

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Child marriages in Senegal: Qualitative study on the perceptions of adolescents in Kaolack and Gossas

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Abstract

An estimated 650 million girls worldwide are married before their 18th birthday. The phenomenon is recurrent in sub-Saharan Africa with a prevalence of 18% and particularly in Senegal where one in three girls is married before the age of 18, i.e. a prevalence of 31%. Despite the legislative and legal arsenals, the laws on the legal age of marriage are not respected. The general objective of this study is to document the way in which gender norms define and influence the perceptions of adolescents in Gossas and Kaolack on child marriages and to collect possible solutions proposed to prevent/reduce the practice. We used qualitative data collected in the two study sites. These were individual interviews with adolescents aged 10-19 (n=30) and focus groups (n=8) with the same target. The interviews were conducted in Wolof and transcribed into French then coded using Dedoose software. The results are presented for each age group and each gender then triangulated in order to highlight similarities and divergences according to the different perspectives. The results show that child marriages are rooted in patriarchal social and cultural norms, while reflecting gender inequalities. Thus, adolescents' arguments regarding the causes of child marriage align with those described in the literature on gender norms. Most adolescents cited poverty, tradition, fear of early pregnancy, and concern to preserve the girl's honor as the main factors contributing to the persistence of child marriages. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [8s]: 137-144).

Keywords: Gender norms; child marriage; adolescents; Senegal

Résumé

On estime à 650 millions le nombre de filles mariées dans le monde avant leur 18e anniversaire. Le phénomène est récurrent en Afrique subsaharienne avec une prévalence de 18% et particulièrement au Sénégal où, une fille sur trois est mariée avant l'âge de 18 ans, soit une prévalence de 31%. Malgré l'arsenal juridique législatif, les lois sur l'âge légal du mariage ne sont pas respectées. L'objectif général de cette étude est de documenter la manière dont les normes de genre définissent et influencent les perceptions des adolescent(e)s de Gossas et de Kaolack sur les mariages d'enfants et de recueillir les pistes de solutions proposées pour prévenir/réduire la pratique. Nous avons utilisé les données qualitatives collectées dans les deux sites de l'étude. Il s'agit d'entretiens individuels avec des adolescent(e)s de 10-19 ans (n=30) et de groupes de discussion (n=8) avec la même cible. Les entretiens ont été conduits en wolof et transcrits en Français puis codés à l'aide du logiciel Dedoose. Les résultats sont présentés pour chaque groupe d'âge et chaque sexe puis triangulés afin de ressortir les similarités et divergences selon les différentes perspectives. Les résultats montrent que les mariages d'enfants sont ancrés dans des normes sociales et culturelles patriarcales, tout en reflétant les inégalités de genre. Ainsi, les arguments des adolescent(e)s par rapport aux causes des mariages d'enfants s'alignent avec celles décrites dans la littérature sur les normes de genre. La plupart des adolescent(e)s ont évoqué la pauvreté, la tradition, la peur d'une grossesse précoce, le souci de préserver l'honneur de la fille comme étant les principaux facteurs contribuant à la persistance des mariages d'enfants. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [8s]: 137-144).

Mots-clés: Normes de genre; mariage d'enfants; adolescents; Sénégal

Introduction

Despite international conventions, gender-based violence, gender inequalities and child marriage (CM) continue to persist in many countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. An estimated 650 million girls worldwide are married before

their 18th birthday. CM constitutes a violation and denial of girls' rights and is recognized internationally as one of the most harmful forms of gender-based violence (GBV) because it can lead to physical and psychological sexual abuse and impact the future well-being of girls. The phenomenon is recurrent in sub-Saharan Africa

with a prevalence of 18%¹. West and Central Africa have the highest rates of CM in the world, led by Niger (76%), Chad (67%) and Nigeria 43%².

Due to the high prevalence rate of 31%, Senegal signed most of the international agreements and conventions to prevent the practice. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW³), Maputo Protocol⁴; African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child⁵, among others). The country also launched the African Union Campaign Against Child Marriage⁶ in 2016 as well as the first African Summit on Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage⁷ in Dakar in 2019. Additionally, the country also established several Comprehensive policy initiatives and strategies aimed at promoting children's rights and ending CM in line with Goal 5.3 on the elimination of all harmful practices against girls. Despite the legislative and legal arsenals, the laws on the legal age of marriage are not respected. In the Family Code, the legal age of marriage for girls is set at 16 years. However, this disposition coexists with social and cultural norms that help perpetuate CM; which remains a practice deeply rooted in society and traditions.

