

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Traditional socio-cultural practices and early pregnancies in Togo: Between social norms and violation of adolescent rights

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Abstract

This article shows how certain traditional socio-cultural practices that influence the root causes of teenage pregnancy violate the rights of adolescents. The data came from the action-research entitled "Multisectoral and transformative approaches to rites and initiations for adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights", conducted by the Togolese Association for Family Welfare (ATBEF) in May 2022. The option is made for a qualitative approach. The information collected was recorded on dictaphones and then transcribed from the local languages of collection into French. Content analysis was used to write the research report. The results reveal that these practices, which are still prevalent in the localities of the study, and which exert pressure on adolescent girls, are also products of violations of many girls' rights. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2024; 28 [8s]: 122-129*).

Keywords: Traditional rites; pregnancies; adolescents; violation; rights; Savannah; Kara; Togo

Résumé

Cet article montre en quoi certaines pratiques socio-culturelles traditionnelles qui influencent les causes profondes de la survenue des grossesses chez les adolescentes, constituent une violation des droits de ces dernières. Les données proviennent de la recherche-action titrée « Approches multisectorielles et transformatrices des rites et initiations pour les droits en santé sexuelle et de la reproduction des adolescentes », menée par l'Association Togolaise pour le Bien-Etre Familial (ATBEF) en mai 2022. L'option est faite pour une approche qualitative. Les informations collectées ont été enregistrées sur dictaphones puis transcrites des langues locales de collecte vers le français. L'analyse de contenu a été utilisée pour la rédaction du rapport de recherche. Les résultats révèlent que ces pratiques encore prégnantes dans les localités de l'étude et qui exercent des pressions sur les adolescentes, sont aussi des produits des violations de nombreux droits des filles. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2024; 28 [8s]: 122-129*).

Mots-clés: Rites traditionnels; grossesses, adolescentes; violation, droits; Savanes; Kara; Togo

Introduction

Among the multiple causes of early pregnancies, it should be noted that forced and early marriages feature prominently. Indeed, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) notes that around the world, around 650 million girls are affected by child marriage. Generally, these adolescent girls do not choose their partners who are often much older than them¹.

Leevy Frivet² notes that young African girls are affected by early pregnancies. Hundreds of African teenagers see their future shattered by an unwanted pregnancy. In fact, the presence of early pregnancies is proof that children have unprotected sexual relations, an attitude which makes them more vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies. The UNICEF

report (2015) reveals that in the West and Central Africa sub-region, four out of ten women aged 20 to 24 were married before the age of 18. Of these, a third were before the age of 15 years³. This region includes three countries with the highest child marriage prevalence rates in the world: Niger (76%), the Central African Republic (68%) and Chad (67%)⁴.

In Togo, the multiple indicator cluster survey (MICS-6) carried out in 2017 reveals that for the entire country, 6.4% of women aged 20 to 24 were married for the first time before the age of 15 years, and 24.8% before the age of 18 years. In the Kara and Savanes regions, these proportions are respectively 2.6% and 23.3% for Kara and 13.0% and 37.4% for Savanes⁵. These data reveal that the Togo and more particularly the Kara

and Savanes regions are not spared from this phenomenon. However, child marriages and forced marriages constitute, in the opinion of several researchers, a violation of human rights since they threaten the lives and futures of girls and women. The practice of early marriage deprives girls of their ability to make decisions about their lives, undermines their education, makes them more vulnerable to violence, discrimination and abuse, and prevents them from participating fully in economic, political, and social spheres of life.

In Togolese societies, both traditional and modern, children, young people and even adults are subjected to or undergo ritual practices of all kinds (baptism, confirmation among Christians; vodou, divinities and convents in the traditional societies). Some of these traditional socio-cultural practices lead to early marriages and pregnancies. With this in mind, in this article we are interested in the practices of Chadji (private dowry) and Sikpen/Okpenkpen/Lipikpen/Opokpen (Exchange) in the Savanes and Kara regions of Togo⁶. Note that these two traditional socio-cultural practices concern approximately 10-15% of the Togolese population.

To this end, the question that arises is: in what way do the practices of Chadji (private dowry) and Sikpen/Okpenkpen/Lipikpen/Opokpen (Exchange) constitute a violation of the rights of adolescent girls?

