing the age of first marriage to be delayed in women; while in men it is other issues such as the economic order and migrations that cause delay, and in urban areas, economic difficulties related to employment and housing (Kaplan, 1998).

Education and Schooling

In The Gambia there are two types of education, the Koranic school (madrassa) and the formal schooling, which is public and not compulsory. Over the last decades, this last one has been spreading, especially in the most urban areas and replacing traditional Koranic schools.

> Modern schools provide a type of egalitarian education that allows access to girls with no age limit, while in Koranic schools they generally have to leave education as soon as the first menstruation appears, since, during the menstrual period, called *kosoo*, they become impure and cannot touch the Holy Quran. (Kaplan, 1998:65)

On the other hand, it is important to understand that the education of sons and daughters is a great economic effort for parents, so it can cause significant absenteeism and school dropout. In The Gambia, most of the population either have no formal education or have attained only some primary education. Specifically, 65% of females and 60% of males aged 6 and over have either no education (39% and 35%, respectively) or only some primary education (27% and 26%, respectively) (DHS 2019-2020).

As the percentage of women who have not received education is higher than men, it also has to do with the preference for the schooling of sons instead of daughters. In addition, they will have more difficulties to reach higher grades, since, if they become pregnant before marriage, they tend to drop out of school, on the one hand, as a reproach for their behaviour and on the other, to not set a bad example for the other classmates.

Sexuality and Fertility in The Gambia

Being a virgin until marriage continues to be a very important social attribute on which the responsibility for this to happen falls on the mothers. Virginity is seen as an honour for mothers, since it translates as knowing how to educate and care for their daughters according to established standards, as expected of them. This attribute can even make the price of the bride vary, since if they are not a virgin, this price can be reduced; In addition, the father can impose, as punishment on the mother for her negligence in the care of the girl, that she returns the money invested in the daughter's studies. Because of this, premarital sex can be more of a disgrace to the mother than to the daughter (Kaplan, 1998).

Three fundamental axes explain the meaning that sexual relations with their wives have for men: children, need and pleasure. "Children mean wealth because they also generate wealth, and a man gains consideration within the group to the extent that he is supported by a large offspring." (Kaplan, 1998: 153). In other words, what is expected of women is that they will have many children, be good protectors and selfless mothers. On the other hand, sexual relations have other connotations for women within marriage, which would be: pleasing the husband and the importance of conceiving children that can only be done through this physical contact.

In the Gambia, the average fertility rate is 4.4 children/woman. In urban areas it is 3.9 and in rural areas it is 5.9 (DHS 2019-2020). It is important to take these data into account, since in Africa, a large number of children guarantees the continuity of the community. Infant mortality is very high (under-5 mortality rates are 56 per 1,000 live births) and it is not known how many will survive to become adult carers when their parents are elderly.

1.3 Child Marriage in The Gambia

In 2016, a National Strategic Child Protection Plan was launched in The Gambia that centralized the issue of child marriage as a problem to be addressed due to the high rates presented (Lowe et al., 2019). Before that year, the Children's Act prohibited child marriage, but was subject to the provisions of any common law, meaning that a minor could marry if it was argued that the marriage was based on custom. For this reason, in 2016 the legal age for marriage was raised to 18 years so that it is now a crime punishable by up to 20 years in prison, both for the parents and the spouse of the minor (UNICEF, 2016; cited in Jouhki & Stark, 2017). However, despite efforts to decrease the prevalence of the practice through legislation, it continues to be common in the territory, as it remains among the 41 countries in the world where the rate of child marriage is 30% or more (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2018).

There is currently a downward trend of the practice in The Gambia, as historically 58% of 40-49-year-olds were married before the age of 18, while today only 36% of women between 20 and 24 years of age have been married underage. However, the difficulty of obtaining data is an issue, as how these unions are recorded poses major challenges in measuring the impact and enforcement of marriage laws in The Gambia. The lack of adequate procedures for the registration of births and marriages, as well as access to them, is a major impediment to making effective the prohibition of child marriage.

Another issue is articulated in the religious interpretation made by local Islamic communities, which can allow this type of union. Islamic Sharia does not specify an exact minimum age for marriage. In The Gambia, this is the main tradition that governs family law, most of the population is governed by this code (Center for Human Rights, 2018). In this way, child marriages often take the form of traditional or customary unions, which are registered less frequently than other forms of marriage. Other factors that explain such a high rate in the country include the legislative frameworks and the inconsistencies that can occur in the context of legal pluralism, where civil legislation and customary or religious law are applied simultaneously. On the other hand, many women and adolescents of fertile age in rural areas of the country have recently obtained birth certificates based on a rough estimate of their age. In these cases, it has been observed that, as women know that marriage before 18 is illegal, to obtain their maternity cards they declare they are above this age, when in fact they are younger (Lowe *et al.*, 2019).

This is especially problematic in the poorest rural areas (where religious marriages are not registered) and with the lowest level of education, as these factors (economic and educational) also vary depending on the place of residence, since there are large differences between rural and urban areas. Child marriages are more common in rural Gambia. In contrast, women living in urban tend to marry after the age of 18. An example of this is the women of Kuntaur (a rural town in the country), who marry on average at 17 years of age, four years earlier than the women of the capital, Banjul, who marry at an average age of 21.

Along these lines, poverty is one of the main causes of child marriage and is, in turn, a factor that worsens the consequences of marrying at an early age. Thus, it is intertwined with other elements that harm the educational level of women and the obstacles encountered in accessing the world of work, generating a vicious circle of poverty and precariousness (Lowe *et al.*, 2019). In difficult financial situations, the costs of school often require families to weigh the cost-benefit ratio of education against other options to help their daughters have a future. The hidden cost of education is understood as an indirect cause of child marriage when families cannot afford a daughter's education and do not see other livelihood alternatives (Jouhki & Stark, 2017). This leads to girls leaving school early and explains why child marriage rates are higher in countries with lower levels of education.

On the other hand, studies such as those by Lowe *et al.* (2019) demonstrate how prevalence is often associated also with the ethnic groups present in The Gambia, built on different cultural values and social norms, which affects the practices carried out by each group (Kaplan *et al.*, 2013). For example, according to the same study by Lowe *et al.* (2019), Mandinka and Wolof women are more likely to marry before the age of 18 than women from the Fula ethnic group. Along these lines, the study by Mobolaji *et al.* (2020) conducted in Nigeria, finds that the prevalence of child marriage differs considerably among girls aged 15 to 19 depending on the different ethnic groups in the country.

All the factors exposed above cannot be understood without intersecting the gender inequalities generated by the differentiated roles that are granted in patriarchal societies. Being forced to marry causes physical and psychological trauma for women as a consequence of the loss of part of their childhood and adolescence, early pigeonholing in domestic gender roles, and forced sexual relations to which they may be subjected. In addition, it constitutes a phenomenon that, for the most part, occurs with large age gaps between girls or young women and adult men (UNICEF, 2015).

1.4 Continuity and Change Factors

Recently, efforts have been intensified to end child marriage and try to transform the roots that sustain the practice (Schaffnit et al., 2021) and, in this regard, education is a central factor in delaying the first marriage among adolescent women (Jouhki & Stark, 2017). As mentioned, the decline rates of child marriage in The Gambia are significant and, although the reason for this decline is still uncertain, it could be due to the increased enrolment of girls in school in recent years, as it has been shown that women with secondary education or higher, marry on average at 22.2 years compared to 17.3 for women with no education (Lowe et al., 2019).

The existence of legislation prohibiting child marriage does not in itself guarantee that the practice will end. Legislation is not usually accompanied by the necessary policies and programmes to support social transformation. Consequently, the implementation of laws must be based on community participation for the transformation of the

social and gender norms that drive it. In this context, Jouhki and Stark (2017) explore the effect of legal changes on child marriages in The Gambia and suggest that legislation is not enough to reduce child marriage rates for girls under 18 years of age.

In addition, there are other reasons why it is difficult to prosecute those responsible for such links through formal legal procedures. Refusing to marry can lead to a conflict of loyalties towards their families, since, although there is no consent of the young women to the marriage, they must do so anyway. The concern about social rejection and the possibility of being left without their support network if they decided to confront each other, has a great emotional impact as a consequence. For this reason, many of them do not want to initiate legal proceedings against their relatives, so as not to damage or break family ties (Fundación Wassu-UAB, 2021), causing reports of child marriage to be reduced.

In the cases in which a complaint is filed and it reaches the courts, these usually do not progress due to the social pressure exerted on the girl to withdraw the complaint (Center for Human Rights, 2018). Impacts on the economic dimension can also be included since there are cases where the payment of the dowry or the return of the bride price is claimed.

On the other hand, studies such as those by Lowe et al. (2019) warn that to reduce the practice, especially in rural Gambia, future programmes should focus on dismantling beliefs surrounding premarital sex, by providing adequate information and using correct family planning.

For this reason, committing to the diversity of experiences of child marriage is key to addressing the problem more effectively and coherently with the reality of the communities. This implies considering the possibility of divergences between the narratives promoted by international organizations and the populations targeted by the interventions. Likewise, the authors suggest that more nuances should be included in the representations of the practice, recognising the fluidity of the concept and that the capacity for female agency and autonomy can exist outside the legal limits of adulthood. In this regard, Horii (2020) warns that most of the time the agency capacity of girls is talked about, but only about not getting married. Consequently, the current child marriage framework of international organisations overlooks the complexity of children's capability. On the other hand, the category of child marriage can also make it difficult to understand local realities, approaching it from a westernised perspective and ignoring the voices of the girls and boys involved.

