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Tackling Early Marriage in Senegal: Understanding drivers and the Collaborative Approaches of Senegal's Ministry of Education in addressing Early Marriage Challenges

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Introduction

Early marriage, happens before a girl reaches the age of majority. Prior to 2020, the minimum legal age of marriage was 16 years for girls and 18 years for boys in Senegal (<https://rutgers.international/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Sub-Saharan-Africa-Senegal-Rutgers-ICPD-interactive.pdf>). Early marriage is not only a violation of human rights (Darnah, Utoyo, & Chamidah, 2023; Kohno et al., 2020; Paul & Mondal, 2021), but also deprives girls of opportunities to continue their education, and attain optimum health (Darnah et al., 2023). Children, particularly girls, are subjected to early marriage due to factors such as poverty, and family honor. For example, some communities in Senegal perceive early marriage to uphold family honor and status within the society. Consequently, early marriage is viewed as a safeguard for girls against the prevailing social norms (Ahonsi et al., 2019).

In Senegal, the highest rate of marriage before the age of 18 years, was observed in Kedougou at 72%, while other regions recorded above 40%. Further, 48 % of women aged 20-24, who got married before the age of 18, had no education, whereas 65 % of women who got married before the age of 18, were in the lowest wealth quintile (UNFPA, 2018). Moreover, early marriage in Senegal is linked to early pregnancy (Guttmacher & IPPF, 2014). For example, the UNFPA dashboard estimates that among women aged 20-24 years, about 21% had given birth before the age of 18 years.

The evidence informing this brief is part of a larger compendium collected by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) in collaboration with the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), during the implementation of the “Improving Girls Education” project. The study aimed to improve education outcomes and the overall well-being of girls in Senegal using a two-phased approach:

PHASE 1

Conduct a comprehensive scoping review by mapping organizations and programs working on girls’ education and engage policy and practice actors to validate the evidence coming out of the scoping review.

PHASE 2

Conduct an exploratory study to ascertain the perspectives of stakeholders, including beneficiaries (both adolescents and their parents), on girls’ education and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programs in Senegal.

Consequences of early marriage

Early marriage has detrimental effects on young mothers and their children, impacting the surrounding community. Moreover, early childbearing exposes teenage mothers to a myriad of health complications in comparison to older mothers (Kabir, Ghosh, & Shawly, 2019; Raj et al., 2019). Furthermore, the effects of child marriage are intergenerational; children born to teenage mothers are highly likely of experience similar adverse health effects as their mothers (Hofferth & Hayes, 1987; Hofferth, Hayes, & Council, 1987) (Hofferth, S. L., Hayes, C. D., & National Research Council. 1987; Hofferth, S. L., & Hayes, C. D. 1987). For instance, a child of a teenage mother has twice the likelihood of dying than those children born to slightly older mothers (Harron et al., 2020). Child marriage exacerbates negative health consequences, including the risk of compromised sexual, reproductive, and maternal health, heightened risk of



depression, and suicide (Gage, 2013; Raj et al., 2010), and increased likelihood of experiencing intimate partner violence (Gage, 2013). Moreover, early marriage leads to decreased social and physical mobility, reduced autonomy and diminished decision-making power for girls in their household and communities (Delprato et al., 2015; Talukder et al., 2020).

Early marriage, honor, and shame

Shame is a deeply interpersonal phenomenon related to the development of identity and intersecting with class, gender, individuality, and race (Kuzniar, 2009). Moreover, shame depends on social recognition and vulnerability to social exclusion (Murray, 2016). On the other hand, honor is the corresponding item to shame, which infers the public recognition of an individual's social standing, which is either gained or obtained from being a family member (Moxnes, 1993). In the same way it is acquired, it can be eventually lost.

Shame makes one submissive to appease "others" deemed powerful and in the process, selectively allows the expressions of emotions depending on one's place in the social hierarchy (Power, Cole, & Fredrickson, 2011). Honor and the subsequent threat to family honor led to decisions that encourage early marriage (Morgan, 2016). For instance, in some contexts, having unmarried daughters poses a risk to the family's honor. This exacerbates the family pressure to marry daughters off early. The likelihood of early marriage is increased if there is a possibility of girls engaging in premarital sex—whether forced or consensual (Alston et al., 2014; Miedema et al., 2020). Early marriage is perceived as a protective measure for girls and families, enhancing social standing and potential economic benefits for households.

Connecting early marriage, family honor, and shame

Study participants, including parents and adolescents, reinforced the connection between early marriage and early pregnancy. In some instances, early marriage precedes early pregnancy and vice versa. Teenage pregnancy, in some cases, influenced parents' decision to give girls away in marriage to potential husbands. These occurrences were common in the region of Sedhiou where, up to seven girls would withdraw from school at the end of each school year due to pregnancy. An adolescent girl from Sedhiou was keen to observe that there **"are classes [where] girls get pregnant before the end of the school year and [do not] continue their studies...parents give them away in marriage..."** before they can continue their studies.

The awareness that early marriage is harmful to adolescent girls was acknowledged by both girls and their parents. However, the choice to stay in or leave school was often not depended on them, but rather on their parents. Parents took the initiative to marry off girls at an early age, often after completing primary school and against their will. Consequently, these girls did not advance to the secondary level. Parents thought that marrying off their daughters early protected girls from undesired pregnancies.

“When the girls reach the last grade of primary school and their bodies develop, parents propose marriage, and they flee home to go and settle somewhere else.” **(IDI, Adolescent Girl, Ziguinchor).**

Parental willingness and urgency to marry off their daughters early was driven by their perception that this was a coping strategy to keep them away from engaging in early sexual activity. A male parent from Ziguinchor said,

“Some parents do not agree to let their children continue their studies until they succeed, for them the best thing would be to give their daughters into marriage as soon as they reach a certain age, before they will be perverted by the boys...this leads to forced marriage, without the girl’s consent.”

The urgency for parents to marry their daughters early was also driven by the fear of pregnancy, due to the shame that early pregnancy brings to certain families and communities. A program actor said,

“The desire of their parents to prevent an unwanted pregnancy leads them to give them [their daughters] into marriage...to avoid the shame of ending up with an unwanted pregnancy.”

Another reason for parents encouraging their daughters to get married was driven by the parents’ belief that girls’ education is not beneficial as they would end up married anyway. This parent declared,

“Their parents ask them to drop out on the pretext that girls’ education is not sustainable and that sooner or later they will end up in the kitchen in their homes. Likewise, if they don’t have an educated person in the neighborhood, no one will encourage them to study...”



In conclusion, even though some communities in Senegal value early marriage to avoid unwanted pregnancies, shame, and thereby reclaim family honor, program actors in this region are collectively rallying together to fight this vice. For instance, the program actors and education stakeholders have called for instituting relevant local programs in areas where rates of early marriage remain high.

More importantly, is the need for Senegal to be more effective in application of laws to eliminate early pregnancy, child marriages, and excision, beyond being a signatory to global and regional treaties.

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