The research hypothesis is that the practices of Chadji (private dowry) and Sikpen/Okpenkpen/Lipikpen/Opokpen (Exchange) do not leave freedoms of opinion and decision-making to adolescent girls in the choice of their spouses, and expose them to early pregnancies.

The objective of the article is to describe the practices of Chadji (Special dowry) and Sikpen/Okpenkpen/Lipikpen/Opokpen (Exchange) and to determine their influences on the violation of the rights of adolescent girls in the regions of Savanes and the Kara in Togo.

Definition and meaning of the two traditional socio-cultural practices concerned

Chadji (or the special dowry)

This form of dowry is an ancestral practice which takes place in the localities of Takpamba and

Dankpen in the Konkomba community. This practice consists of paying in kind (field products, material goods, etc.); in services (country and domestic work); or in cash (cash) the dowry of a young girl. The dowry can be given at any age of the girl (from birth to 20 years) and she (the girl) can also be taken by her husband at any time, whether she is studying, working or learning. This last aspect makes this dowry special. Chadji can be done in two ways. The first variation is the one that is done for a girl from birth. This form involves much more the parent (of a boy) who wants to marry a girl for his son. At this time, the parent begins to help the in-laws with farm work until the daughter grows up. Then comes the "Chadji" itself, which consists of bringing food and a sum of money according to the financial capabilities of the boy's family. The choice of the future bride is made by the boy's parents and the agreements are "signed" by the parents on both sides without the opinion of those principally concerned.

The second variation of Chadji is the one that involves the boy (the groom-to-be) himself. At this level, once the parents have identified the girl, the boy gathers the necessary items and the day of Chadji (dowry) is fixed. Sometimes, all this is done without the young girl knowing. It is on the "D" day that she will know that her parents have given her in marriage. The teenage girl has no say.

The Sikpen/Okpenkpen/Lipikpen/Opokpen (the exchange)

Practiced among the Gourma, the Moba, and the Gangam (in the far north of the country) under various names, Sikpeng/Pogalou (Gourma); Opokpen (Moba) and Okpenkpen (Gangam), this ancestral rite involves two distinct families in the mutual exchange of their daughters with a view to marriage. It consists of a father giving his own daughter or sister in marriage to a neighbouring family and in return, taking a daughter from this family in marriage for his son or brother. This form of union is a practice which is part of the logic according to which "I give you my daughter in marriage and you give me yours". For those interviewed, the exchange has the advantage of giving any person, regardless of their social rank, physical appearance or character, the chance to marry and procreate/conceive.

Methods

The data used in this article came from the basic action research study entitled “multi-sectoral and transformative approaches to rites and initiations for the sexual and reproductive health rights of adolescents”, that was conducted by the Togolese Association for Family Well-Being (ATBEF) in May 2022. They came from 15 in-depth individual interviews (EIA) and 10 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) carried out with populations in localities in

the Savanes and Kara regions in northern Togo. (West Africa) where these traditional socio-cultural practices take place. (Tables 1, 2 and Map 1). Among the 15 EIAs, 5 concerned the traditional chiefs of villages/localities; 5 concerned the initiating priests; and 5 individual interviews were carried out with the initiates (people who had undergone traditional initiation). The 10 FGDs took place as follows: 5 FGDs with members of the multisectoral framework and 5 with students (Table 2).

Table 1: Summary of the different targets interviewed from In-Depth Individual Interviews (EIA) in the localities concerned through socio-cultural practices

COMMUNITIES	LOCALITIES	EIA N°1 Village Manager	EIA N°2 Initiating priest	RECIT1 Initiated	TOTAL OPERATIONS
KERAN 2	Ossacré	1	1	1	3
BASSAR 1	Kalanga	1	1	1	3
OTI SUD 1	Djé-Bouri et Djé-Gando	1	1	1	3
OTI SUD 2	Takpamba	1	1	1	3
KPENDJAL	Naki Est	1	1	1	3
OUEST 1					
TOTAL		5	5	5	15

Source: Produced from field data, May 2022

Table 2: Summary of the different targets interviewed from Group Discussions (FG) in the localities concerned by socio-cultural practices