2. Methodology

This article offers a detailed look at a complex phenomenon: child marriages in The Gambia, based on a mixed methods that has allowed the collection of quantitative data, as well as qualitative information, following a triangulation model with the anthropological and ethnographic bibliography, which has allowed the construction of the social context in which the practice takes place.

The quantitative part consisted of collecting information through a Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) questionnaire, while the more qualitative aspects were gathered in four focus groups, which allowed the in-depth collection of the opinions of young people and teachers, of rural and urban areas and the ethnographic field work.

2.1 KAP Survey

This survey on child marriage was conducted in all the administrative regions of The Gambia between June and September of 2021. The training team of Wassu Gambia Kafo administered the survey, which was piloted before the final version with 50 KAPs, administered in North Bank West, North Bank East, Lower River Region, Central River Region, and Upper River Region (10 in each Region). The survey was further developed with regards to the recommendations from the pre-test, together with the transnational team in Spain.

The structure of the survey has five main parts: Socio-demographic data, Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices, and the relationship between child marriage and FGM. In total, 32 questions guaranteed to gather the information needed to assess the disposition of the Gambian population regarding child marriage.

Participants were selected based on availability and regional health directorates, as well as village heads, helped to reach the communities. There were no criteria for ethnic selection. The study population is 400 out of which 200 are male and 200 are female, with ages ranging from under 18 to over 65.

Data collection included Djolas, Fulas, Mandinkas, Serahules, Serers and Wolofs. It was done in all the regions of the country: 50 KAP surveys were done in North Bank East, 50 in North Bank West, 50 KAPs in Lower River Region, 50 KAPs in Central River Region, 50 KAPs in Upper River Region, 75 KAPs in West Coast Region 1 and 2 and 75 KAP surveys in Greater Banjul area.

Age, gender, ethnic group and region of residence were the four criteria chosen to analyse the results of the survey and, in the article, the outcomes follow the same structure, except for the territorial factor, which is represented on an interactive map.

Table 1 and 2. Number of respondents per age group and number of responders per ethnic group

Age group	Number	Ethnic group	Number
Under 18 years	5	**Djola**	39
18 and 25 years	93	**Fula**	86
26 and 35 years	124	**Mandinka**	128
36 and 45 years	107	**Serahule**	33
46 and 65 years	62	**Serer**	28
Over 65 years	8	**Wolof**	75
NA	1	**Other**	11
Total	400	**Total**	400

Interactive Map

A map has been designed as an interactive online tool, available internationally and with the possibility of being updated periodically. It offers a visual representation of the distribution of the results of six questions selected from the set of the KAP survey. These questions have been selected following criteria of relevance, as well as considering that they are easily captured on the map. The users of the resource will be able to navigate through the different questions, observing the main territorial differences existing in The Gambia, concerning child marriage.

On the other hand, the map includes a directory of entities that work or have worked on the issue in the Gambian context. This section aims to give visibility to the main social actors, promoting networking and the generation of synergies.

For its elaboration, the Wassu Gambia Kafo training team has carried out seven in-depth interviews that have allowed us to know the opinion and local knowledge of the services, projects, actions and available resources, linked to the prevention and care of child marriage. Moreover, it will avoid duplication of actions and commitment to complement each other between entities and actions in the same area of intervention. https://matrimoniosforzados.fundacionwassu.com/child-marriage-in-gambia-do-you-think-it-is-right-to-force-a-girl-or-woman-into-marriage/

2.2 Focus Group

Four focus groups were held to explore in depth child marriage and analyse qualitatively the discussions about child marriage, and were implemented from December 2021 to May 2022.

The number of people that participated in each group was eight, with four men and four women in every focus group discussion, with a total of 32 participants. The ages vary between 18 and 38 years old. With regards to the ethnic groups, these are the ones represented in the sample: Fulas, Mandinkas, Wolof, Djola, Serer and Balanta. As for the areas where they were held: a focus group of youth in an urban area, another of teachers in an urban area; one of youth in a rural area and another of teachers also in a rural area.
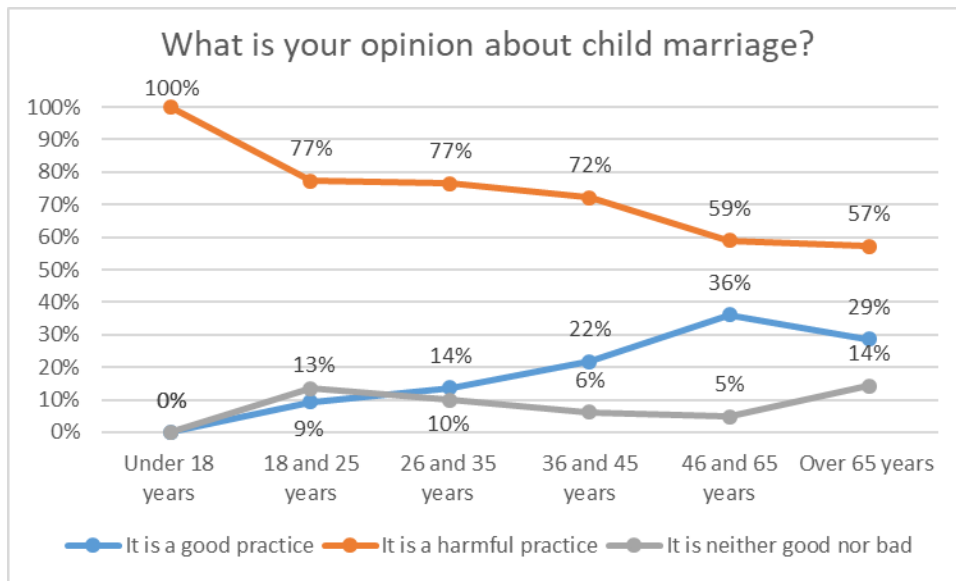
Although gender equity was achieved in the attendance of the same number of men and women in each focus group, it was not possible for participation to be homogeneous among the participants, so the interventions of men are more numerous than those of women.

3. Results of the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) survey

The analysis of the answers obtained during the KAP surveys has been carried out taking into account the variables of age, gender and ethnicity.
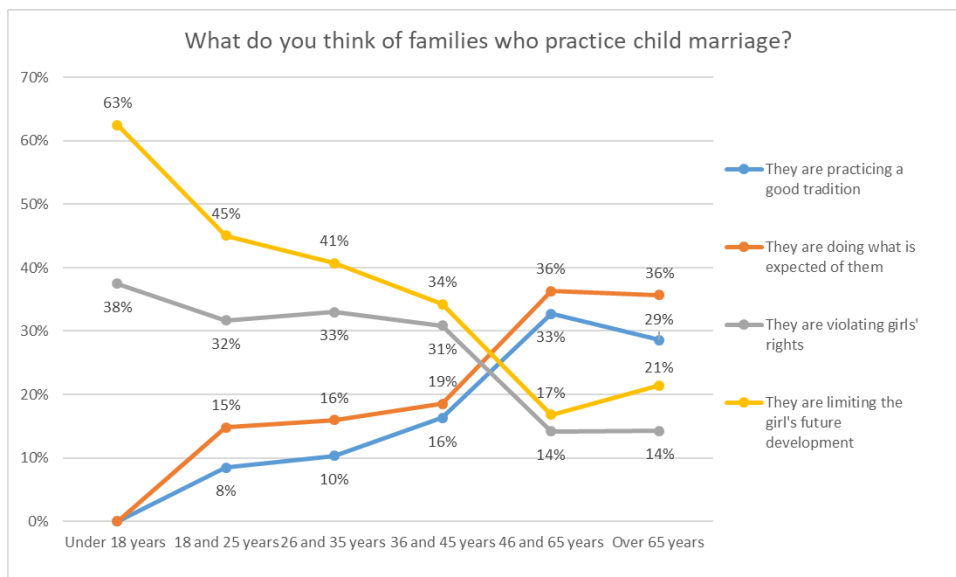
3.1 Age

The distribution of the answers by age group reveals a clear trend: in general, younger participants are more against the practice of child marriage compared with older participants. For example, the trends in the opinion about the practice are highly illustrative: although most respondents from all age groups reflected that child marriage is a harmful practice, the percentage considering child marriage as a good practice increased from under 18 to 65 years from 0% to 36%. (Graph 1).

