Child Marriage and Its Impacts on the Education of Girls in the Rural Gambia: Focus on Niani District

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Abstract

Twenty-one percent of young women married before the age of eighteen. Approximately 650 million girls and women are married before their 18th birthday (UNICEF, 2020, 2021). States member of the United Nations, through its Sustainable Development Goals, has committed to ending child marriage globally through laws, legislation, and other means. Though the practice of child marriage is declining globally, it remains prevalent in Africa and Asia, particularly in the Gambia. This study looks at the impact of child marriage on girls' education in rural Gambia and the factors that encourage it. The researchers conducted qualitative case study research through documentation, Focus Group discussion (FGD), observation, and interviews to collect data. The study's findings indicate that child marriage has negative impacts on girls' education in rural Gambia. This reveals the fact that the percentage of girls enrolled in schools, especially high school, is lower than boys. Girls also face more difficulties than boys to complete, retain and transit to secondary or higher education. This leaves them with no future and excludes them from social or economic advantages. The factors that encourage child marriage are included: religion, poverty, culture, lack of meaningful opportunity, older men's desire for younger women to marry, and the failure of law enforcement. These factors mentioned repeatedly perpetuate the practice of child marriage, and undermine the educational opportunities for the majority of girls in the Niani district of Gambia. Therefore, the researchers recommend that the Gambian government enforce the existing laws and regulations to protect children's fundamental rights and put into practice the necessary regulations on the prohibition and elimination of this phenomenon.

Keywords: *education, child marriage, rural Gambia, girls' education, educational attainment*

Introduction

Child marriage is a formal or informal union before the age of 18. The practice of child marriage still prevails in many developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia. About twenty-one percent of young women are married before they turn 18 worldwide, which means around 650 million girls and women alive today are married as children (UNICEF, 2020, 2021). About half of them are from developing countries (UNICEF, 2021). Twelve million girls get married before turning 18 each year, 23 marriages per minute and one marriage every two seconds (Mwangi-Powell, 2022). States member of the United Nations, through its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), has committed to ending child marriage through laws and legislation by 2030.

Child marriage has been an issue in Gambia for decades, especially in rural areas, despite the global and national policies designed to restrict or forbid this practice. It primarily affects girls due to the patriarchal system of most Asian and African societies, especially in the   Gambia. Average Gambian parents withdraw their children from school early as 14 to send them into married life when they should be at school. These children are often manipulated or forced to get married by their parents, relatives, and in some cases, their friends. Even if these young girls may occasionally marry voluntarily at a young age rather than as a result of pressure or manipulation, it is nevertheless a harmful practice because it violates their human rights.

Some people within the rural Gambian communities consider child marriage a cultural norm due to its extensive practice. The girls are thus indoctrinated to believe that it is their sacred obligation to be obedient to the decisions of marriage that their parents make for them, regardless of their age. According to a 2015 UNICEF assessment, women have less access to education in the rural parts of Gambia. The practice exists because it is often believed that females' education is not important. Regardless of education level, women are destined to be homemakers. Therefore, their fundamental rights to education, guaranteed by the Gambian constitution, are denied.

Section 30 of the Gambian constitution states that "All persons shall have the right to equal educational opportunities and facilities, and to achieve the full realization of that right; subsection (a) indicates that primary education shall be free, compulsory and available to all irrespective of age, gender, or religion; (b) secondary education, including technical and vocational education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular, by the progressive introduction of free education; (c) higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, based on every appropriate means, and in

particular, the by the progressive introduction of free education" (The Constitution of the Gambia, 1997).

Gambia is the twelfth African nation to join the African Union in their campaign against child marriage, an effort to spread awareness of the dangers of the harmful practice that children are exposed to, especially girls, who are sent into married life at an early age (Guilbert, 2016). However, there appears to be a contradiction between policy and its practice. According to gender reports from the Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 19.3 percent of girls and 1.5 percent of boys in the same age range were married in 2013 (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

The former president of Gambia, while addressing his nation in 2016, stated that child marriage is a criminal offense and that it might result in 20 years of imprisonment (Guilbert, 2016). This declaration was issued in support of the government's initiative to ensure that every Gambian child completes their primary and secondary education. The practice, somehow, still continues in the rural areas of Gambia despite the government's efforts to stop it. This practice primarily prevents girls from acquiring the fundamental education that the Gambian constitution guarantees (The Constitution of the Gambia, 1997).