Few studies have examined the realities/norms and social practices that promote CM and none has considered adolescents' perceptions of the practice. This study is intended to contribute to a better understanding of gender inequalities linked to CM, paving the way for the implementation of more effective interventions and the design of more rigorous policies to eliminate or prevent the practice. The objective of this study is to document the way in which gender norms define and influence the perception of adolescents in Gossas and Kaolack on CM.

Theoretical framework

We used Bronfenbrenner's⁸ developmental theory to explore how gender norms influence perceptions about CM. The theory explains the interdependence of different levels of the socio-ecological system and their influence on the development of people. We applied this framework with the new adaptation of Heise⁹ which includes social and gender norms. According to Cislighi and Heise¹⁰, social and gender norms are in the inner circle of the ecological model and they exist within the social system in which they are

embedded. Consequently, to understand the behavior and physical, psychological, socio-cultural, and economic vulnerability of adolescents, it is important to take into account the socio-cultural context in which they evolve. This includes the place that this context gives to the reproductive health of adolescents. The model⁸ thus looks at the multiple layers of the environment and determines the influence of each layer on the development and behavior of the adolescent. This adapted framework takes into account global, social, community and local factors as well as family factors that significantly influence the development and well-being of adolescents. The model thus helps to explain the problems linked to CM among Senegalese adolescents. We conceptualise that the socialization to which adolescents are subjected constitutes the source of their vulnerabilities, and consequently, of the violence they suffer, particularly CM.

Methods

Study site

The study was carried out in the commune of Kaolack and that of Gossas (see map). These selected cities are crossroads and transit cities which have experienced rapid spatial and demographic development in recent years, favoured in particular by economic activities. In these communities, the matrimonial union is more an exchange between social groups than an alliance between individuals¹¹. Across the region, the prevalence of child marriage is 39% in Kaolack compared to 33% in Fatick¹².

The study adopted a qualitative approach aimed at documenting vulnerability factors and exploring solutions to reduce child marriage. The qualitative data were collected from adolescents in the two study sites. This consisted of individual interviews carried out with adolescents aged 10-19 (n=30) and focus groups (n=8) in the same target population. The selection of adolescents in the two sites was facilitated by members of youth associations, community mobilizers (Badiénou Gokh and peer educators), the Association for the Promotion of Senegalese Women (APROFES), and health actors. Members of youth associations and community mobilizers helped in the selection of adolescents working in youth associations and those outside the associations, while APROFES