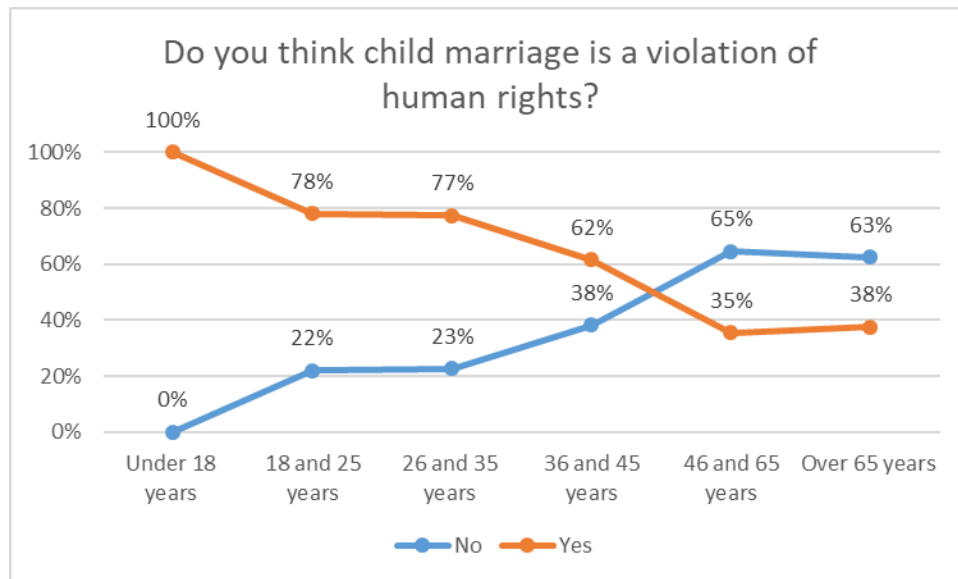Graph 1. What is your opinion about child marriage? Distribution by age

This opinion was confirmed by judgment about families who practice child marriage. As they were older participants, they tended to answer less often that they are violating girls' rights and limiting the girls' future development. Similarly, older responders more frequently answered that these families are practicing a good tradition and are doing what is expected of them (Graph 2).

Graph 2. What do you think of families who practice child marriage? Distribution by age

When asked about the negative consequences, 100% of respondents under 18 recognise the negative consequences of child marriage, the proportion was 82% in 26-35 years respondents and 36% in 46-65 years. The negative consequences perceived are also different, because the concerns change depending on the life stage. In terms of reproductive health, labour complications and tears was the most common answer (25-27%) chosen across all age groups, excluding responders under 18 years, among who school dropout was chosen with the most occurrence (33%).

The youth's perception of child marriage as a neglectful practice was opposite to that of the elders. While all of the respondents under 18 considered that it is a violation of human rights, this answer decreased as participants were older, with most 46-over 65 participants (65-63%) considering that it is not (Graph 3).
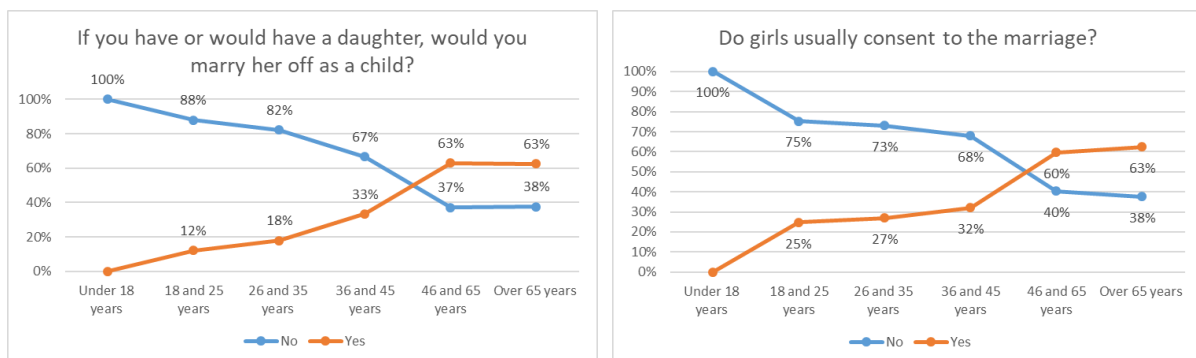
Graph 3. Do you think child marriage is a violation of human rights? Distribution by age group

When consulted about the strategies to end child marriage, young respondents (under 18-25) consider that conducting sensitizations is helpful (5-45%). However, older participants (46-over 65) stated that no law can stop child marriage (47-46%). This population group is less willing to think that child marriage will be someday eliminated in The Gambia, with only 31% of the population aged 46-65 accepting that possibility.

To find out the impact of the activities carried out aimed at ending the practice of child marriage, there seems to be a change in the strategies followed in sensitization and training programmes. Those carried out in schools have increased more recently. The highest frequency of participants reporting training/sensitization during school education was observed by respondents in the 18–25 year group (62%) and decreased with increasing age. The opposite trend can be observed with training/sensitization during work career, which is more commonly seen in the age groups between 36 and 45 years old (79%). Under 18 years responders more easily assumed that child marriage sensitizations had an impact (100%), but the older responders were (from 25 to 65) they were less likely to consider that these organisations had an impact and were more likely to answer they did not.

Then again, the understanding of consent seems to be different between generations. The older participants were, more likely they were to report that girls usually consent to the marriage (60% 46-65 years old and 63% over 65 years old) while younger respondents thought girls do not usually consent (100% under 18 years old and 75% 18-25 years old) (Graph 4).
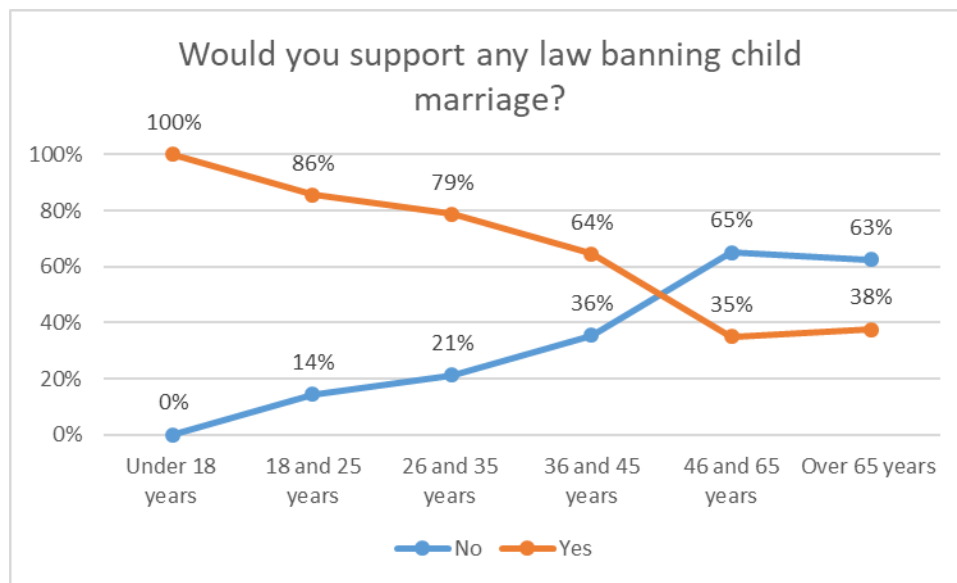
Finally, the predisposition to continue with the practice with their daughters followed the same pattern. None of the under 18 responders reported they would marry off their daughter, 67% of 36–45-year respondents chose the same answer, while the majority of 46-over 65 years (63%) reported they would do it (Graph 5).

Graph 4. Do girls usually consent to the marriage? Distribution by age group

Graph 5. If you have or were to have a daughter, would you marry her off as a child? Distribution by age group

Knowledge of the law prohibiting the practice follow the same pattern. There seems to be less awareness of it regarding child marriage the older participants were, with 80% of under 18 responders stating there is a law banning child marriage, and only 38% of over 65 responders chose the same answer. Only 35% (46 and 65 years) and 38% (over 65) of the participants would accept a law banning child marriage in The Gambia (Graph 6).

Graph 6. Would you support any law banning child marriage? Distribution by age group

This way, the intention to continue with the practice was expressed following the same tendency. The older responders were, they answered that child marriage should continue more often (under 18: 0%; over 65: 63%). Between 84% and 66% of responders aged 18-45 years considered that child marriage should not continue, while most participants (67%) aged 46-65 and 63% over 65 years, responded that child marriage should continue.
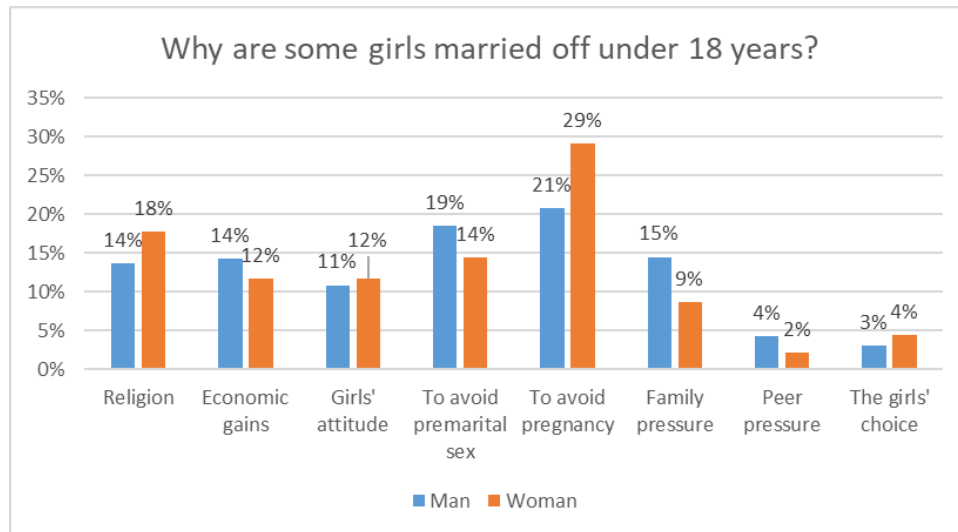
The reasons to perpetuate child marriage also show important differences. More 18-25 years respondents argued that the practice should continue because it allows women to have more children (14%) while over 65 years participants responded with greater regularity that it should continue because is part of tradition (33%) and protects the family honour (42%).