Teenage girls' decision to marry at a young age might be made voluntarily or encouraged by their parents or other close family members. These girls are probably less motivated to continue their education due to their social environment. They are left with no other options but to marry earlier and stop going to school. In some cases, they quit school before getting married because they believe that no matter how educated they are, they will eventually get married and be forced to stay at home (Guilbert, 2016; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Sarfo et al., 2020).

This should be noted that the victims of child marriage are not only girls but also boys (Sarfo et al., 2020). However, in Gambia, girls are receiving more negative impacts out of this practice. Girls who complete their secondary education and are ready to continue their postsecondary tend to marry first because of the widespread perception within the communities that women with higher degrees are difficult to control. The common practice in the majority of African societies, particularly in rural Gambia, where they make a collective decision on matters, such as education, and marriage, raises serious challenges in finding an appropriate approach to determine the impact of child marriage on academic attainment (Nguyen & Wodon, 2008). Given that most African societies share a similar social system, it is important to note that Gambia is not only the country in sub-Saharan Africa that demonstrates the above-mentioned traits.

A report from the World Bank Group and the International Centre for Research on Women suggests that child marriage will cost developing countries trillions of dollars by 2030 (World Bank, 2017). We are convinced that the

elimination of child marriage in this modern world is everyone's responsibility, considering how troubling and dehumanizing this practice is, despite the fact that ending child marriage is a target under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

In the rural areas of Gambia, child marriage is considered to be responsible for three in four early births or infants born to mothers under the age of 18. On average, a girl who marries at the age of 13 will have 26 percent more children than a girl who marries later or at the age of 18. If the practice of child marriage is prohibited, total fertility rates in emerging nations would typically reduce by 11%. As a result, population growth would experience significant short-term declines (World Bank, 2017).

The researchers, therefore, feel the urgency to examine the impact of child marriage on girls' education in the Gambia, with a particular focus on Niani District, while trying to find answers to the following questions:
1. What factors contribute to child marriage in Niani District?
2. Why does child marriage persist in these areas despite the Gambian government and other stakeholders' initiatives to eliminate it?
3. What are the implications of child marriage on girls' educational attainment in Niani District - given the high percentage of child marriage practice?

Literature Review

The long existence of child marriage might be influenced by cultural and religious norms, (Sarfo et al., 2020). About 40 percent of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa marry before they reach the age of 18 (Nguyen & Wodon, 2008; Nguyen & Woden, 2014; Wodon et al., 2016). Child marriage has a deep root in socio-cultural practices and religious beliefs in many communities. However, beyond the generalized facts, the relationship between faith and child marriage are multifaceted and change, depending on the community (Gemignani & Wodon, 2015 McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Parsons et al., 2015). "Cultural practices, threats, family ties, and misunderstanding of human rights were among the obstacles that schools and communities faced in reducing child marriages," according to a recent study (Mulenga & Harrison, 2022). It is also found that in rural Gambia, ethnicity and the fear that girls would participate in premarital sex, are the two main factors that contribute to early marriage. In addition to that, the lack of meaningful options in rural areas, such as formal job opportunities may also limit the choices and resources available to girls, resulting in early marriage (Lowe et al., 2020).

It is important to note that there is a need for girls' agency. Girls' agency means, the capacity of women and girls to take purposeful action and pursue goals, free from the threat of violence or retribution. The three core expressions of the

agency are decision-making, leadership, and collective action. Girls with an agency can make decisions in life and can act upon them without fear of retaliation or violence (Klugman et al., 2014; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015). In the Gambian context, females are selectively excluded from making decisions on issues, affecting their lives. The alienation extends beyond their personal lives which are related to household, family, or community. This implies a lack of agency to give females the voice they need. It is rooted in a patriarchal culture that perpetuates gender inequality (Klugman et al., 2014; Wodon et al., 2016). According to Parsons and colleagues, child brides are often vulnerable because they are minors, often poor, and uneducated (Parsons et al., 2015).

Based on several other studies, married girls are frequently absent from school. The majority of them have little or no say in deciding whether to continue their education or not, which ultimately affects the financial aspects of their lives and educational attainment (Malhotra et al., 2011; Parsons et al., 2015; Vogelstein, 2013). Their husbands and in-laws often believe that they are unable to earn, handle their finances, or make financial decisions for their household because of their low level of education (McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Parsons et al., 2015).

