

Child marriage and related risk factors in The Gambia: a cross-sectional study



**MSc. Global Public Health
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Abstract

Background. The persistently high rates of marriage below the age of 18 years are a global health concern. Early marriage, also called child marriage or even girl child marriage, disproportionately affects girls and is considered to be a human rights violation by various treaties and conventions. Not only does it curtail girls' opportunities for development, it increases their risks for maternal morbidities and mortalities, and it is also linked to infant morbidities and mortalities as well. Early marriage affects adolescent girls worldwide, but evidence shows that it is more widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in poor and rural settings. In The Gambia, although early marriage prevalence declined significantly over the past 20 years, the current rate of 23% among 20 - 24 years old women is still higher than the world estimate. If current trends continue, it is unlikely that the Sustainable Development Goal Target 5.3, which calls for the elimination of child marriage practices by the year 2030, will be met.

Aims and Objectives. This study aims to assess the individual-level factors of adolescent girls and their parents that are associated with child marriage in rural parts of The Gambia. The specific objective is to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of adolescent girls as well as the factors associated with parents' decisions to marry off their daughters before they reach 18 years.

Methods. The study design is a cross-sectional household survey of 181 female adolescents and 288 parents stratified by age and ethnicity and conducted in 24 communities in the Lower Baddibu district of the North Bank region of The Gambia. Households and respondents were selected by systematic and convenience sampling methods. Data was collected using a structured survey questionnaire, and descriptive statistics and multiple logistic regression were used to analyze the data.

Results. This present study found that socio-cultural identities, such as religion and ethnic group, education status of girls, and the size of the families which they hail from are all significant individual-level risk factors that increase girls' odds of early marriage. In addition, parental factors associated with the risk of early marriage for girls also include parents' education level, parents' age at first marriage, as well as their perceptions of the appropriate age at first marriage.

Conclusion. The results of this study are concurrent with previous studies on child marriage practices in sub-Saharan Africa. Socio-cultural identities and other related characteristics reinforce norms and perceptions that perpetuate early marriage. No other studies have explored these

individual-level adolescent and parental factors, and therefore, these findings have important implications for reducing the prevalence of early marriage in The Gambia. Girls must be encouraged to stay in school and participate in activities in order to delay marriage until they reach the minimum age of 18. They must also be empowered to find their voice and to make good choices that will positively affect their future. Community leaders must also be engaged to endorse interventions that will eliminate this practice.

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I'd also like to thank family and friends that have always encouraged and supported my scholastic journey, and I'd especially like to thank them for being patient with me during these past few months.

My pursuit of global health studies was inspired by the life and work of the late Dr. Paul Farmer. I hope to, in some way, honor his memory by contributing to his grand vision of global health equity.

1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale

Child marriage, used interchangeably as early marriage, is a public health challenge that has plagued all global regions; yet prevalence and trends in sub-Saharan Africa have shown how it is relatively more widespread in that world region. The term is more or less defined as any form of union, formal or informal, that involves one party less than 18 years old, and that definition is derived from several treaties and conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, just to name a few. Studies show that girls are disproportionately more affected than their male counterparts, indicating that the practice is perhaps deeply rooted in patriarchy and also a manifestation of inequitable gender norms (Akter et al., 2021; Mobolaji et al., 2020; Parsons et al., 2015). Due to this disproportionate reality, the term child marriage or early marriage has now become gendered and is also often referred to as girl child marriage (Efevbera and Farmer, 2021). In some societies, there is a lower value placed on girls as boys are preferred, and the former often have little or no agency in decisions that affect them and their community (Girls Not Brides, 2019).

There are some debates on what age limits define a child where some opinions differentiate between a child and an adolescent but for the sake of this study, we refer to a child as anyone under the age of 18.

Girl child marriage is a practice that can be blamed on many varied factors including macro-sociocultural as well as micro-individual factors. Various local and international governing bodies across regions have, over the years, been responding to the challenge and seeking to eliminate the practice. The United Nations (U.N.) considers it a harmful practice and a human

rights violation (UNICEF, 2022a), and it is increasingly being recognized and condemned as a roadblock to achieving global health equity, development, and not least, gender equality (Efevbera and Bhabha, 2020).