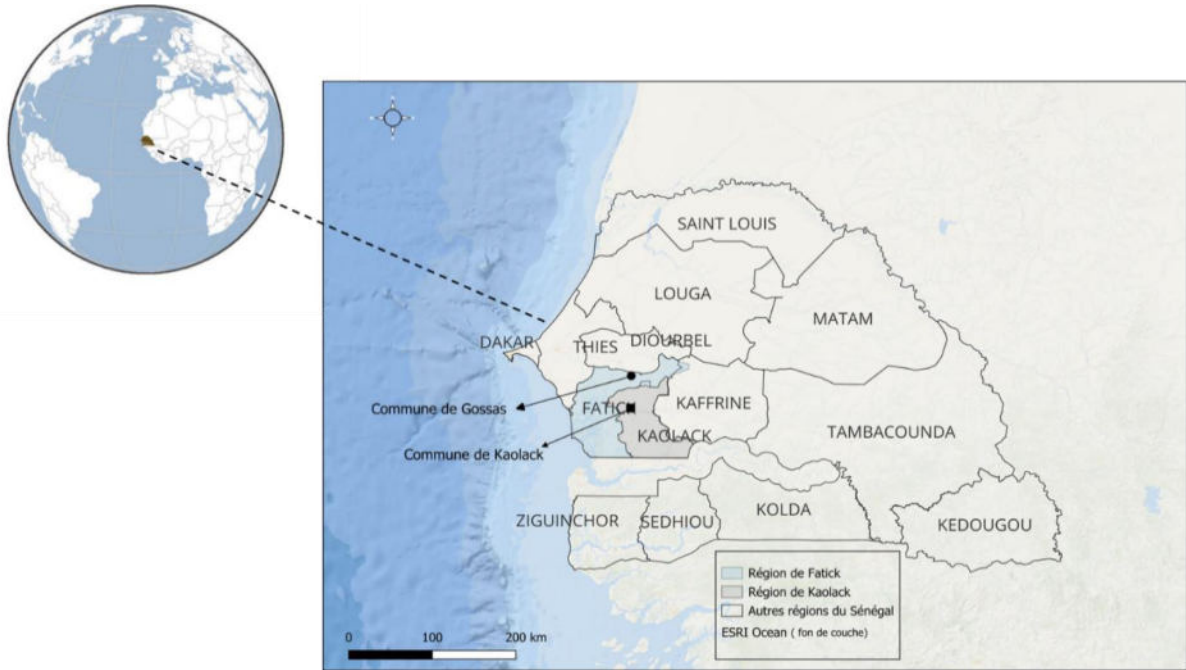


Figure 1: Map of study sites

and health actors facilitated the selection of adolescents having been victims of CM.

In Kaolack, individual interviews were carried out with 4 boys and 11 girls aged between 12 and 18 years old. In Gossas, the individual interviews were conducted with 6 boys and 9 girls aged between 14 and 18 years old. In each site, four discussion groups were conducted with adolescents aged 10-14, adolescents aged 15-19, and adolescent members of youth associations.

The interviews were conducted in Wolof and recorded on dictaphones. The recordings were subsequently transcribed into French. Coding was carried out using Dedoose software¹³. The analyses were carried out using a deductive/inductive approach. The deductive approach allowed the application of Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem model⁸ while the inductive approach, by favouring the use of raw data, facilitated the exploration of individual experiences and specific socio-cultural contexts linked to CM. The study protocol received approval from the National Ethics Committee for Health Research (CNER; SEN21/105).

Results

Perceptions of the causes of child marriage

The results of the study show that CM are anchored in patriarchal social and cultural norms, while

constituting a manifestation of gender inequalities. Most adolescents cited poverty, tradition, fear of early pregnancy, and concern to preserve the girl's honor as the main factors contributing to the persistence of CM. Adolescents aged 10-14 as well as those aged 15-19 share the opinion that poverty is the basis of CM. Boys and girls aged 10-14 placed more emphasis on financial motivations. A 12-year-old boy relates:

“There are some parents, it’s because of the money that they give their daughter in marriage.”

Another 18-year-old teenager confirms the influence of the parents’ economic situation in CM’s decisions:

“For me, the main cause remains parental poverty because often, some parents push their children into marriage because they do not have the means to provide for their needs.”

Apart from poverty, participants highlighted other factors linked to social norms relating to sexuality and reproduction. Thus, tradition and family honor are factors that encourage CM because some families may perceive this practice as a way of ensuring that their daughters remain virgins until marriage. Failure to respect these social norms is perceived by parents as an attack on the family's

honor. Thus, adolescents aged 15-19 are well imbued with these norms and believe that CM helps prevent pregnancies outside of marriage and avoid shame in the family. According to them, marriage can “save” the girl from temptations.

A male teenager explains it in these terms:

“For me it’s early but it’s necessary because if parents don’t do it, they won’t get what they need from their daughter. If they can’t control her, if she doesn’t obey them, doesn’t listen to them and walks in the street until late, it can cause other problems.”

Some girls aged 15-19 justified the practice of early marriage. According to them, marriage is practiced to avoid early/out-of-wedlock sexuality among girls. This is evidenced by these comments from an 18-year-old girl:

“If the young girl does as she pleases, the parents give her in marriage before she contracts a pregnancy [out of wedlock], because it is a dishonour for a family for their daughter to lose her virginity before to marry ”.

These opinions were shared by adolescents aged 10-14, particularly girls. A 14-year-old girl reinforces this opinion by pointing out the sexual precocity of children:

“It may be due to prevention, they may give their daughter out in early marriage to prevent her from becoming pregnant believing that marriage remains the only solution. Often some girls are physically precocious. I think parents are just doing their duty because giving your daughter in marriage is a source of pride for a family.”

Despite having similar opinions on the causes of CM, adolescents aged 10-14 just like those aged 15-19 do not seem to want to conform to this social norm. Asked if they were ready for marriage, they were unanimous in wanting to postpone their entry into a union until they obtained a diploma or a “good” job. Girls aged 10-14 are adamant on this subject, they want to finish their studies before thinking about marriage. They are aware of the importance of being “autonomous” in relation to their future husband. Boys aged 10-14 also feel that it is too early to think about marriage at their age. Similarly, boys and girls aged 15-19 are of the opinion that they are not ready for marriage

because they are “too young”, “not of age” or want to “finish their studies” and have a financial base.