As explained in the "Marriage in the Gambian society" section, the social expectations of wives are that they should become prolific procreators, since children mean wealth, and having many children guarantees the continuity of the community. On the other hand, virginity continues to be a very important attribute and it is the responsibility of the mothers to protect their daughters' virginity until marriage. It is also an honour for the mothers, since it means that they have cared for and educated their daughters in accordance with established social norms, and have been able to exercise the control and surveillance that is expected of them (Kaplan, 1998).
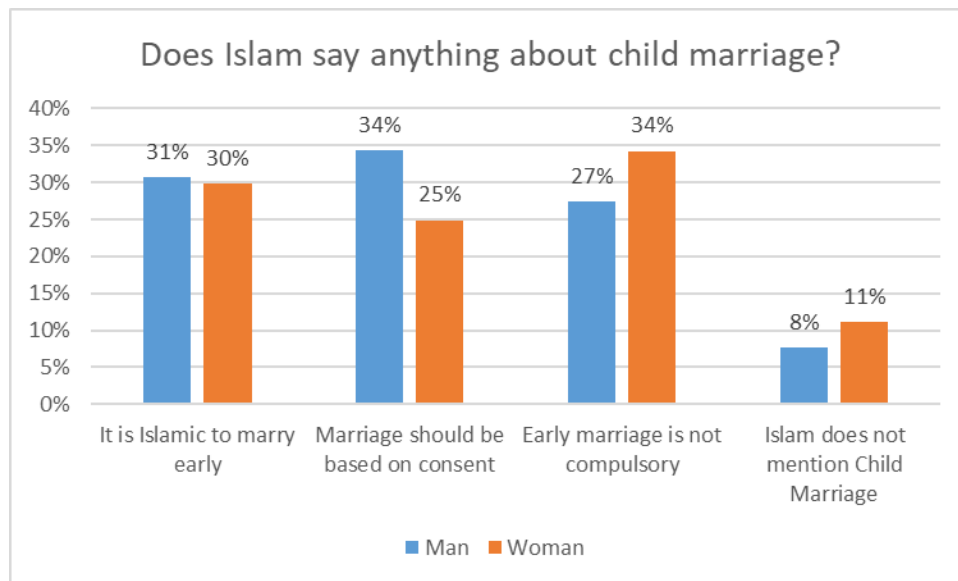
3.2 Gender

When making comparisons between genders, in general women seem to have a position more against the practice of child marriage than men, but still, most men surveyed seem to be against it as well.

When talking about the reasons behind girls marrying under 18 years, the most common answer in both men (21%) and women (29%) was "to avoid pregnancy". It is understood to guarantee virginity and avoid possible premarital relationships and teenage pregnancies outside of marriage. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe that more women than men have responded this, while more men (19%) than women (14%) chose "to avoid premarital sex", the first option being the fear of women to have a pregnancy out of marriage (taking into account the social judgement that this implies), and the second one the control of men over girls' sexuality preserving their virginity. The second most answered option in women (18%) was that religion plays a role in the early marriage of girls (Graph 7).
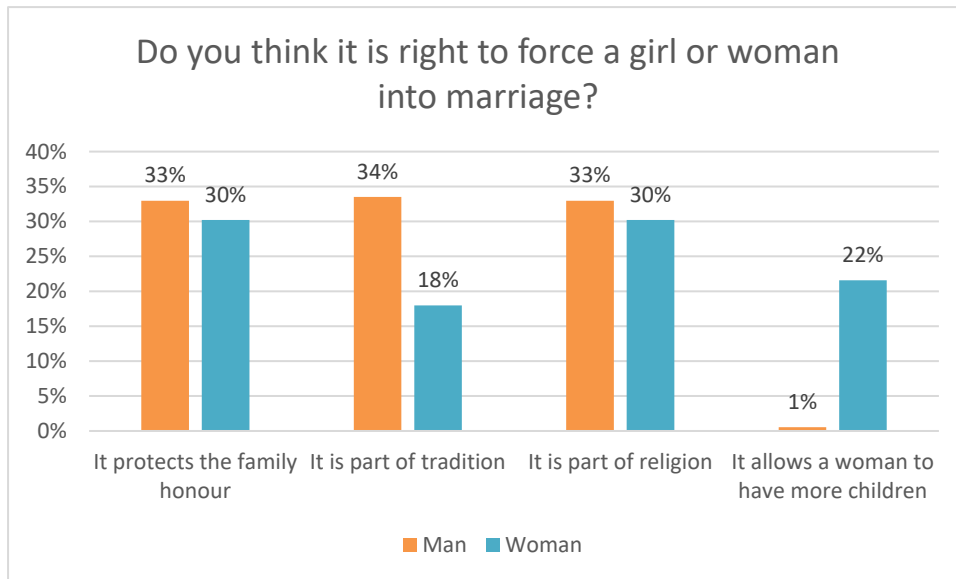
Graph 7. Why are some girls married off under 18 years of age? Results divided by gender

Despite the last graph showing there were more women than men that chose religion as a reason for girls marrying early, when asked directly about Islam, respondents of both genders considered that it is Islamic to marry early at similar frequencies (31% men and 30% women). Otherwise, a higher proportion of women (34%) selected that early marriage is not compulsory according to Islam and it does not mention child marriage. On the other hand, most male respondents (34%) considered that marriage should be based on consent (Graph 8), contrasting with a lower percentage of women that chose this option (25%), a fact that can be interpreted as a possible submission of these, who accept that marriage is often carried out without their consent, as this is what is expected from them.

Graph 8. Does Islam say anything about child marriage? Distribution by gender
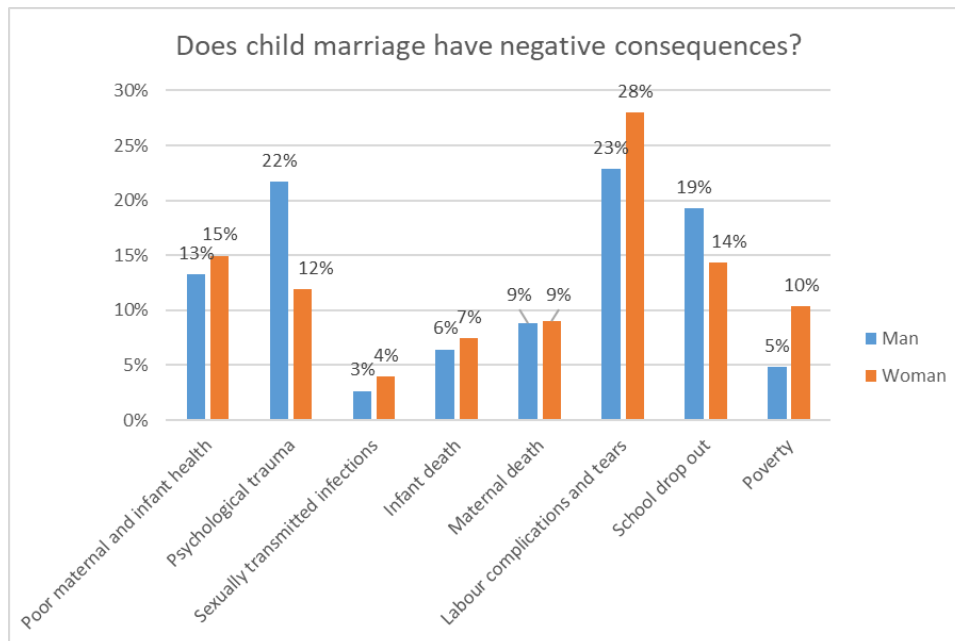
Even though the fact that in the previous question a higher percentage of men defended marriage should be based on consent, 30% of male respondents thought it is right to force a girl or a woman into marriage. In addition, most women (92%) did not consider it this way. The explanations to defend the practice have also differences between genders; in this case, most men (34%) thought child marriage should continue because it is part of the tradition, being this option the less answered by women (18%). It is also interesting to see a dissimilarity in one option, where women (22%) considered child marriage should continue because it allows them to have more children. This may come from the belief that the early age of marriage is also related to the perception of reproductive health, the later women marry, the more years of fertility will be lost (Graph 9).

Graph 9. If yes, why? Distribution by gender. (Follow up of –Do you think it is right to force a girl or a woman into marriage)

Opinions about the consequences of child marriage were similar for men and women surveyed, they both thought they are negative, although more women (76%) than men (68%) responded this way.
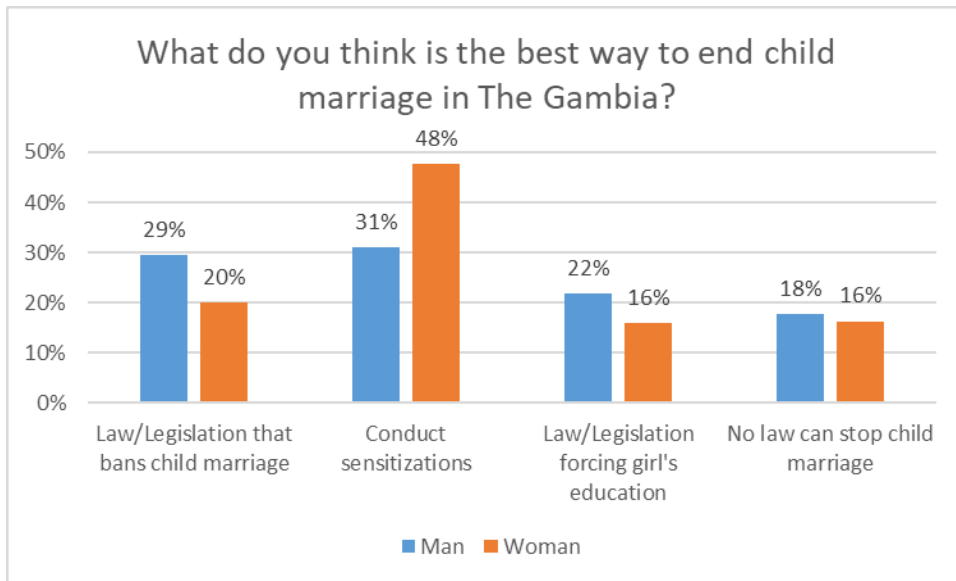
Regarding these consequences, labour complications and tears were the most answered option; apart from that, differences were observed between men and women, while a significantly higher proportion of men (22%) chose psychological trauma, a higher proportion of women (10%) selected poverty as negative repercussions of child marriage (Graph 10).