The Gambia has recorded a significant decline in child marriage rates among women of all ages from 58% over the past 20 years, but even at 30% currently, the rates are still high (Lowe, Joof, and Rojas, 2020). The Gambia is a small country on the west coast of Africa with a land area of roughly 10,689 sq km and a population of about 2.4 million people (The World Bank Data, 2022). The U.N. reports that The Gambia is home to over an absolute number of 224,000 child brides, with 23% of women 20 – 24 years of age having been married before they were at the legal minimum age of 18 years (UNICEF, 2022b); this rate is considerably lower than the country with the highest prevalence in the region at 76% (Niger), yet it is still higher than the world estimate of 19% (ibid). The rate is even more disproportionate when compared to the percentage of men in The Gambia aged 20 - 24 years who were first in a union before the age of 18, which is at 0% (ibid). Nonetheless, it is still worth noting that the percentage of Gambian females aged 20 - 24 years who were first married before 18 declined from about 43% in the year 1995 to about 23% in 2020 (UNICEF, 2022b).

To meet the U.N. Sustainable Development Goal (S.D.G.) Target 5.3, which calls for the elimination of the practice by the year 2030, more efforts need to be done by contextualizing the factors responsible for the perpetuation of early marriage practices in populations where they still occur. Ending girl child marriages is necessary, and it has the potential to contribute to eight of the S.D.Gs., including those addressing poverty, economic growth, access to good health and well-being, inclusive and quality education, and naturally, gender equality (Mobolaji et al., 2020).

1.2. Purpose

Similar to a lot of settings, the legal minimum age for marriage in The Gambia is also 18 years even though child marriage persists. Parts of rural Gambia are the population of interest in this study since girl child marriage is found to be practiced predominantly among rural dwellers. According to Lowe, Joof, and Rojas (2020), women from poorer rural households usually marry about two years earlier than the women in the urban areas of The Gambia.

Previous studies on child marriage in The Gambia have focused on some of the causes and motives as well as the socio-cultural factors associated with the practice including poverty and lack of meaningful alternatives to marriage (Chant and Touray, 2012; Jouhki and Stark, 2017; Lowe, Joof, and Rojas, 2020). However, to my knowledge, no studies have explored the individual and parental-level risk factors associated with the practice in The Gambia. Thus, the expected outcome of this research is to identify these factors and to add to the findings on overall risk factors associated with early marriage practices among girls in rural Gambia. The findings from this study will further enhance intervention programs and provide program coordinators that are working towards ending this practice with more insights on the issue, as well as enumerate contextual factors that are perpetuating girl child marriages in these settings where they are prevalent.

1.3. Aims and Objectives

This study aims to assess the individual and parental-level factors associated with girl child marriage in The Gambia. This aim will be achieved through the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the socio-demographic characteristics of adolescent girls associated with child marriage.
2. To determine factors associated with parents' decision to marry off their daughters before the legal minimum age.

2. Background

Child marriage is shown to affect both females and males, yet most research and advocacy for this practice is primarily focused on the former due to the disproportionate nature in which it affects the female population and the more adverse consequences it can have on them during their life course (Efevbera and Bhabha, 2020). Even social expectations on the ideal age of marriage between the two sexes differ with the age expectations being earlier for females (ibid). Early marriage exposes girls to overlapping vulnerabilities that also affect their abilities to make life-changing decisions (Parsons et al., 2015; Sagalova et al., 2021a); these vulnerabilities include being young, poor, and under-educated. The practice inevitably denies the girl children their right to the education needed to contribute effectively to their wellbeing and that of their family, as well as undermining their autonomy and the attainment of developmental goals (Avogo and Somefun, 2019; Nguyen and Wodon, 2014). For children who are already enrolled in school, it oftentimes interrupts their education resulting in their dropping out (Hotchkiss et al., 2016). Consequently, dropping out of school excludes them from participating in political and economic ventures. A study found that the risk of dropping out of school for marriage heightens after girls complete primary education (Sekine and Hodgkin, 2017), signifying the interdependent nature of child marriage and education attainment seeing as the former presents as a barrier to school attendance, yet school attendance often delays early union formation (McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Sagalova et al., 2021b).