These findings show that CM is driven by multiple, interrelated factors, all reinforced by unequal gender norms. These social gender norms are often the basis of parents' decisions to marry off their daughters at an early age with all the risks involved.

Parental responsibilities in child marriages

Organized around gendered social roles, the traditional family in Senegal is based on a patriarchal structure, the power of elders and the supremacy of men over women. Therefore, women are particularly likely to lack autonomy in the decision-making process, particularly regarding marriage. The father's decision-making power over the life of the family and especially the children largely dominate that of the mother.

The responsibility inherent in patriarchal power is fully recognized by adolescents aged 10-14. Boys aged 10-14 postulate that the father is primarily responsible to CM because authority rests with him.

“With us, the mother does not have this authority, it falls to the father.” (A boy in the Focus group Adolescents 10-14 years old)

The same opinion was repeated among girls aged 10-14: the father is responsible for the family while the mother plays a secondary role in decision-making relating to CM. The daughters add, however, that the mother may have a little more deterrent power because she can “negotiate” with the father to dissuade him from entering into a marriage. A 14-year-old girl thinks that:

“If the mother sees that her daughter is a minor, she can negotiate with the father”

For their part, most adolescents aged 15-19 also attribute responsibility to the patriarchal power which embodies the decision-maker. According to boys aged 15-19, the father is responsible when it comes to CM. They deplore the behavior of parents who “get rid of their daughter” because of money. They confirm that the mother does not have enough decision-making power to oppose her husband because she “must follow the father’s directives”. This opinion is shared by girls aged 15-19; This is evidenced by these words:

“Fathers have the greatest responsibility because they have the last word. Even if the mother is against this decision, her refusal cannot have any impact....” (A girl in the Focus group Adolescents 15-19 years old)

However, some girls aged 15-19 put forward factors that could justify the father's position, in particular family ties with the future son-in-law. A 16-year-old girl confides:

“Parents rely on cousin ties to give their daughter in marriage.”

However, other girls blame the mothers who sometimes influence the fathers' decision to seal the marriage. This is well illustrated by the words of a 17-year-old girl:

“Most of the time it is the mother who has the greatest responsibility. If a girl wants to get married, she first talks to her mom, and the mom talks to her dad. Most of the time, if the mom agrees, so does the dad.”

These statements confirm the perceptions of adolescents regarding patriarchal norms. These standards are integrated into the family code in Senegal, giving fathers primary authority over children and control over decision-making.

Solutions recommended against child marriage

After having narrating the causes of CM and located the responsibilities, the adolescents formulated several strategies and solutions aimed at preventing or even fighting against this practice. For boys aged 10-14, the solution to CM involves meetings and direct discussions with parents. Girls aged 10-14 suggest teen advice centers, advertising campaigns in the media and social networks. Some insisted on raising awareness among parents, talks with parents and adolescents through television and radio. They also suggested conveying messages through television series.

A 12-year-old girl thinks that it is necessary:

“Emphasize awareness at household level and also organize advertising campaigns in media and social networks. Make parents aware of the risks of

early marriage, especially through awareness-raising. We must also discourage people who resort to this practice by imposing a minimum age for marriage.”

Boys aged 15-19 recommend conducting awareness sessions for parents to combat CM, accompanied by discussions on puberty; activities in neighborhoods and at the regional level. To raise awareness among young people, they also suggest circulating awareness messages via social networks (Facebook, WhatsApp) and television series popular with adolescents, especially girls.

“Since young people are more on social networks, I think we can get the information out there. We can do this through the radio or on TV. And even in television series. These are the series that girls follow the most.” (Focus group Adolescents 15-19 years old)

An 18-year-old boy suggests the following:

“We can use telephones or television. We can raise awareness.”

“Let us organize awareness sessions in all neighborhoods or in all regions to allow young people to know their sexuality”

For girls of the same age, awareness must be raised in schools, neighborhoods, via traditional communication channels (radio, TV, theaters to reach parents, tea debates on weekends in neighborhoods) and also social networks. Some adolescents offer to carry out activities in teen advice centers and health structures in order to include adolescents who do not have access to the telephone.

Since parents play a key role in the marriage decision, adolescents suggested focusing on raising parental awareness. Thus, the latter can help reduce cases of CM.

A teenager adds:

“The solution that I find important is raising awareness among parents because the child is only implementing his parents' decision and he is obliged to follow their directives. As the last word goes to parents, we must focus on their awareness and sensitization.” (Focus group Girls 15-19 years old)

In summary, adolescents recommend carrying out awareness campaigns aimed at young people and parents on the harms of CM; to use traditional communication channels as well as social networks to reach as many people as possible.