Graph 10. If yes, which ones? Distribution by gender. (Follow up of -Does child marriage have negative consequences?)
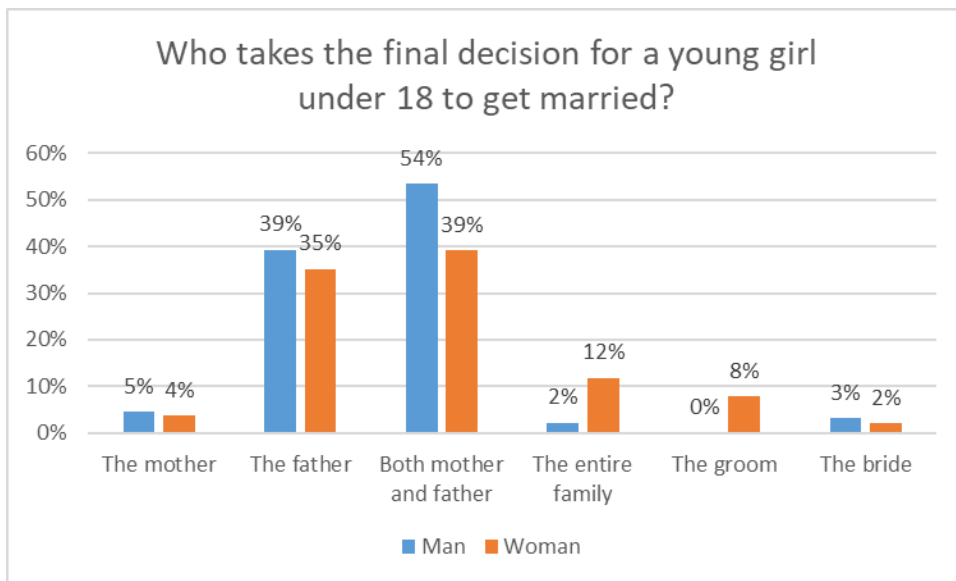
To end child marriage in The Gambia, the percentage of men (29%) thinking that law/legislation forcing girls' education is the best way, is higher than the frequency of women (20%). The most remarkable difference was that

the percentage of women (48%) choosing that conducting sensitizations is the best way to end the practice was significantly higher than the percentage of men choosing the same option (31%) (Graph 11).

Graph 11. What do you think is the best way to end child marriage in The Gambia? Distribution by gender
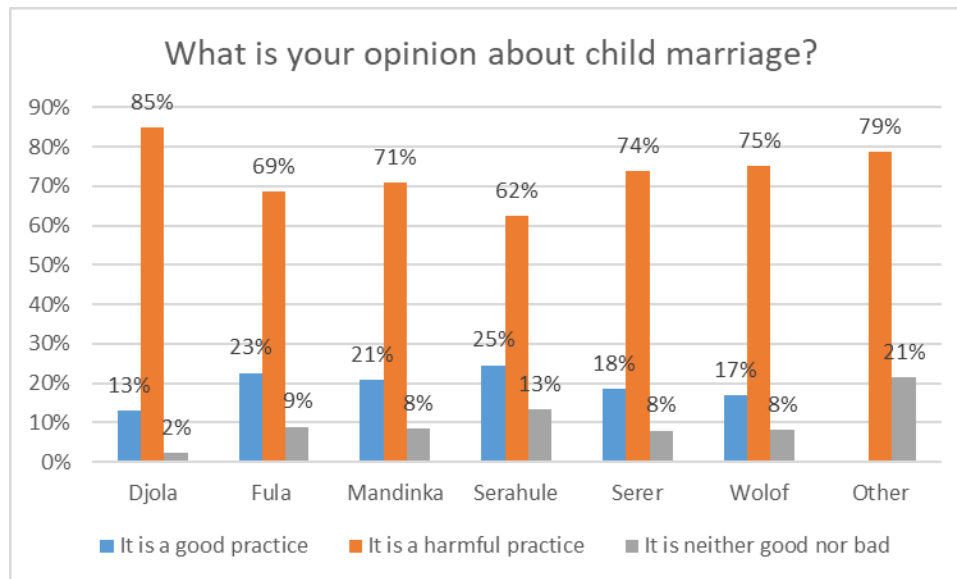
Lastly, ending or continuing child marriage also depends on the decision the families make. Around this aspect, the father and both mother and father are the most selected options by both men and women (39% - 35% and 54% - 39% respectively). In addition, a significantly higher proportion of women thought that the entire family (12%) and the groom (8%) had the final decision for a young girl under 18 to be married, compared with men (2% and 0% respectively) (Graph 12).

Graph 12. Who takes the final decision for a young girl under 18 to get married? Distribution by gender

3.3 Ethnicity

Continuing with the same structure of the two previous variables (age and gender), the opinion about child marriage also varies depending on the ethnic group. It is observed that 85% of participants from Djola ethnic group considered that child marriage is a harmful practice, while other ethnicities stated the same with lower frequencies (from 62% to 75%) (Graph 13). It is shown that the ethnic groups with a higher number of anwers thinking that child marriage is a good practice are Serahule (25%), Mandinka (21%) and Fula (23%).
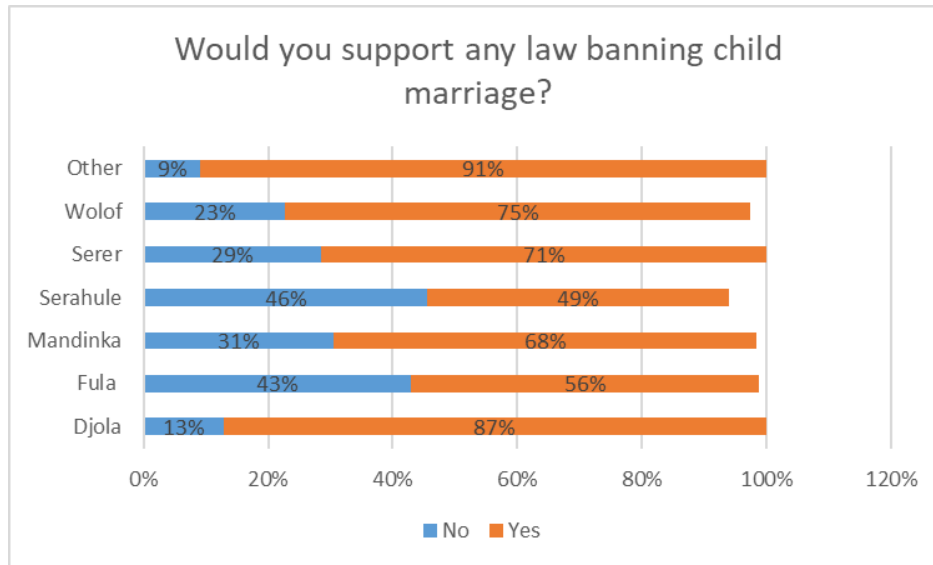
Graph 13. What is your opinion about child marriage? Distribution by ethnic group

When asked "Why are some girls married off under 18 years?" all ethnicities detected "to avoid pregnancy" as the main reason. Despite that, Serahule participants chose "religion" at a higher frequency (22%) compared to other ethnic groups and "economic gains" at a lower frequency (7%). Serahules (41%), Fulas (38%), and Mandinkas (32%) considered that it is Islamic to marry early, while Djolas had the lower proportion on that question (16%). On the other hand, a lower proportion of Serahules (23%) compared with other ethnic groups believed that early marriage is not compulsory according to Islam, while a higher proportion of Wolof (13%) and Serer (12%) affirmed that Islam does not mention child marriage.