Studies show that young women's educational journey comes to an end once they get married (Kamal et al., 2015; Klugman et al., 2014). As a result, their schooling and formal educational journey end, leaving them deprived of knowledge and skills that will help them to succeed in life, or become useful members of their families, and communities (McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Zegeye et al., 2021). They are also neglected or excluded from social networks and support structures provided by schools. Early marriage also increases the likelihood that a girl will remain illiterate for the rest of her life (Kamal et al., 2015; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Paul, 2019; Rumble et al., 2018).

Child marriage echoes the absence of girls' agency in several ways. First, the individual's fundamental right to free and informed consent to marry at full legal age is violated, as guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Second, they cannot have their voice heard or stand against their husbands and families who are causing them various forms of gender-based violence, such as marital rape, and sexual, physical, and mental abuse (UNICEF, 2008; Klugman et al., 2014). The latest study shows convincing evidence of a link between child marriage and low educational attainment. This means child marriage is an additional risk factor and an outcome of illiteracy (Klugman et al., 2014; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015).

Child marriage is closely associated with educational attainment (Nguyen & Wodon, 2014). Educating girls can help prevent child marriage, and child marriage also discourages girls to complete their education McCleary-Sills et al. (2015). Therefore, diagnosing the relevance of these connections is critical. Programs that

primarily focus on education, poverty, and a lack of economic opportunities–all of which are the contributing factors–have been added to the global campaign in order to prevent child marriage (Kamal et al., 2015; Klugman et al., 2014; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Nguyen & Wodon, 2008; Nguyen & Wodon, 2014; Paul, 2019; Subramanee et al., 2022; Wodon et al., 2016). According to Klugman et al. (2014) and McCleary-Sills et al., (2015), the expectation for girls' to restrict their movement, socialize only with a few female peers, and have limited decision-making roles, encourages the practice of child marriage (Klugman et al., 2014; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015). In case, these girls are suspected to breach these norms, will face serious consequences. Therefore, they are forced to marry at a young age to safeguard themselves and their families' reputations (McCleary-Sills et al., 2015).

Method

Study Design

The researchers used a qualitative case study to explore and understand the dynamics and practices of child marriage and its implications on girls' education in rural Gambia. According to Creswell, J.W. & Creswell (2018), qualitative research assists researchers in investigating, discovering, and comprehending the meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The research method includes developing questions and procedures, collecting data from participants, inductive data analysis starting from specific to general themes, and interpreting the data (Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, 2018).

Selection of Respondents

The respondents for this research were selected using a purposive sampling procedure. According to Creswell, purposive sampling "Identifies and selects individuals or groups of individuals who are mostly conversant about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest" (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; J.W Creswell, 2008; John W. Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This sampling approach was chosen because the respondents were expected to have either experienced child marriage, be at risk of getting married at a young age, or have the authority to make it happen. The study's subjects were purposely chosen by researchers using those criteria. These include parents, local leaders, such as imams and village heads, women/girls married before the age of 18, and school-age girls who have dropped out of school but were not married yet.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data for the study were gathered through observation, interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). According to Gay, FGD is a type of group interview in which

a researcher attempts to elicit shared understanding from a group of people and views from specific individuals (Gay, L.R., Mills. G.E., & Airasian, 2012). The researchers held Focus Group Discussions (FGD) in two villages. Out of 42 participants, 12 and 15   participants attended from each village. The FGD was attended by the village head (Alkalo), religious leaders, and parents.

Gay, L.R., G.E., & Airasian, 2012, describe an interview as an organized method of interaction in which one seeks information from another. Interviews allow researchers to collect essential data that observation alone cannot. This approach was very important since the participants were primarily local decision-makers and some young women who were married or were vulnerable to getting married before the age of 18. The researchers interviewed ten women and five men from five villages in Niani District. Three participants were chosen in each village, two females and one male. Two out of ten were girls who were yet to marry, eight were married women, – and all five men were parents of girls who were currently married. Journals, articles, and other scripts relevant to the topic were reviewed and used as secondary data sources.

The thematic analysis method is used in this study in order to analyse the data from this study. The researchers apply Miles & Huberman's, suggested steps to generate the themes from data. The suggested steps were: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and Discussion

The next step for this research was to discuss the researchers' findings in the context of different themes. These sub-themes were discovered through interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and documentation. The sub-themes for discussions that emerged among these topics are the policy elements, the educational implications, and other contributing factors, such as religion, culture, lack of realistic opportunities for females, older men's desire for younger girls, poverty, and the absence of law enforcement.