Furthermore, the practice of child marriage has potential negative health outcomes for girls and their offspring especially because expectations of childbirth usually follow marriage (Avogo and Somefun, 2019; Jones et al., 2020). Children are very much valued so there is usually pressure on new brides to prove their fertility even at a young age. The consequences and health risks affect

both the girl child and her future offspring because in addition to their bodies being underdeveloped and relatively weak, child brides are also less likely to receive proper antenatal care services thereby increasing the chances of maternal and child mortalities and morbidities (Avogo and Somefun, 2019; Efevbera et al., 2017; Hotchkiss et al., 2016; Kohno et al., 2020; Raj and Boehmer, 2013). Findings from a study conducted between 2010 and 2014 using the UNICEF Multiple Indicator Clusters Survey (MICS) program, through cross-sectional surveys across sub-Saharan Africa, revealed that compared with children born to women who married later in life, the odds for off-track development and stunting were 25% and 29%, respectively, for children born to girl child brides (Efevbera et al., 2017). Their babies are more likely to be of low birth weight, preterm, and malnourished (Hotchkiss et al., 2016; Raj, 2010).

A qualitative study in Guinea Conakry revealed that several women recognize health disadvantages that are associated with their early marriage, and these perceived disadvantages include poor sexual and reproductive health, poor psycho-social and mental health and well-being, and intimate partner violence (Efevbera and Farmer, 2021). One of the major health problems associated with early marriage and childbirth among girls includes an obstetric fistula, a medical condition that affects the ability to control urination and defecation due to obstruction of labor. Married adolescent girls are also at heightened risk for other pregnancy-related complications such as pregnancy-induced hypertension and miscarriages. Not only can the practice have a toll on girls' physical and reproductive health, but their overall mental and emotional well-being can also be affected due to their premature debut into sexual activity (Zegeye et al., 2021).

Additionally, these adolescents who are mostly rural dwellers, are less likely to use modern contraception lack of which predisposes them to sexually transmitted illnesses (S.T.I.s), shorter

birth spacings, and higher fertility (Avogo and Somefun, 2019; Raj, 2010; Sagalova et al, 2021a), all of which can potentially reduce women's life expectancy.

2.1. Literature Review

Lokot et al. (2021) refer to child marriage as a “complex practice that is context-dependent, non-linear and shaped by interlocking structural, household-level and interpersonal factors.” The literature on child marriage indeed shows various contextual and nuanced factors associated with the practice, but generally, these factors have been grouped into broader categories including political, societal, cultural, and economic factors (Misunas et al., 2021; Psaki et al., 2021). These broader categories are further manifested across the community, household, and individual levels (Misunas et al., 2021). For this study, we mainly focus on the individual-level characteristics of adolescent girls and the parental factors that foster the practice of child marriage in The Gambia but we also show the influence of societal factors as well.

Evidence from the literature shows that some of the individual-level factors that are associated with perpetuating the practice include the age of the girl and whether menarche has occurred; oftentimes, the onset of a girl's period determines maturity and may indicate ‘readiness’ for marriage (Madut, 2020). Other individual-level factors that have been documented include literacy, level of educational attainment, cultural and religious affiliations reinforced by social norms, and degree of autonomy or agency (Avogo and Somefun, 2019; Bicchieri et al., 2014; Hotchkiss et al., 2016; Kohno et al., 2020; Psaki et al., 2021). Some of the parental level factors also documented in the literature include literacy, education level, employment status, and perceptions of the benefits of early marriage.

The three themes that will be discussed include education, social norms, and agency.

2.1.1. Education

Numerous empirical studies have documented the role of education as a protective factor against child marriage. Education has been linked to increased self-efficacy among adolescent girls and provides an opportunity for their personal and economic development (Raj et al., 2014), and when allowed, it is also associated with delayed marriage; yet child marriage most often interrupts a girl's education while posing adverse health risks including maternal and infant mortality and morbidity (UNICEF, 2021).