Discussion

The justification for the practice of CM, according to the perspectives of adolescent girls and boys, finds its basis in poverty as well as social norms marked by a patriarchal predisposition towards girls' sexuality. These young people believe that they do not feel ready to marry at their age, even if, for some, early marriage could prevent some girls from engaging in sexuality or becoming pregnant outside of marriage. In doing so, different solutions have been proposed to counter CM.

The delineation of social and gender roles through hierarchical and patriarchal values generally structures the organization of the family and the relationships between its members, as well as the life course in general¹⁴. Thus, adolescents do not escape this “societal orientation” and their arguments regarding the causes of CM are an illustration of this¹⁵. Poverty and social norms are explanatory factors for CM, according to studies carried out in similar contexts where this practice remains high. For example, in Niger, a study on adolescents aged 12-19 showed that CM is due to tradition and economic reasons¹⁶. In Hoque and Rashid's study¹⁷ on perceptions of CM in Bangladesh, adolescent girls aged 12-18 cited causes similar to those in our study as well as other factors such as the dowry system and the ignorance of parents. Religion is also highlighted in certain studies as being a cause of CM^{18,19}. This religious aspect was, however, not highlighted in the discussions we had with adolescents during this study.

Several studies have described gender norms and beliefs and their important implications for adolescents²⁰⁻²³. CM is both an indicator and a consequence of gender-based discrimination²¹. As highlighted in our results, when girls reach puberty, their sexual awakening can raise fears within their family and community. The fact that they become sexually active, that they become pregnant outside of marriage and/or that they express sexual autonomy, is seen as an attack on the honor of the family, especially in contexts where sexual relations are generally accepted only in the context

of marriage^{22,24}. Sustained family pressure is sometimes put on girls to conform to these standards relating to the preservation of virginity and family honor¹⁴. Marriage thus constitutes a shield against the early introduction of young girls to sexual activity¹⁶. According to Miedema et al.²⁵, shame and honor constitute idioms through which gender-specific socio-economic inequalities are created and maintained.

Honor and perceived threats to family honor, in particular, are key factors in decision-making processes leading to CM. Marriage therefore constitutes a means of overcoming the shame associated with the sexuality of young single women, of protecting family honor and social status.

Patriarchal norms governing sexual and reproductive behavior influence CM²⁶. West African countries share patriarchal traditions and gender hierarchy¹⁴. This justifies the predominance of paternal authority over maternal authority, as emphasized by the majority of adolescents in our study. Ideas about virility and the place of men in society are deeply rooted in sociocultural ideologies that give a preponderant place to men in various African communities. They are considered decision-makers²⁷.

The solutions proposed by adolescents to parents and their peers revolve around raising awareness through different channels. This approach is supported by Walker²⁸ who suggests that prevention interventions focus on educational programs for girls and media awareness projects to inform parents about the dangers of CM. However, most studies suggest working with traditional and religious leaders and raising community awareness of laws and policies²⁰. For the case of Senegal, it is imperative to start by working on revising the laws in order to update them and align them with the policies in force while ensuring their application. This would make it possible to have a more positive impact on communities and their leaders. For the Girls not Bride movement, the theory of change involves four programmatic strategies to combat CM: (i) empower girls, (ii) mobilize families and communities, (iii) provide services, and (iv) establish and enforce laws^{23,29}. These elements, associated with the suggestions of adolescents, must be taken into account in the implementation of effective interventions against CM.

This study focused exclusively on two municipalities (Kaolack and Gossas); which limits the generalization of the results to all rural areas. These areas are often more affected by these practices and are characterized by more deeply rooted gender norms. A study extended to the Kaolack and Fatick regions could confirm or refute the perceptions noted here. Furthermore, a longitudinal study would make it possible to determine whether adolescents' perceptions change as they grow up.

Conclusion

Social norms and practices perpetuating gender inequalities contribute to the persistence of CM. The results of our study reveal that social norms and gender-related obstacles exist at all levels of the ecological environment for Senegalese adolescents. These social and gender norms are an integral part of society and must be taken into account in all projects and programs aimed at promoting the well-being of adolescents. Therefore, there is a need to conduct more qualitative research to better understand adolescents' perceptions. This research should take a holistic perspective, based on the ecological model and the social change framework of gender norms. This approach is fundamental to designing more effective interventions aimed at protecting adolescents; to correct gender imbalances and end CM.

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