COMMUNITIES	LOCALITIES	F-G N°1 Members of the Multisectoral framework (CM)	F-G N°2 Young boys and girls	TOTAL OPERATIONS
KERAN 2	Ossacré	1	1	2
BASSAR 1	Kalanga	1	1	2
OTI SUD 1	Djé-Bouri and Djé-Gando	1	1	2
OTI SUD 2	Takpamba	1	1	2
KPENDJAL	Naki Est	1	1	2
OUEST 1				
TOTAL		5	5	10

Source: Produced from field data, May 2022

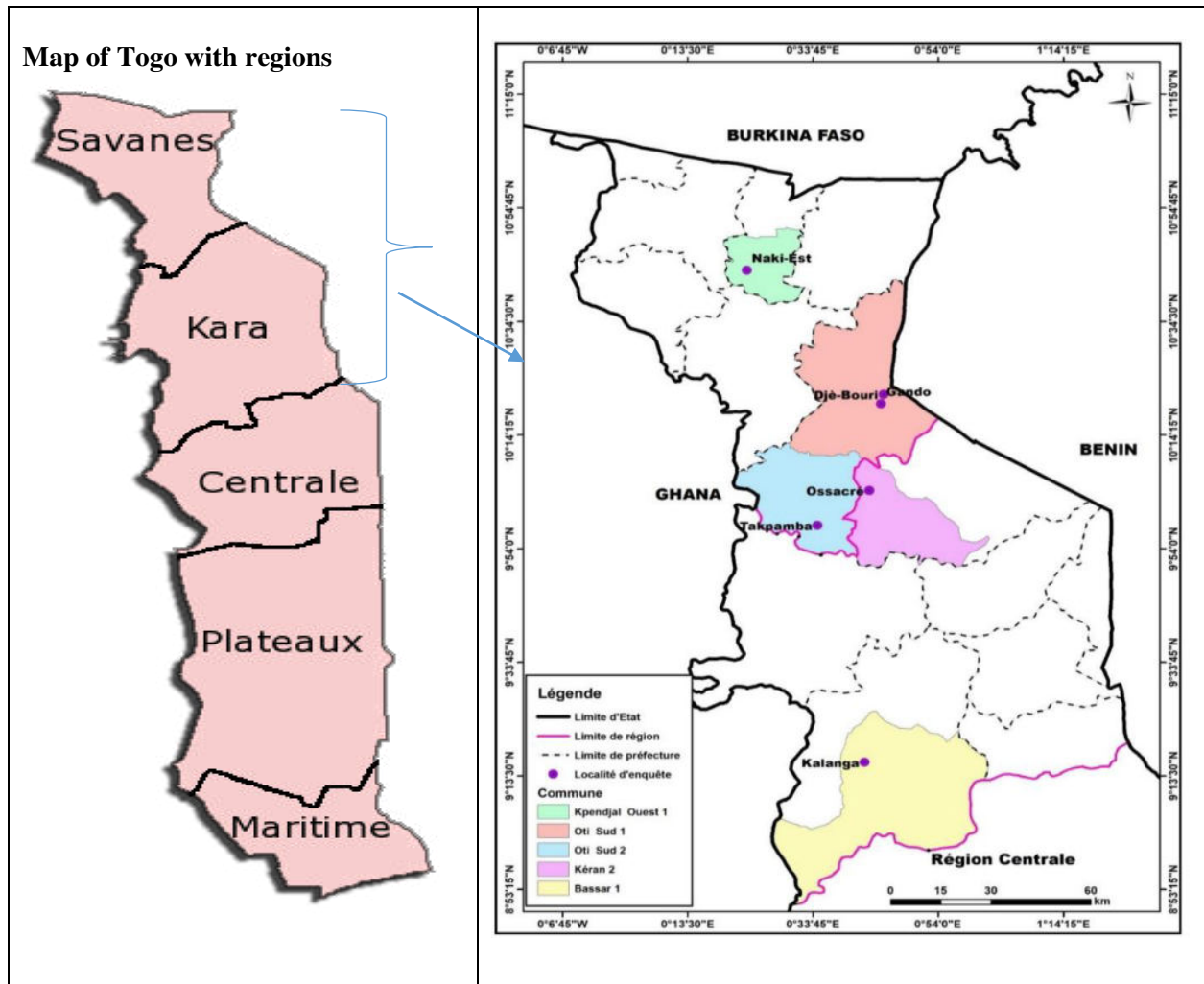
In this article, we have opted for a qualitative approach. The information collected was first recorded on a dictaphone and then transcribed from the local languages of collection into French. Subsequently, content analysis was used to refine the data and write this article.