Policy Dimension on Child Marriage in Gambia

Child marriage is a more common practice in rural Gambia than in metropolitan areas. According to UNICEF's 2015 Report, nearly a third of women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before turning 18, and about a tenth, were before turning fifteen (Guilbert, 2016; UNICEF, 2015).

Despite the ratified Gambian Constitution and International Human Rights Treaties, as well as the country's recognition of girls' fundamental rights to education, the rate of primary school completion for females and access to education between rural and urban regions remains concerning. Due to early

marriage, most women in rural Gambia are deprived of education based on the participants' stories. The gendered structure influences the decision to send girls into early marriage. Due to the patriarchal nature of Gambian society, women are particularly disadvantaged from having access to education because of the various roles established by the society for men and women to uphold. The decision to send girls into early marriage is therefore greatly influenced by the patriarchal structure of society. The primary claim of the gender roles theory is that women are made to believe that their educational achievements are less important than men's.

This observation of the child marriage practice is prevalent in Gambia and has led the Gambian government to combine additional strategic initiatives and programs to ensure that females have equal access to educational opportunities as men. Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), now known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), among other projects, were adopted to uphold their commitments to providing primary educational opportunities for all Gambians (SAGG, 2019). According to UNDP's assessment in 2010 and Basse, Gambia has a low rate of literacy, where literacy among women aged 15-24, was only 13.8 percent in 2010 (Jouhki & Stark, 2017).

Implications of Child Marriage on Girls' Education

Gambia's education system includes twelve years of early childhood education, plus elementary and high school. According to the policy framework for education, nursery education lasts three years, between the ages of three and six; primary education lasts six years, between the ages of seven and 12; junior and senior secondary education last between the ages of 13 and 18 – three years each. This means, there are 15 years of primary and secondary education with nursery or ECD in total (MoBSE, 2004, 2015, 2016).

This research found that the majority of women in rural Gambia were unable to complete their senior secondary education. It appears that there is a strong relationship between child marriage and educational attainment in the Niani district. Early marriage has caused girls in rural Gambia to drop out of school. This is evident that most husbands or the families of the husbands forbid them to pursue further education. As a result, girls' access to education in rural Gambia, is severely concerning. According to one of the respondents, B.C., parents occasionally withdraw their female children from school to send them into marriage because they fear that their daughters will engage in premarital affairs or get pregnant, which are culturally taboo. She further added that this practice has created major barriers for many girls to pursue higher education because these women are considered house workers rather than being employed in the modern workforce. This parental eagerness to marry off their daughters has a significant impact on women's educational attainment in Gambia, especially in people in rural areas.

These sentiments expressed by B.C., are shared by all groups in the rural villages of Gambia, particularly parents, religious leaders, and local leaders (village heads). In addition to that, some village heads also tend to respond in a more political manner because they consider themselves political figures and must support all state initiatives. These village leaders, on the other hand, are also concerned that they are violating their cultural and religious values (FGD at Niani Sukuta, January 16th, 2022). This suggests that females are taught from an early age to value their role as housewives, and are persuaded to believe that they do not belong in formal educational systems, or as formal employees to the modern workplace. Therefore, it is difficult to end child marriage in these parts of Gambia, since it serves the purpose, which is male supremacy. These young girls, young as 14-15, are sent into married life and are also unaware of the implications it has on their lives. We argued that the practice of child marriage would never end unless these girls and women develop critical consciousness with which they will be able to create a social change and dismantle the patriarchal systems which held them oppressed for centuries. Girls will have the ability to deconstruct gender roles since these roles are constructed by societies. Most importantly, for women to have equal access to education as men, the roots of gender, society, religion, and any other factors that oppress women, must be challenged.

The "Education for All" framework reported in Dakar, Senegal, adopted in 2000, and led by UNESCO, was developed to ensure that every child has access to education by 2015. The Gambian government has developed certain strategies under the national education policies, such as MoBSE (2004, 2016) and the Children's Act (2005), to apply the framework and reach the EFA target. According to the MoBSE and UNESCO 2014 reports on "Education for All", the number of Gambian girls and boys enrolled in schools increased in 2014, ranging from early childhood education centres to senior secondary education. Despite the fact that this program along with a couple of other initiatives has considerably increased the number of students enrolled in schools, particularly in rural Gambia, child marriage has not been yet eliminated.