Following this trend, 46% of Serahules and 42% of Fulas believed that child marriage should continue, contrasting with 87% of Djolas that thought that the practice should not continue. Additionally, more Serers (55%), Fulas (44%), and Mandinkas (35%) thought that child marriage is not a violation of human rights compared with respondents from other ethnic groups.
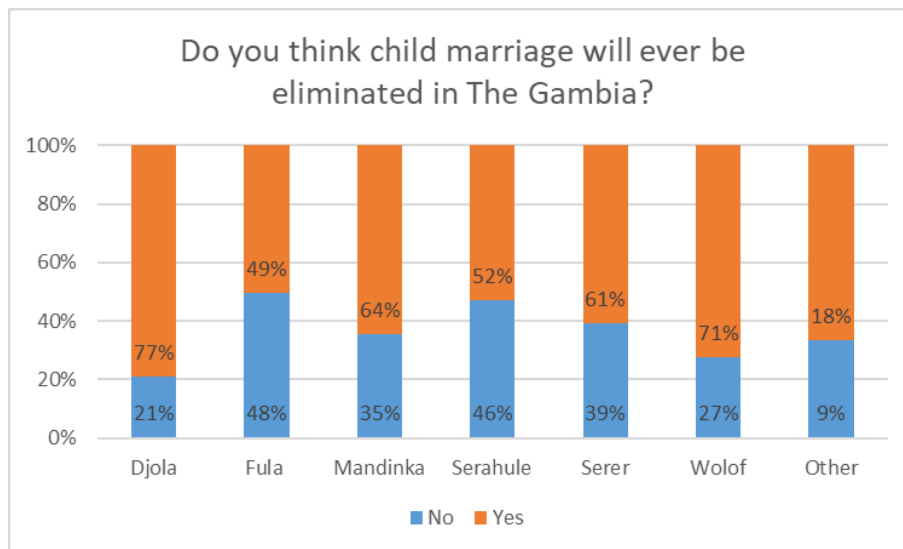
This pattern was followed also in the consideration of possible negative consequences of child marriage, as a higher proportion of Djola participants (90%) considered that case, followed by Wolofs (80%), Serers (71%), Mandinkas (69%), Fula (63%) and, finally, Serahules with the lower frequency (55%). This unawareness could be due to the low participation rates in any kind of activity (training or sensitization) related to child marriage. In this regard, Djolas showed a higher percentage of people stating that they have attended one, compared to surveyed individuals from any other ethnic group.

Concerning which is the best way to end child marriage in The Gambia, over 30% of respondents in each ethinc group (except Serahules with a 29%) considered that conducting sensitizations is the strategy to follow to end child marriage, with Serers (47%) and Djolas (44%) the ones to be more convinced about this. Talking about the law as another strategy to end the practice, some ethnicities were more reluctant, above all Serahules (27%) and Fulas (22%), opining that no law can stop child marriage. This seems to be reflected in the support that the different groups would give to any law banning child marriage, as the majority of Djolas (87%), Wolofs (75%), and Serers (71%) would support a law prohibiting the practice, while more Serahules (46%) and Fulas (43%) than other ethnic groups would not support such a law (Graph 14).
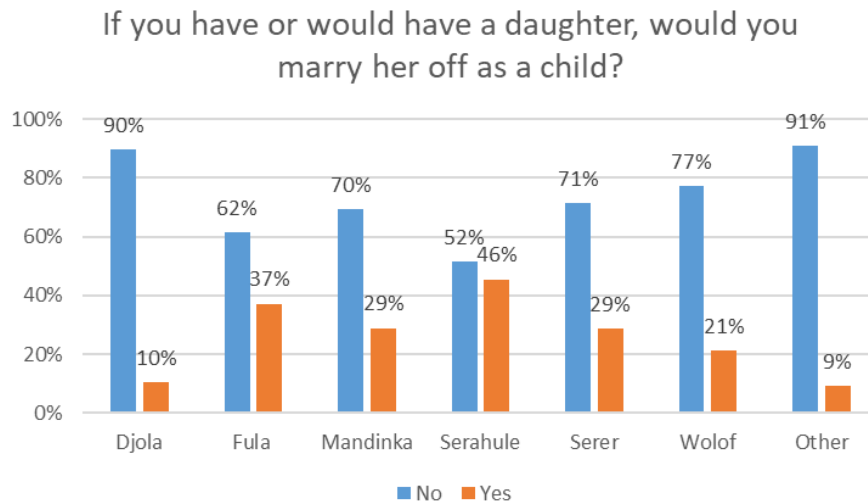
Graph 14. Would you support any law banning child marriage? Distribution by ethnic group

As in the rest of the results obtained by measuring the ethnic group variable, it has been seen that Fulas and Serahules are the groups with more favourable opinions towards the practice and Djolas and Wolofs would be in a position more against it. This trend continues to be confirmed when they were asked about the prospects of continuing this practice in the future. A higher proportion of Fula (48%) and Serahule (46%) did not think that child marriage will be eliminated from The Gambia compared with other ethnicities, while Djola and Wolof respondents answered affirmatively at the highest frequencies (77% and 71% respectively) (Graph 15).

Graph 15. Do you think child marriage will ever be eliminated in The Gambia? Distribution by ethnic group

Finally, when consulted about their own decisions in a pretended future, Serahules (46%) and Fulas (37%) reported more commonly that they would marry off their child, while Djolas chose this answer at the lowest frequencies (10%) followed by Wolofs (21%) (Graph 16). These results demonstrate the need for programmes aimed at ending child marriage to be adapted to the specificities of each ethnic group and to have a special impact on those who continue to have an opinion in favour of the practice.

If you have or would have a daughter, would you marry her off as a child?

Graph 16. If you have or would have a daughter, would you marry her off as a child? Distribution by ethnic group

4. Focus Group Discussion Results

The main reasons mentioned in the focus groups discussions can be gathered in three main groups: sexuality and fertility, sociocultural reasons, and the economic burden.

Regarding the issues related to **sexuality and fertility**, the idea of honour is very present in the need of controlling girls' sexuality. Pregnancies out of wedlock are shameful for all the family members, so it is important to ensure it will not happen.

> *"What happens is, if the girl is always going out to meet boys she may end up being pregnant which brings a lot of shame to her parents and the family. We have seen girls at grade 8 and grade 9 getting pregnant in this community. So, to avoid that, parents will marry off their children to avoid them going through that shame". (Woman, 27 years old, focus group of youth in an urban area).*

While pregnancies are undesirable outside the marriage, fertility is highly significant in the life of all women. In this regard, social pressure to have children is one of the reasons that fosters child marriage, because parents want their daughters to make the most of their full fertile span.

> *"They will marry her off with the intention of her having children early in order for them to help her." (Man, 19 years old, focus group with youth in a rural area).*

Sociocultural reasons, in which peer influence and following family traditions have also been considered an important factor, convincing girls that the best option is to marry early and have children early on because their relatives and peers are doing the same thing.

> *"Peer pressure can also be another reason why child marriage is happening. If all your friends are married in the community, community members will always tell you to go and get married because all your friends are married with their children. Sometimes your married friends will tell you to go and get married in order for you to be on the same footing as them. This can make you change your mind to go into marriage." (Man, 25 years old, focus group of youth in a rural area).*

Marriage means a status change in Gambian society, and it is an important institution that protects family honour. Many girls accept marriages because they cannot confront their adults, in a gerontocratic society where elders are the leaders of the community.

> *"It is difficult to refuse to the marriage because your parents are the ones that arrange the marriage and they will threaten you with their words. You will end up agreeing to the marriage because you will not want to be disowned by your parents." (Woman, 22 years old, focus group of youths in a rural area).*

Besides, the punishment in cases in which the woman or the man does not obey is the social rejection of the individual and their offspring in the family group, as a kind of ostracism.

> *"My husband was asked to marry her cousin who is a child, but my husband refused to get married to that girl because he said he regards her as a sister, not a wife. The family was putting a lot of pressure on him to marry the girl, but he refused, so when he said he was going to marry someone else, the family*

said they were not going to be part of it. Since that *time, he and his family have not had that relationship because he married outside the family. My husband is a Fula and, even when I gave birth, his family refused to come to my naming ceremony." (Woman, 24 years old, focus group of youths in an urban area).*

The **economic burden** is a point to be considered in the case of child marriages. For example, some poor families can consider it as a solution for their daughters to have a better quality of life. As already mentioned, in situations of economic difficulty, and with the costs derived from the care of the daughters, early marriage becomes one of the best options to ensure future subsistence.

> *"For me, I think the socio-economic factor is also a reason why child marriage happens because some people will send their daughter off for marriage because they are poor, and they expect something from the family the girl is married to." (Man, 33 years old, focus group of youths in an urban area).*

The economic reasons are not only those driven by poverty and need. Child marriage can also be considered as an option to ensure a better future for their children, to access a lifestyle offering financial security, or maybe just as a safer way to assure it.

> *"One of the factors could also bethe search for greener pastures, like let's assume you have a girl who is very tender in age and sees a guy who is way older but financially successful and stable. Despite the fact that the child is not from a poor family background, she still needs a greener environment to be in. So that can also be a contributing factor." (Man, 27 years old, focus group of teachers in an urban area).*

> *"Other factor that can also lead to child marriage can also be the safety of the female child. To some parents, giving the child away can be safer than keeping her in the compound without knowing whether the child is going in the right path or in the wrong path. So for her to be given away maybe safer than keeping her in the compound." (Woman, 28 years old, focus group of teachers in urban).*

Other reasons can be cited, such as using child marriage as a strategy to maintain family wealth and keep it under control. This is consistent with the objective of endogamous family unions, to perpetuate kinship networks, maintain the proximity of children and invest in the family itself.

> *"When I was at junior school, I had a friend who was forced to get married. [...] it was a way of holding him back. Like most of the family members were abroad. He is a Sarahuli too. Very wealthy, they had a lot of things they wanted to make secure. One way that they could secure these properties was to marry the boy for him to settle here and secure the properties. Yeah… it was a strategy that was there to secure or maintain their family wealth. That is why he was pushed into marriage." (Man, 27 years old, focus group of teachers in an urban area).*

In the focus groups that were held in the rural context, other economic motivations appeared. For example, there may be men who pay for the education of a girl, and then in payment of that debt, the girl is obliged to marry him.