Hotchkiss et al. (2016) posit that the timing of marriage and school enrolment decisions are, in fact, interdependent and often made simultaneously, since the likelihood of the two events occurring may be influenced by the same contextual factors. The education gradient has been hypothesized and proven to be a very significant determinant of child marriage practices with higher levels of education corresponding to a lower risk of early union formation and vice versa (Avogo and Somefun, 2019; Envuladu et al., 2016; Hotchkiss et al., 2016; Jain and Kurz, 2007; Zegeye et al., 2021). However, according to Sagalova et al. (2021b), even lower educational levels have some protective effects against early marriage, as it can improve girls' mentality against undesirable social practices even slightly. Educational attainment not only delays marriage but also increases girls' knowledge and self-awareness about reproductive health choices (Zegeye et al., 2021). In addition to the educational attainment of girls, parental education has been shown to have a significant role in preventing early marriages as well. Studies show that girls with educated parents have a lower risk of being married off early with the odds corresponding to the education gradient (Bezie and Addisu, 2019; Envuladu et al., 2016; Mooyaart and Liefbroer, 2016). Children with educated parents are likely to be socialized

differently and more likely to be educated and have career aspirations naturally leading to a delay in marriage (Mooyart and Liefbroer, 2016).

Some reports show that parents are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of education for their girl children and that decisions to marry off their young daughters may not necessarily be due to failure in appreciating the value of education (Jain and Kurz, 2007; Jouhki and Stark, 2017). According to Jouhki and Stark (2017), child marriage practices have changed and thereby allowing an increasing number of Gambian children to attend school. However, poverty which is a significant risk factor for early marriage prevents some families from sending their children to school, extending the problem beyond the micro-individual level to the macro-social and economic levels. Even where education is free, hidden costs and fees in the form of books, uniforms, and other miscellaneous items needed for school attendance may pose as barriers (Jouhki and Stark, 2017). Therefore, marriage is seen as a good alternative when there are no educational or employment opportunities. Families even encourage their girl children to view early marriage as virtuous and as a desirable goal (Kohno et al., 2019). Consequently, in settings where opportunities for continued education or other meaningful alternatives are scarce, parents perceive marriage as the best or perhaps the only viable option for their daughters (Lowe, Joof, and Rojas, 2020; Psaki et al., 2021). Girls themselves may also express interest in marriage, and this is likely due to social norms in favor of marriage (Psaki et al, 2021).

In The Gambia, the median age at first marriage among women between the ages of 25 – 49 years is found to increase with increasing education; the median age for those without education is reported to be 17.7 years while for those with at least a secondary education, it was found to be 22.9 years. (Demographic and Health Survey: The Gambia, 2013).

2.1.2. Social Norms

Quite a bit of the literature on child marriage has essentially documented the role of social norms as an important factor in understanding the practice. Even though social norms are mostly community-level factors, they influence behaviors at the individual level, and the practice of child marriage can be regarded as a cluster of behaviors (Bicchieri et al., 2014). Norms related to gender and sexuality as well as norms related to cultural and religious beliefs can be highly resistant to change, yet they oftentimes determine the fate of girls when it comes to union formation. Social norms also play a significant role in this practice as wide social networks in the community are involved in the decision-making process to marry off young girls (Girls Not Brides, 2019); these social networks may include extended family members, family friends, community heads, and religious leaders, etcetera. The practice then becomes an inter-generational cycle and thus widely regarded as a natural and accepted practice. For instance, girls who were married off early are more likely to have mothers, sisters, and grandmothers who were also married off early (Avogo et al., 2019); once they become accustomed to that as the norm, girls become conditioned to aspire to the same fate.

Due to the informal social rules that present with social norms, gender norms and gendered practices (even though they tend to be discriminatory by curtailing girls' voice and agency) are often beyond questioning especially because they begin early on in life and become part of the life course (Jones et al., 2020). The patriarchal ideology found in some cultures is cited as a historically rooted issue in most of these places where child marriage occurs and influences gender roles as well as decision-making processes; girls are expected to be submissive and accepting of decisions made by their parents (Kohno et al., 2020), especially their fathers. Patriarchy perpetuates gender inequality, and gender inequality is "a cause, result, and an

exacerbating factor of child marriage” (Nabaneh, 2018). Such patriarchal ideology is further reinforced by cultural identities such as tribe, ethnicity, and even religion. Jain and Kurz (2007) report that different religions participate in child marriage and the prevalence among religions depends on the country. Some studies found that Muslim girls were more likely to be married off early (Envuladu et al., 2016; Kohno et al., 2020; Sagalova et al., 2021b). However, Sagalova et al. (2021b) point to some evidence that reveals that the association between Islam and child marriage has more to do with the socio-cultural norms embedded in some of these religious societies and less to do with the religious belief itself. Kohno et al. (2020) also posit that the Islamic religion does not impose marriage on girls if they are not ready, yet “readiness for marriage is a subjective judgment that cannot be easily assessed by others, and as a consequence, child marriage is tolerated most of the time.”