In terms of results, two main points are addressed. The first point deals with the links between traditional socio-cultural practices and early pregnancies among young adolescents. The

second point addresses these socio-cultural practices and social norms seen through the prism of violations of the rights of adolescent girls.

Results

The traditional socio-cultural practices analyzed in this article are the “special” dowry and the exchange.



Map 1: Map of Togo, accompanied by the map of the Savanes and Kara regions and their localities where the socio-cultural practices described in the article take place

Table 3: Traditional socio-cultural practices linked with the types of children's rights violated

The different rights of children	Traditional socio-cultural practices	Numbers of the types of rights violated by this practice
Right to equality; Right to health; Right to have an identity; Right to live as a family; Right to education and leisure; Right to be protected against all forms of exploitation; Right to express oneself and be heard on issues that concern oneself; Right to be protected against all forms of violence; Right of a child with a disability to live with and like others;	Chadji	1 ; 2 ; 5 ; 6 ; 7 ; 8 ; 10
Right to protection of privacy; Right to justice adapted to one's age; Right to be protected in time of war.	The exchange	1 ; 2 ; 5 ; 6 ; 7 ; 8 ; 10

Traditional socio-cultural practices: their links with early pregnancies

Chadji's links (or the special dowry) with early pregnancies

In Konkomba country in the past, the payment of the dowry was purely symbolic. It is the consecration of a friendship or the confirmation of loyalty between two families or two people or the testimony of recognition. Nowadays, the practice has undergone changes and taken another turn. According to our informants, you can literally “buy” a girl to make her your wife. As the payment of this form of dowry is motivated by exaggerated greed, it has become a competitive process between two rival young suitors or between their respective families. The highest bidder puts all the chances on his side to acquire, have and keep the girl as his wife and consummate the union whenever he wants. The following passage gives an illustration of this situation.

When a young man gives 50,000F as Chadji and another gives 500,000F, the latter then has every chance of marrying the girl. Men put all their savings into these practices. So, rather than it being a proper dowry, it is corruption, institutionalized conscience buying. This is why young Konkomba feels like he has bought his wife and believes he has all the rights over her, including “the right of life and death”. For him, his wife (even a student living with his own parents) is therefore his property. He is so jealous that anyone who comes near her is a good rival to take down. This is why we see early marriages; early pregnancies in schools and school dropouts.

(Extract from the words of the informant K, aged around 40).

It emerges from the interviews carried out that the fact that the man who pays the “Chadji” for a girl can decide to marry her before the age of majority; exposes the latter to early and often unwanted sexual relations; because nothing obliges the man to wait for the girl to finish her studies or her apprenticeship.

According to the report of a Research Monitoring Agent (AS), in the locality of Gando (Oti Sud1), “A 14-year-old girl, a 4th grade student, was given in marriage to a young rich breeder aged 28 years old who got her pregnant and fled with her, for fear of being arrested and fined”

The links of Sikpen/Okpenkpen/Lipikpen/Opokpen (the exchange) with early pregnancies

This appears from the interviews carried out that for the parent who gave birth to more boys than girls. This exchange is considered a loan. Whoever receives girls today to give them in marriage to his boys will have to repay them through his granddaughters or the daughters of a member of his family. In this sense, it constitutes a “debt to be repaid”. Any girl born into the “indebted” family already has a guaranteed husband in the other family whether she likes it or not. This situation forces girls to enter into unions very early, which often leads to early pregnancy. A member of the multi-sectoral framework states the following:

Sometimes, some parents, as part of the exchange, push their daughters to marry early; They agree to give their daughter while waiting for the other family to honor their commitment. Once married, the teenager discovers a new life at home for which she is not prepared. Under these conditions, the young married girl becomes a mother early with the consequences that can result.