It is important to note that these initiatives have had major contributions in rural Gambia toward addressing gender disparities in the attainment of primary education. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Gambia had an 88 percent gross enrolment rate (GER) at the primary level in 2010, with a 70 percent net enrolment rate (NER) for girls. This data reveals that the enrolment inequalities do not exist, or are very minor at the primary education level wherein children are enrolled at the age of seven. This data also unfolds a considerable scale of gender discrepancy at the upper elementary and senior secondary levels with only

25 percent of girls graduating, compared to 32 percent of boys (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2013; MoBSE, 2021; SAGG, 2019).

The above enrolment statistics supported by MoBSE and UNESCO EFA report show a remarkable increase in the number of early childhood development centres, established across the country from 265 in 1999 to 1,015 in 2014. The increment of this number was also accompanied by the increment of students' enrolment over the same period of time from 29,910 to 87,061. This growth represents a 283 percent increase in the number of centres established and a 191 percent increase in ECD enrolment. In primary education, this trend continued with a gross intake rate of 124.3 percent and boys enrolled at a gross intake rate of 123.4 percent by 2014. This data suggests that girls' education in ECD and primary school is rarely interrupted and that they are not denied access to education (MoBSE & UNESCO, 2014).

The majority of children in the rural areas of Gambia are enrolled in ECD and primary education, as mandated by the country's constitution and national educational policy. However, student retention and transition after primary are still challenging. Parents usually withdraw their children from school after they have completed primary or junior high school or even before they have completed elementary or senior high school in order for them to marry. The researchers from interviews learned that when a girl reaches a certain age, marriage appears to be the only option for her in the majority of rural communities in the Gambia because it is the only acceptable option under the rules of her cultural and religious practices. This is undoubtedly caused by the roles and responsibilities that the Gambian societies impose on girls and boys. In the book "Gender and power" on sex role theory Connell's (1987) argued that men and women are taught about their positions in society and to embrace what behaviour is and is not acceptable. Women, seemingly, are considered to be obedient rather than instrumental (Connell, 1987).

Women are expected to marry, be housekeepers, bear children, and obey their husbands while they provide their basic needs. As a result, women come to accept that they are not destined for higher education and should instead stay at home as housewives. Their family members and husbands will reward them when they play their indoctrinated roles correctly and with obedience. These women are also promised an eternal reward in heaven (Jannah) for believing that marriage is a sacred obligation by Allah. Family members may threaten to kick their daughters out of the house or take away some of the benefits and privileges that they may have if they disobey.

Here are the answers to the following questions that the researchers asked a participant during an interview

Question 1: As a young woman, did you ever decide not to marry and instead pursue your education after completing junior school or grade nine?

Answer. "Yes"

Question 2: Why did you decide not to pursue your education in order to marry?

Answer: "I never gave up on my education; I was forced to. My father threatened to divorce my mother if I did not accept the marriage proposal, because he believed that my mother was supporting me in my decision."

In a male-dominated culture and traditional society, men use these strategies to force girls to accept their decisions. She was aware that her choice would cause harm to her mother if that happened to her mother. She also knew that she could not handle it – therefore, she made the decision to give up on her education. Because families expected their daughters to accept being sent off to marriage when the time came, those who accepted being withdrawn from school for marriage were considered obedient.

Families might have been motivated to give their children special rewards if their children's responses were in their parents' favour. If the opposite occurs, the child was punished, such as her parents would forcefully remove her from the house until she accepted their decision "Until she comes back to her senses", as their families describe it.

Ghosh, (2016) argued that child marriage leaves children with no choice and forces them into a life without education. He explains that early marriage does not only force girls to give their consent to their domestic and matrimonial roles as children, but it also forces them to make decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. Daniel asserted that "Early marriage has an impact on the number of girls' enrolment in school; many of these young brides were unable to continue their education after getting married" (Daniel, 2016). In some cases, girls are frequently pulled out of school and denied further education, leaving them with insufficient skills to help lift their families out of poverty. These children are more likely to remain illiterate, which has an impact on the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Daniel, 2016). Daniel's and Ghosh's findings are consistent with the current study on the implication of child marriage on girls' education.

Factors that Encourage Child Marriage in Niani District

Culture: Premarital sex for young girls and boys is culturally unacceptable in most Gambian societies because it increases the likelihood that they would have

children outside of marriage. This is considered taboo, particularly in rural Gambia. According to L.J., one of the respondents gave his daughter's hand in marriage at the age of 17, out of her consent. Her father did so to avoid her daughter from engaging in premarital sex and pregnancy. Most gave similar responses, i.e., fear of premarital sex or having children out of wedlock, and these families would prefer anything over that.