Cultural and religious beliefs may also influence the fear around pre-marital sex as well as pregnancy out of wedlock, thereby encouraging early marriage among girls. Pre-marital sex and pregnancy are considered religious taboo in Muslim societies and therefore parents would rather their girl child experience coitarche only after marriage. In a study conducted in The Gambia and Tanzania, it was discovered that one primary reason for wanting to marry their daughters early was because parents believed the girls were sexually active with men, sometimes through transactional sex motivated by poverty (Jouhki and Stark, 2017). Therefore, to protect their daughters from such perceived threats, marriage may be used as a risk mitigation strategy by parents (Ahonsi et al., 2019; Kohno et al., 2020; Psaki et al., 2021).

Ultimately, social norms shape agency, another important theme in the child marriage discourse that will be discussed below.

2.1.3. Agency

The concept of agency, sometimes referred to as empowerment or autonomy, is a very significant framework when discussing girl child marriage. Klugman et al. (2014) define agency as “the capacity to make decisions about one’s own life and act on them to achieve a desired outcome, free of violence, retribution, or fear.” As already mentioned, social norms shape agency: they can reinforce people’s sensitivities to the social expectations of their community, and they can also limit people’s agency at the individual level (Bicchieri et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2020). In most situations, children’s inherent immaturity predisposes them to a lack of agency, and they are married off only at the discretion of their parents.

Whereas some studies report that girls lack agency in making decisions about marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2019; Envuladu et al., 2016), one study in Niger reports that young girls do have agency and that the decision to get married was a choice they willingly made (WiLDAF, 2017). For some girls, marrying early would appear to be normal since generations before them have indeed normalized the practice, and therefore, they wouldn’t see it as unusual to follow suit. But even though it appears that the choice was theirs, it can be argued that the normative factors and lack of economic opportunities in that society perhaps led to their decision-making regarding marriage, since there may be no other viable alternatives and marriage is perceived as beneficial. Thus, Jones et al. (2020) suggest that girls’ choices especially when it comes to life events like marrying early are illusory rather than real. Most times, girls are married off without their consent just because it is the norm in that society, further proving the point that community-level factors influence individual-level ones when decisions about child marriage are being made.

Interestingly, the use of the term agency is sometimes critiqued in the literature and considered as narrow. In the instance where adolescent girls exercise agency in their choice to

get married, regardless of whether marrying early was the norm or not, would that perhaps be contended as a not ideal? If they still decide to get married despite being educated on the potential harms associated with the practice, do they still have agency? Notably, in the early marriage discourse, almost all campaigns that promote agency do so in terms of girls' agency against early marriage which then disallows for a broader framing for the contrary situation (Horii, 2020; Lokot et al., 2021). Nonetheless, Lokot et al. (2021) posit that agency has to do with "exercising good choices" and being empowered to resist negative forces including early marriages. Agency, in this context, has been framed as resistance, and exercising agency means "they are resisting oppression and not exercising agency relegates these individuals to being powerless, seemingly irrespective of the context surrounding them" (ibid).

2.2. Conceptual framework

According to Bicchieri et al. (2014), there seems to be an abundance of explanations and yet no specific theories to explain the determinants of child marriage since the different explanations are only contextually applicable and relevant; thus, they posit that the many explanations lack theoretical rigor. Notwithstanding, some theories have been identified in the literature and proposed as a guide to understanding the practice of early marriages. These include but are not limited to: the theory of family change which explores the association between socio-cultural factors and the development of one's resultant self, with one's family as the mediator (Kagitcibasi, 1996); the cultural tightness-looseness theory which shows how social norms can impose socio-cultural sanctions on people (Gelfand et al., 2006); and the life course family development perspectives which explain the development of an individual's life course and how one's life outcome is influenced by family experiences (White et al., 2018).

The social norms theory is perhaps more suitable for explaining and understanding early marriage practices in The Gambia as is demonstrated below.