(Extract from the comments of an FGD member of the multisectoral framework; Oti Sud 1).

A Research Monitoring Agent reports the following in his supervision area: “A 17-year-old student in 3rd grade was given in exchange to a 51-year-old Farmer as a wife in Kangounou / Oti Sud 2.” The case is being followed by the justice system in Mango (the prefectural capital).

In view of the above, we can conclude that the “Exchange” practice can be done at any age, which constitutes an open path to early pregnancies.

How do the traditional socio-cultural practices exposed above, obeying certain social norms, leading adolescent girls to non-consensual sexual relations, constitute a violation of their rights?

Traditional socio-cultural practices and the violation of the rights of young adolescents

Chadji (the private dowry)

Chadji gives the right to the husband who pays him to take the girl in marriage before the age of majority and to make her his wife, often, against her

will. At home, the “adolescent woman” is exposed to all kinds of violence including forced sexual relations.

A religious leader, member of the CM, declared this:

From the start, even the girl is not comfortable since the sexual intercourse is forced; it is not of his will. She is hit and told clearly “I paid; I’m going to do with you what I want.” Sometimes we send the girl very small because we say to ourselves if she grows up, we can’t manage her. And upon arrival at home, during sexual intercourse, there are vaginal tears and there is no treatment and subsequently there are complications. If she is pregnant, it is a miscarriage because the body is not ready to support a pregnancy until full term (...). This slows down the development of the locality too much; both for girls and boys. Because when we take the side of health, we cannot provide for health care. When you are bought as an object, whether you are the husband or the daughter, each time there are problems. And a home in which there are problems, there is no happiness, no peace; even the education of children is also violated?

Religious leader of the CM; 41 years; savannah region

The remarks recounted in the verbatim above make it clear that the “Chadji” practice, far from contributing to the well-being of adolescent girls, violates several of their rights, notably the right to decide about one’s body (Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Man (UDHR, Article 1), Rights No. 2 and 8 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The exchange

A form of violence that this rite exercises on the adolescent girl results in the failure to respect the girl’s legal age because families often base themselves solely on the observation of her physical characteristics. The young girl exchanged, whatever her age, sees herself obliged to endure everything (sexual relations, her husband’s demands, etc.) without reacting.

This is an aspect of the violation of the rights of the young girl to freely choose her spouse and sometimes leads some girls to suicide. According to informants, the exchange is considered a purchase by the teenager. This has

serious consequences on the health and psychology of the young girl. In this sense, one interviewee declared:

The consequence is that in the case of exchange, when the daughter becomes pregnant, she is neglected by the husband; caning here, bullying there; even when she is ill, it is none of his business. Some girls in these situations are traumatized; but they are forced to endure. This means that some girls are forced to give birth at home and often have complications because the girl does not have money to go to the hospital and she risks losing her life. Sometimes the wife manages to go to the hospital and when the products are prescribed for her, the husband does not pay for them. They have nothing to say because we must respect the parents’ decision.

(Extract from an FG interview with young people.; OTI SUD 2)

According to our informants, it sometimes happens that certain adolescent girls try to oppose and refuse this imposed marriage. In these cases, they are forced to follow ceremonies/ritual practices in convents for a period of time (3 to 6 months) where advice is given to followers by priestesses to better prepare them psychologically to accept this union. Referring to one of these cases, a member of the multisectoral framework expressed the following:

“Almost every day at the gendarmerie, there are regular cases of Okpenkpen (Exchange). Especially in the case where the girl does not consent, she comes to report. We punish perpetrators severely in order to deter potential perpetrators. These exchanges of girls by families lead to school dropouts, running away and sometimes suicides. »

Comments from a Gendarme, member of the multi-sectoral framework.

In light of the various comments made by our informants, we can deduce that “The Exchange” contains some seeds of sexual, physical, psychological violence, etc. towards adolescent girls in the Savanes Region.

Discussion

It appears from the above results that the practice of the “special dowry” that is the “Chadji” favours the early entry of young girls into relationships and

exposes them to pregnancies, as underlined by Leevy Frivet². Indeed, this early marriage is an obligatory union because the girl married too young is forced to accept the union and ends up carrying pregnancies early. It is therefore an “open door” to sexual activity and the risk of pregnancy⁷. This situation is similar to the case of Mali where Jacky Bouju emphasizes that “*Marriage is arranged by the parents and the young girl does not have the right to choose her husband: the woman only has value in marriage*”⁸. It is accepted that young people often do not have enough experience to make good choices regarding life as a couple and that unions were family arrangements; and even today, parents still have a say in the unions of their children.