A respondent K.J., shared her story of how she was withdrawn from school and forced to marry. According to her, she was 16 when she was withdrawn from school for marriage because her parents were worried that she might engage in premarital sex. The fear grew in her parents because she used to spend most of her time with boys as the majority of her friends were boys even though she felt safe. However, her parents saw it as a threat and forced her to marry and drop out of school (interview at TBK on January 12th, 2022).

Girls are expected to play and socialize only with girls and boys are expected to interact with boys since both sexes are assigned different roles in society. It is traditionally unacceptable for boys and girls to hang out with each other because they are of a different gender.   As a result, society expects them to behave in certain ways. A woman hanging out with men will cause her parents' serious concerns, as some parents mentioned during the interview. These findings are nearly identical to the findings of Jouhki & Stark 2017 and Lowe 2020.

The majority of parents highly value a girl's virginity. This value encourages parents to push their daughters into married life – before they lose their virginity. The significance of these norms is also echoed in communities, where they have a ritual on the first night of a girl's marriage to determine whether or not she is a virgin. BN, a respondent described her experiences with this ritual. She recalled the night before the wedding when her mother interrogated her to make sure, she was still a virgin because it would be embarrassing if her husband discovered otherwise.

According to her, such fear motivates parents to marry their daughters at a young age in order to protect their virginity while the girls can also accommodate their sexual desires. This situation puts girls and their families under greater pressure if they are found to be non-virgins in their marital homes. These findings demonstrate the fact that culture has a significant influence in convincing parents to send their daughters into marriage at a young age.

 It should be noted that child marriage does not always imply forced marriage, despite the fact that most child marriages in Niani were forced, according to the participants' accounts. There is a strong cultural emphasis on the preservation of virginity, some girls make consensual marriage choices. However, it does not imply that girls have the authority to decide whether or not to marry; rather this decision is made solely by their parents, particularly their fathers. This is due to the

patriarchal nature of the system in most communities in Niani. Girls are rarely involved in the decision-making process. The story narrated by Aja confirmed that she found out about her marriage on the day it was made public. She was never consulted and had no power to refuse the marriage because it was not her decision to make in the first place anyway. A large number of women confirmed that they were never consulted or involved in making a decision on whom to marry. The majority of marriages are arranged between two families, and girls have little voice in these decisions despite the fact that these decisions are directly affecting them.

  Religion; Marriage, according to the majority of Gambians, is a religious obligation, and all children must marry when they reach puberty. The two major religions practised in the Gambia, are Christianity and Islam. Because the vast majority of them are devout Muslims, they will never allow their daughters to engage in premarital sex. With such a strong religious belief, sex is only permissible after marriage. So, almost all Muslim parents would force their daughters to marry young. What I found fascinating is that girls' sexual activity prior to marriage is more strongly regulated than boys'. In other words, if parents suspect their children engaging in sexual activity, their only option is to force them into marriage, regardless of their age.

  Another respondent, M. J., an imam from one of the villages that the researchers chose for this study stated that Islam forbids Muslims from engaging in unlawful sex. He further added that Muslim societies must incorporate and enforce this religious teaching into their cultural values. He while quoting from Quran emphasized, "Do not even approach fornication." It is a heinous act to commit and an evil path to take (17:32). Most parents refer to this verse in Quran, which forbids fornication, regardless of gender. Surprisingly, boys' sexual activity is not considered serious as girls', though parents' desire to marry off their daughters has little to do with religious beliefs than cultural values. M.J., the same imam, supported the idea of girls marrying young. He thinks children of this generation are socially exposed to a wide range of activities that might lead them to premarital sex. He also believes that having a child before marriage is the most embarrassing thing that a girl can bring to her family. In a follow-up question with him, the researchers inquired whether Quran sets an age limit for a girl to get married. This is how he responded:

  "As far as I know, there is no specific age mentioned in Quran. He did, however, mention that children can marry when they are 16 years old or older. Nonetheless, this viewpoint may differ depending on the ethnic group, but the most important point to emphasize is that marriage may occur if the child reaches puberty".

  The researchers from the Focus Group Discussion discovered that many parents force or will force their daughters to marry young because they do not want

them to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage, believing that this may result in an unwanted pregnancy (FGD session two at zero village in Niani on January 14th, 2022).