> *"Yes, it is common in the rural area, some men will sponsor a girl from primary to junior secondary and then they will request her hand in marriage." (Woman, 22 years old, focus group of youth in a rural area).*

Other factors associated with child marriage were identified during focus group discussions, that also vary depending on the place of residence. As has been seen, child marriages are more common in rural Gambia, so there are also differences in the motivation for practicing child marriage whether it is in rural or urban areas.

4.1 Differences between Rural and Urban Areas

Tradition

Greater diversity in terms of origins, families, and points of view is more prevalent in urban areas with higher population densities. The plurality of opinions and attitudes can give greater flexibility regarding traditional norms.

> *"Yes, once you take on a new tradition, you will always underrate the one you were living with. When someone is born and brought up in rural areas, the elders train them with the traditions here but when the same person travels to Kombo, they change. The people in the rural area are the same people that are living in Kombo, but we'll all agree that the traditions in Kombo and the rural area are different. The reason for this is, the generation we are living in, people assume that they are more aware and take on board a new tradition. The tradition of the white people and their lifestyle, if someone lives in the rural areas, they don't accept that." (Man, 37 years old, focus group of teachers in a rural area).*

Rethinking traditional norms also includes values that guarantee a better future for children. In rural areas, the belief that marriage offers better opportunities than other alternatives (such as having a complete education) seems to be more prevalent.

> *"Most of our parents in this area do not see the value of education and this makes it hard for so many young girls because most of their parents see marriage more important than allowing them to finish school." (Man, 29 years old, focus group of youth in a rural area).*

Education

During the focus groups it could be seen that education also plays a very important role in the prevention of child marriage. On one hand, it is considered that in urban contexts, access to education is easier and there are more options to choose from.

> *"Both in western and Islamic education because there are more dairas (Islamic schools) in Kombo than in the rural areas. The number of Quranic Schools in Kombo are more than those in the provinces here. In short, the main contribution factor is education. Kombo is more developed in terms of education than here in the rural area. And then the mentality that has been talked about became different, and the level of awareness too. There are plenty of western schools there, plenty of Arabic Schools, plenty of Quranic memorization centers. This is what I think." (Man, 38 years old, focus group of teachers in a rural area).*

On the other hand, it is considered that in urban contexts, access to education is easier and therefore children have more opportunities to complete their education and not be exposed to marriage at such an early age.

> *"There are two key points here; tradition and education, because if you look closely, I would say up to 90% of those going to school in Kombo will complete their education. When a child is starting grade 1 at 7 years of age, upon completion of the 12th grade, they will be 19 years old, meaning that many children will escape child marriage. The level of exposure is higher in Kombo than here and parents in Kombo are more likely to be open to their children. Good family discussions in combination with education will of course help children." (Man, 38 years old, focus group of teachers in a rural area).*

Therefore, in the urban environment people are better informed and more aware of the harmful consequences for children in practices such as child marriage. Meanwhile, in rural areas there is a greater lack of knowledge about the dangers of the practice.

> *"Most parents in urban areas are aware of the consequences of child marriage and wouldn't want to expose their daughters to them. But parents in rural areas have little or no knowledge about the negative consequences of child marriage. It will be easier for a parent in the rural areas to marry off their child than a parent in the urban areas. Child marriage is practiced more in the rural areas than the urban areas." (Man, 25 years old, focus group of youth in a rural area).*

Awareness of the Law

The social pressure exerted by the family if the child refuses a marriage can be experienced differently depending on whether it is a rural or an urban context. The difference lies in the level of awareness of child marriage as a harmful practice and the possibility to refuse this type of union.

> *"Awareness also plays and important role in the practice of child marriage, a child in the urban areas is aware about the authorities and can refuse to be married off as a child but a child in a rural environment has no idea about the authorities involved in it and, also, they cannot say no to their parents if they want to marry them off." (Man, 25 years old, focus group of youth in a rural area).*

In rural areas, due to the belief that marriage is a family problem and, as such, is managed privately, it becomes harder to seek help if the children need it.

> *"There is a belief in the community that no situation should reach the authorities; all situations should be settled within the family, village and the community." (Woman, 22 years old, focus group of youth in a rural area).*

There are also difficulties in finding life alternatives outside marriage. As a result of the deprotection children experience when they are rejected by their own families for refusing a marriage, they start to question whether it is worse to suffer this process or endure the marriage they would find themselves in.

> *"In the rural area when a child refuses to get married, they will be disowned and sent out from the house and they will have nowhere to go which might be the reason for the child accepting that marriage. But in the case of urban areas the child might have somewhere to go." (Woman, 18 years old, focus group of youth in a rural area).*

On the other hand, in urban areas, there is more knowledge about the laws that prohibit child marriage and the complaint against parents is a repeated punitive route during the focus groups. However, the participants also

talked about the fear caused by making the decision to report to the authorities, since the confrontation with the families can also be expressed through maximum vulnerability and lack of protection for the children.

> *"So, I asked the headmaster what we were going to do, whether to take the legal route or report it to the police. The child said: "No, if you do that, my father will kill me when I arrive home." The child was afraid of the father, so I told the headmaster that we should leave it to them." (Man, 32 years old, focus group of teachers in an urban area).*

In some cases, this fear may extend to the entire family, due to the possible repercussions of confronting someone with more power within the community.

> *"The girl's family was also afraid to report the matter to the police because everyone is running from what the man is going to do to them." (Man, 35 years old, focus group of youth in an urban area).*

4.2 Teachers and Youth, Two Different Perspectives

As seen throughout the study, the educational sector is key in preventing child marriages. For this reason, we wanted to hold focus groups with teachers, considering them the main agents in the transmission of knowledge and the empowerment of the new generations and with students, to find out their opinion on the subject, as well as to be able to reflect on the changes that should be made in the current syllabus to improve the prevention of child and forced marriages.

The results of the focus groups do not present great differences of opinion between the two groups, a fact that we can value positively, since it means that there is good communication and coordination between teachers and their students, and that mutual expectations are adequately met.

In this section, we want to reinforce the opinions of both on three issues that we consider relevant in the educational field: the problem of school dropout, sex education given and received, and the identification of key agents in the prevention of child marriages.   Professors and students offer us two different perspectives that do not oppose or contradict each other, but rather offer nuances to the same reality, enabling a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

School Dropout

As we have already seen, school dropout is one of the main consequences of child marriage, while education can be a reason to put off marriage until the girl has finished the last grade. Teachers defend the importance of a good education as well as knowing how to motivate students, especially girls, to choose this path. Young people agree on the value of education and on the fact that marriage means dropping out of school, since they have family obligations to take care of.

A bad performance in school or lack of interest of the girls can be a motivation for parents to decide to marry her, especially in rural areas:

> *"She didn't want to go to school. A year later, I heard from her little sister that she was married. When I asked why, she said, "she doesn't want to go to school so it is better to marry". (Man, 38 years old, focus group of teachers in a rural area).*

In the urban context, teachers affirm that some schools nowadays are allowing married and pregnant girls to attend class, in order to reduce the dropout rates.

> *"I think it is a mix. In the provinces where I am from, you will see a pregnant girl will be going to school. She only stops the school for the period of the pregnancy. Possibly one year or so. After that, they want to come back and continue with school but some of them, because they are as they are, would change schools. They move from one school to another provided they can pay for their tuition." (Man, 37 years old, focus group of teachers in an urban area).*

On the other hand, the perception of youth is that marriage and pregnancy lead the girls and the boys to leaving school because they find themselves in another social stage and must face responsibilities like feeding the family.

> *"You will realise that the boy forced to get married is not even ready yet or he is still at school so at that moment if they get married with one child their education is over because they will be thinking of how to feed their family." (Man, 24 years old, focus group of youth in an urban area).*

Being educated, in this context, is not a right anymore, but a privilege.

> *"I am the only lucky child in my family that went to school; the rest of them all got married before they were 18 years old." (Woman, 24 years old, focus group of youth in an urban area).*

Sex Education

However, going to school is not the only form of receiving information, as the family plays a great role in the education and transmission of community values. In this regard, sexual education is an unresolved issue that needs to be discussed and addressed.

Teachers and youth agree that the social taboo on sexuality must be broken. The former choose to include the topics in the curriculum of some subjects, while claiming the importance of being able to raise awareness among parents and the community in general. For their part, youth stress the importance of being able to deal with these issues within families, in a safe and trusting space.

Teachers explain that they introduce it in the curriculum of Natural Sciences, although some might face problems with some students or families that do not seem to think it is right to talk about sex in class.

> *"I was once reported by a student to the school principal that I was teaching the children about sex. I told the principal that, as a teacher, it was my responsibility to make sure that the children understand it. It is my job and my area of specialisation. I believe teaching them without telling them these things can have a great impact on my career. Schools advances with age. The older they grow, the more advanced their lessons. If they learn later in tertiary institutions that I was not doing much, it will affect me. I had sharp words with the principal. Later when a supervision team from the ministry came there, and started asking the students about related areas, they came back to the principal commending the students for responding well in that area. The principal later thanked me for doing that." (Woman, 27 years old, focus group of teachers in an urban area).*

That is why one urban teacher maintains that issues related to puberty and sex education need to be treated transversally from primary school level, in order to avoid shame and the consequences of ignorance:

> *"My suggestion is, before the children go to senior school, the foundation needs to be set at primary school level which will make it easy at the secondary level. Even issues related to teenage pregnancy might be resolved along the way. If you see some of these girls, they are getting pregnant, and it is because they are not aware. When they get the knowledge at that early age, it will make it easy to teach it there. On the contrary, if you start talking about it [at secondary school], they will not fully participate because it appears to them that whoever talks about it has started having sex. (Man, 32 years old, focus group of teachers in an urban area).*

Community values regarding family honour foster the silence and taboo about sex, which is translated into distance and lack of communication inside the families, especially between parents and their sons and daughters.