In a national research carried out by the Demographic Research Unit of the University of Lomé (URD-UL) in 2002 it appears that in Togo in 22% of cases, the girls' spouses are chosen by the parents. Furthermore, it was noted that it is in the savannah region that spouses are most chosen by parents (54%)⁹. However, with the practice of *Chadji* (this particular dowry) the adolescent girl, forced to marry, rarely has a say on the moment of conception of pregnancies and sometimes even their frequency, which goes against certain legal provisions ratified by Togo, notably article 10; paragraph 2 of the UDHR which stipulates that marriage can only be concluded with the free and full consent of the future spouses and 2 of the 4 development priorities of the UNICEF action plan which are i) Combating child marriage (Art. 47); ii) Promote adolescent health with attention to gender specificities¹⁰. A marriage celebrated without the consent of the girl is therefore a triple form of violence perpetrated against her (forced marriage, health problem, possible pregnancy).

The practice of “*Exchange*” does not take into account the real age of the girl before sending her in marriage. This way of proceeding, sometimes based only on the observation of the physical characteristics of the girl, which is not a conclusive element of maturity, constitutes an violation of the rights of the girl to express herself and to be heard on the questions that concern her, violence and abuse (violation of law No. 7; CIDE).

Whether within the framework of “*Chadji*” or the “*Exchange*”, the UNFPA¹² noted in a report that “... *the pregnant adolescent who, following pressure or constraints, interrupts her studies, is denied her right to education. Likewise, from a*

human rights point of view, teenage pregnancy, regardless of the circumstances or reasons, has the effect of violating her rights. Unions imposed by parents are considered forced marriages within the meaning of the definition of the Group for the Abolition and Sexual Mutilation, Forced Marriages and other traditional practices harmful to the health of women and children (GAMS), which stipulates that “*Any union, whether civil, religious or customary, organized by the family, and in which one of the two people (sometimes both), have suffered pressure and/or violence, in order to force them to do so*” is a forced marriage¹¹.

“*Chadji*” and “*Exchange*” are practices that induce early pregnancies, creating situations that deprive adolescents of opportunities to exercise their rights to education, health and autonomy guaranteed by international treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNFPA notes that when a girl is deprived of her fundamental rights, such as the right to education, she is more exposed to the risk of pregnancy¹².

In many traditional African societies, including those in our study, the honor of the family in matters of marriage or the union of their daughters rests on the virginity of the latter before the celebration of the union. Those who are pregnant outside of marriage are sometimes victims of ridicule and may be rejected by their families. Also, some families prefer to get ahead of events by marrying off their daughters early to avoid shame and dishonor. The two practices “*Chadji*” and “*Exchange*” also fit into this framework; only they go against certain legal arsenals ratified by Togo.

For the sake of summary, it appears that of the 12 children's rights listed, more than half are violated by the traditional socio-cultural practices discussed in this article, as shown in Table 3.

Conclusion

This article has shown that certain traditional socio-cultural practices which influence the root causes of the occurrence of teenage pregnancies constitute a violation of their rights. Indeed, the results reveal that these practices which are still prevalent in the localities concerned, and which exert pressure on adolescent girls, are also the results of violations of many girls' rights, such as the rights of access to education, health information, physical and moral integrity, sexual and reproductive rights, economic

rights, etc. These violations of the rights of adolescent girls have many negative consequences on their health and well-being. Investments in human capital are essential to protect these rights that enable adolescent girls to realize their full potential. It is the responsibility of public authorities and local and community authorities to protect the rights of adolescent girls and to comply with treaties and instruments signed and/or ratified by the country relating to human rights, by raising awareness on the consequences of teenage pregnancies, the harms of early marriages, the redefinition of the age of entry into first union for girls, because the areas of the study constitute places where there are still traditions where a teenage girl is given by force to a man with the active or passive contribution of parents and families who see no inconvenience.

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