This is also to note that child marriage is still practised and is based on traditional Muslim interpretations of how to deal with adolescent sexuality. Traditional Islamic beliefs are used as strategies to control immorality through marriage. This finding is also consistent with the results of Grijns, (2018), which claims that another factor promoting child marriage is conservative religious interpretations.

Poverty: Many families in rural Gambia are predominantly farmers. They entirely rely on farming if they do not have family members working overseas to support them. The possibilities that families enrol their children on school, and retain them through higher education, are evidently impossible. As a result, these families are more likely to allow the boys to continue their education and withdraw girls from school. These girls may later marry and use the dowry to support their families' expenses. Some participants also supported this argument. E.B., a 40-year-old father stated that, instead of spending his family's limited resources on girls' education who will eventually marry and leave with their husbands, it is better to send his son to school which he considers to be an investment for his family. Such judgments are made to demonstrate that men play an instrumental role in their families whilst women do not.

In a practical world, dowry is traditionally paid to the bride. However, in most rural Gambian communities, this is not the case. Families agree on a fixed sum at the Kabilo (clan) level and males pay that to secure the girls' hand for marriage. When the man's family or the man himself pays the expected dowry, the husband and his family members consider the bride as their property. The husbands consider themselves to be in full charge of their wives and do to her future, whatever he wishes. This study discovered that poverty is another contributing factor that promotes child marriage which will most likely lead to poverty again.

According to BN's statement, her parents accepted the marriage proposal on her behalf with the expectation that her future husband would be responsible for his wife's day-to-day needs, and provide the required support that his wife will need after marriage. However, she claimed that after a year of marriage, her husband barely supported her. BN dropped out of school because her parents could not afford to pay for BN and her two brothers' additional expenses. BN had no chance to find formal employment to cover her expenses due to her educational background. She was left with no option but to become a full-time housewife and make a small income through her vegetable gardens and *Banta Faroo* (paddy fields).

As previously mentioned, farming is the primary source of income for the majority of people in Niani, which means, most people in these in the said area live below the poverty line. This makes it more difficult for them to meet their children's basic necessities and finance their children to receive a quality education. They are consequently forced to make decisions on who will proceed with senior secondary school or higher education due to their limited family income, which is mainly derived from farming. Girls are generally considered second-class citizens when choosing between boys and girls because a large number of parents still uphold the belief that girls are meant to be in the kitchen. As a result, there are no meaningful options outside of their domestic life. This will, in fact, lead us to our next factors.

Lack of Meaningful options for girls: Some participants informed that child marriage persists because girls and women have few viable alternatives. As a result of communities' restricted cultural and social settings, women have very few options left to pursue their education because society has confined us to being homemakers and nothing more," said a young woman in an interview.

It should be noted that a significant percentage of communities in rural areas of Gambia follow a patriarchal system, based on the context provided. Women, therefore, have little or no choice except to marry and work for low-income businesses in domestic jobs. K.J., a participant from Niani Sukuta, a village located in one of the districts mentioned above, said.

K.J., a participant from the village of Niani Sukuta, located in one of the districts mentioned above said, "I was married when I was in secondary school. My husband decided that I should give up on my higher education after I graduated, because my husband's family would not allow it, or would otherwise be forced to marry a second wife." This demonstrates the fact that men make decisions, even when it comes to the decisions that women must make themselves" (K.C. Interview at SK, January 2022).

The desire for younger girls: During the Focus Group Discussions and interviews, the participants disclosed another intriguing factor of child marriage, namely a desire for younger women. Many older men have preferences for younger girls, in their twenties or thirties as their wives" (FGD, January 14, 2022, at a village in rural Gambia).

This raises the question of why older men prefer to have younger brides. However, before we get to the answer, it is important to remember that most communities in rural Gambia are patriarchal and that polygamy is an acceptable practice in Muslim communities. Religious values usually justify that Muslim men are permitted to marry up to four wives (Quran 4:3). Men, who are wealthier or are more influential, typically prefer to marry young girls as their second, third or fourth wives.

They use their wealth or influence to persuade families to marry their daughters off for financial gain.

Poverty, as previously discussed, is one of the factors that encourage the practice of child marriage. Jallow and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa "Estimated that approximately 74 percent of the rural Gambian population lives on less than USD 1.25 per day, compared to 32.7 percent of their urban counterparts." (Jallow, 2020). Given this, young girls may be more attracted to older men for marriage as their second, third, or fourth wives, anticipating certain benefits. These older men use their wealth and privileges to keep their young brides close to them. The answer to the question of why older men are attracted to young girls is to blame the patriarchal nature of society.