> *"In fact, here when a child reaches a certain age, all discussions are cut off between the parent and the child. All this is as a result of lack of communication." (Man, 38 years old, focus group of teachers in a rural area).*

Teachers in both rural and urban contexts claim that it is very important to involve parents in these kinds of conversations and educate them about the importance of talking with children in simple terms, so that they can properly understand the importance of the topic and the measure they should take into consideration to be safe.

> *"Another way in which it can be minimised is that parents to be encouraged to have dialogue with their children. In some schools, problems are many, so much that students' individual issues cannot be addressed by the teacher but rather as a parent, when you talk with your family and discuss certain things. Even if not detailed, just letting them know x is this and y is that, and their sexual health, whatever. Even when a girl goes out, she will remember how to keep herself safe. I believe a child's first teacher is the parent. That is where they should get the foundation and learn some of the things. When they get to school, it makes it easier to deal with such sensitive issues. I believe that it is a collective responsibility." (Man, 27 years old, focus group of teachers in an urban area).*

Younger people also claim the importance of breaking the taboo and start talking about sex more naturally. When boys and girls are in puberty, they develop sexual interest and if they are not correctly guided with information, they will experiment with it recklessly.

> *"Another point I want to raise is sex education because it is something we don't discuss in the community. It is forbidden to use the word sex, but this is something that should be discussed within the family setting and both the female and the male child should know about it, they don't know that is why they are involved in it." (Man, 24 years old, focus group of youth in an urban area).*

As seen in the last section, it might seem that the urban context is more aware of this problem, but it is not really true as, in rural the context, younger people also recognise that families should address sexual education, in a confidential and safe space in which parents try to understand their sons and daughters' position.

> "Now parents don't want to take up their responsibilities as parents to sit with their children and talk about issues related to sexual education and other important issues directly affecting children today. I believe teenage pregnancies, and child marriages, are happening because parents don't sit down with their children to talk and educate them on those issues." (Man, 25 years old, focus group of youth in a rural area).

Key Agents in the Prevention of Child Marriage

In order to reduce child marriages, the taboo regarding sex must finish, through the involvement of different social actors. In the focus groups with teachers, they explained different cases in which their students had asked them for help to get out of situations of forced marriage or on issues related to sexuality, since they are people with whom they have direct contact, and this allows them to establish a trustworthy relationship.

On the other hand, the youth who participate in the two focus groups are activists who disseminate information to the girls and boys, and normalise talking about topics such as puberty and sex.

> "I personally organise community outreaches on sexual and reproductive issues. I do this because I believe it is a responsibility to share with people what we know that will help them. What we can do is to share with people the information we have starting from our homes, village level and our peers." (Man, 25 years old, focus group of youth in a rural area).

Awareness-raising is a must to achieve a real social change, and that should come from the communities themselves. Teachers are also a key social player in the prevention of harmful traditional practices. First of all, they are the ones educating and empowering the future generations, so they can prevent child marriage by offering them information about their rights. They also have a good status in the communities, so they can sensitize parents and other family members alike, fostering their engagement in the education of their sons and daughters.

> "When the teachers are empowered with the knowledge and skills required in helping in the prevention of child marriage, they can help do more sensitizations. Schoolchildren put a lot of trust in teachers up to a point, because when they say something and not something else, the teacher is considered right. The teachers can also serve as community mobilizers because most of them live within the community". (Man, 32 years old, focus group of teachers in a rural area).

In the short term, teachers have daily contact with their students, which allows them to build a trusting relationship with them. In this regard, a teacher can be the confidant a girl needs to explain their problems. For example, one of the participants in the focus group of teachers in urban explained a case where a girl confessed to him that her father wanted to marry her to a friend of his. Finally, the marriage did not go ahead, and the girl is still going to school, in grade 11.

> "The girl was very intelligent; she was sharp and smart. One day, she came in and said to me: «Mr Bah, I want to see you during the break. I have something bothering me, I want to see you and explain it to you. I don't know how you can help me.» I asked her what it was, and she said: «my father said he was going to give me to his friend for me to get married to him.» […] I asked if she accepted it, but she said no. (Man, 32 years old, focus group of teachers in an urban area).

In the worst situations, teachers can intercede between the girl and the family, helping their students in trying to stop the marriage. One of the participants in the focus group of teachers explain her case, as she was at risk of child marriage when she was young.

> "I was forced to marry when I was 15 years old. They brought and shared the kola nuts. But I thank my teachers, Mr. Jammeh and Mr. Sanyang, who saved me." (Woman, 31 years old, focus group of teachers in an urban area).

5. Conclusions

To put an end to child marriages, it is essential to continue developing studies that allow us to understand the phenomenon and improve actions to prevent it. The approach should be based on the particularities and reasons the practice presents, to adopt effective strategies.

As we have seen, age follows a clear pattern, most young people are against this practice compared to older people. In recent years, training and awareness programmes for the young population in school environments have increased. This increase in education at an early age demonstrates its impact when we look at the fact that it is the

youngest who relate practices such as child marriage to harmful traditional practices. In addition, education emerges as one of the pillars on which emphasis is placed to ending child marriage. Different studies show that the longer the girls' studies are, the later they will marry, and the better job and economic opportunities they will have. The last years of the Covid pandemic have also reduced drastically the access to education, revealing great concern around the communities.

Access to education, depending on the place of residence, confirms the great differences between rural and urban areas. Given that child marriages are more common in rural areas, a potential strategy to encourage the abandonment of the practice arose during the focus groups. The-way would be to spread the message of awareness and sensitization on harmful traditional practices amid the members of their communities, carried out by those who have studied in urban areas. This, in turn, would encourage an active participation of the civil population as agents of change within their communities themselves.

The knowledge of the laws also have a different impact depending on the age. Following this trend, the older a person is, the less familiar they are with the law; this, added to the fact that it is believed that the law is not applied adequately, which can lead to mistrust of it. This, in turn, reflects that the laws that prohibit child marriages are insufficient to eliminate the practice unless they are accompanied by sensitization and education on this issue.

Differences in the support for the law shown among the various ethnic groups should also be considered, as there is a tendency in the answers, it can be equated with the percentage of participants who answered that child marriage should continue (46% of Serahules and 42% of Fulas) is still very high. Therefore, adapting awareness campaigns according to ethnic group is fundamental, to have a deeper diffusion on those groups who still support child marriage.

Even though young people show a predisposition to oppose the practice, there are still major concerns about them confronting their elders in making these decisions, which affect the entire family and may cause conflict. Girls face an internal duel if they do not want to marry at an early age: follow the family tradition and continue the footsteps of their mothers or face social rejection. On some occasions, this strong gerontocratic component can be an obstacle in raising awareness among the youngest groups, since despite being effective with them, this impact does not cross the generational barrier and accentuates the arguments that "people nowadays are practicing the cultures of the West". It would therefore be essential to generate spaces for dialogue between the generations that allow knowledge to be shared and break the taboo on these issues.

These dialogue spaces could be created through affective-sexual education, as training on this topic is presented as a crucial strategy. Concerns about premarital sex and teenage pregnancies are key in the motivations to carry out child marriage, observed throughout the results of the KAP surveys and in the testimonies of the focus group. That is why implementing curricularly sexual and reproduction health and human rights programmes that keep families informed about the different options is necessary to initiate an open discussion about sexuality between parents and their children. Also, teachers could possibly perform this role as affective-sexual educators. Their position allows them to be trusted by students and to be able to talk about sensitive issues. They can be confidants to whom they can go in order to explain difficult cases or situations.

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Author list:

Adriana Kaplan Marcusán: Chair of Knowledge Transfer, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Building B - Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 – Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès), Spain. E-mail: adriana.kaplan@uab.cat; Tel: +34-93-581-1239; https://www.uab.cat/web/-1263801907341.html

Beatriz Escaño Valentí: Fundación Wassu-UAB, L'Àgora (Edifici R), Plaça Cívica Campus Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona 08193 - Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès), Spain. E-mail: beatriz.escano@uab.cat; Tel: +34-673-294-118. https://www.uab.cat/fundacio-wassu/

Júlia Perarnau Moles: Fundación Wassu-UAB, L'Àgora (Edifici R), Plaça Cívica Campus Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona 08193 - Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès), Spain. E-mail: julia.perarnau@uab.cat; Tel: +34-673-294-118. https://www.uab.cat/fundacio-wassu/

Segga Sanyang: Wassu Gambia Kafo, Kololi New Road, Kanifing Municipality, PO Box 4533 - Bakau, The Gambia. E-mail: segga.wgk@gmail.com; Tel: +220-733-7583

Salieu J. Kandeh: Wassu Gambia Kafo, Kololi New Road, Kanifing Municipality, PO Box 4533 - Bakau, The Gambia. E-mail: salieu.wgk@gmail.com; Tel: +220-733-7583

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