Men over the age of 60 prefer a younger woman to satisfy their sexual desire because their first wife would be less attractive due to old age. A report from the Center for Human Rights (2018) suggested a similar factor but in different dimensions. The report argues that the Gambia's patriarchal culture perpetuates gender inequality, which may fuel men's attitudes to choose younger girls as their brides. More research is required in order to fully understand why older men prefer younger girls over their first wives.

Enforcement of laws: Gambia, like many other countries around the world, is working hard to end the practice of child marriage. Even though the existence of laws prohibits the practice of child marriage, the government has never taken any legal action against the perpetrators. Parents are consequently never bothered to uphold the legislation. In other words, the state's failure to implement or enforce laws against the offenders somehow encourages this practice. The Children's Act (2005) Section 18 (1) stated that "Every child has the right to free and compulsory basic education, and the government must ensure that they do. 18(2) also stated that parents or guardians are responsible for ensuring that their children attend and complete basic education" (National Assembly, 2005). Children's right to education is guaranteed by Gambia's constitution. Parents or guardians, however, withdraw girls from school for marriage before they can complete their basic education. This proves the fact that another factor in the practice of child marriage is the absence of law enforcement. In other words, no legal action was taken against those who are violating the rights of children. According to Section 19 of the same document, "No child shall be subjected to any social and cultural practice that affects a child's welfare, dignity, normal growth, and development, particularly those customs and practices that are: (a) prejudicial to the health and life of the child; and (b) discriminatory to the child on the grounds of sex or another status." (National Assembly, 2005). The laws on the violation of children's rights are clear, particularly children's right to education and their well-being. The practice of "Maslaha"

(compromise) culture has seriously undermined law enforcement and jeopardized the welfare of children, particularly girls.

Conclusion

This study investigated the implications of child marriage on girls' education in rural Gambia. This study also investigated other factors that encourage and support such harmful practices in these communities by parents on the basis of tradition, culture, and religion and or due to the absence of law enforcement despite all campaigns and policies ran against it on national and international levels. The study's findings indicate that child marriage has a negative impact on girls' education in rural areas of Gambia. This practice steals their future and leaves them disadvantaged– both socially and economically for the rest of their lives. This finding has proved that girls have lower educational attainment than boys. Despite the fact that a large number of girls are enrolled in primary schools, the vast majority of them drop out of school before completing their secondary education. Even if they complete their secondary education, only a small percentage of them can proceed with their higher education. The practice of child marriage is used by parents as a strategy to avoid premarital sex and unwanted pregnancy, as they call it. This study also discovered other factors that contribute to the perpetrated practice of child marriage in rural areas of Gambia. These factors include religion, poverty, culture, and lack other meaningful opportunities for women in patriarchal societies, older men's desire for younger women to marry, and weak or no enforcement of laws. These factors provide fertile ground for this harmful practice against girls in the Niani district and put a full stop to a girl's educational journey. The practice of child marriage has devastating implications for girls' education in rural areas of Gambia. Harmful practices based on poverty, culture and religion are often perpetrated against children of a specific age, and gender, such as girls, who lack the ability to speak for themselves or the authority to decide. Norms and parental rights over children, give them the power to violate the rights of children, mainly girls. Some directly by the child's parents and some by older and influential people. Therefore, the researchers recommend that the Gambian government enforce laws and legislation, designed to protect children and put into practice the necessary regulations on the prohibition and elimination of this phenomenon. A holistic approach will provide girls with an equal opportunity to complete their education without interruptions or jeopardizing their welfare.

These actors working to protect children, especially the Child Protection Alliance (CPA), also need to raise awareness of child rights and educate the communities about the implications that child marriage leaves on children. The government, in collaboration with religious and local leaders, non-governmental

organizations (NGOs), and other relevant stakeholders, should reconsider strategies to address the issue of child marriage in Gambia, especially in rural areas. The researchers rely solely on information gathered during Interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and Observations. This study cannot be generalized to all rural communities in the Gambia. Therefore, further research in a broader context is required to understand this phenomenon and come up with a mechanism to address the practice of child marriage. This could be accomplished through an ethnographic study or a quantitative research approach.

Conflict of Interest: No potential conflict was encountered in this research.

Disclaimer: The initials in the text are assigned to my respondents to protect their identity.

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