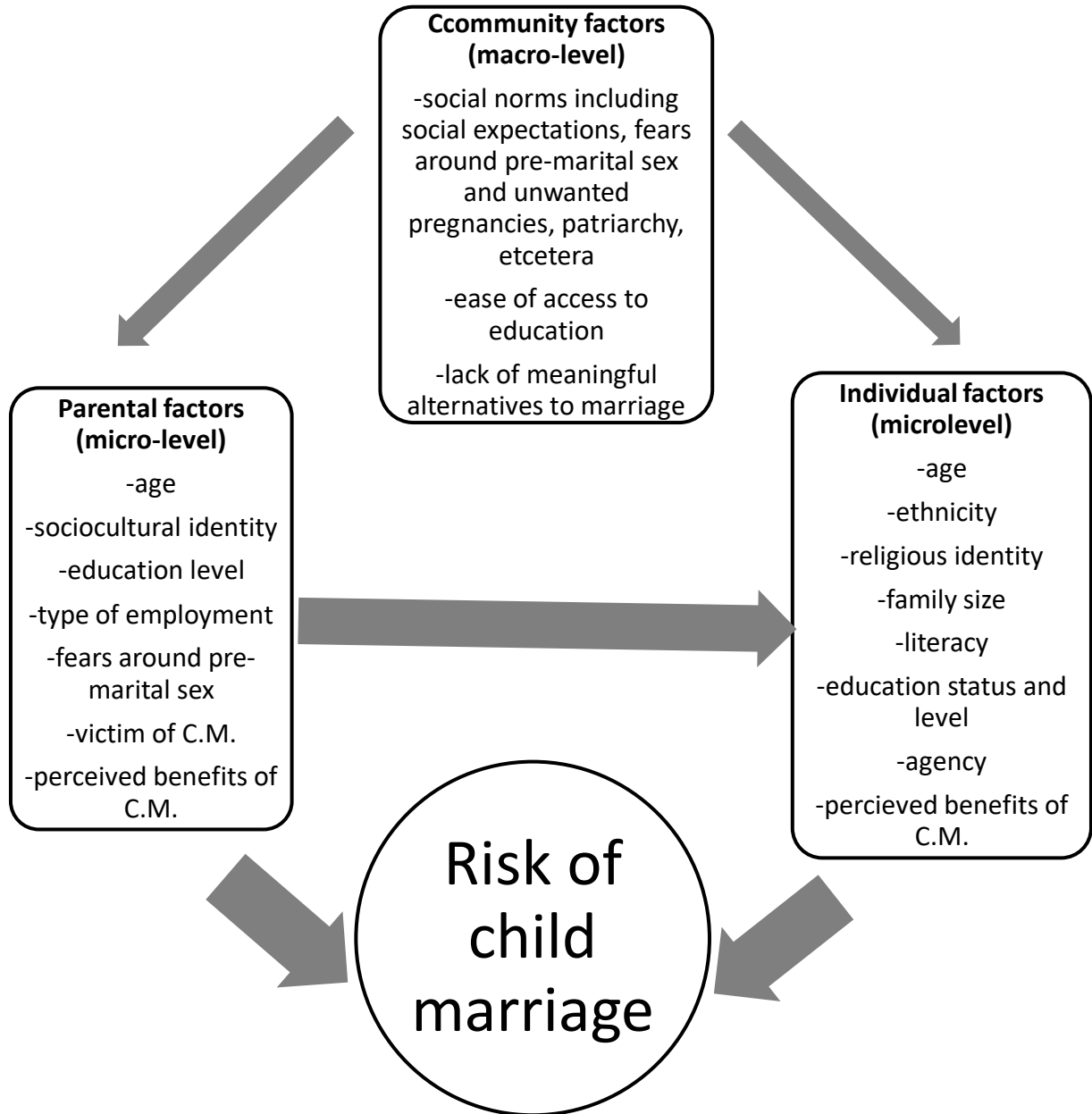


Figure 1. The figure shows the conceptual framework of the study. The study hypothesized that community level factors, including social norms, as well as parental level factors and individual socio-demographic factors of the girl child are all risk factors of child marriage.

2.2.1. Operational definitions of variables used in the conceptual framework

Social norms. These are the informal rules, attitudes, and beliefs that reflect society and become manifested as individual behaviors. The social norms theory can be used to explain how the practice of child marriage is influenced by social expectations manifested in individuals as studies show that when deciding on marriage for their daughters, parents' decisions are influenced by what other parents in the same society are doing and when the other parents have accepted as the right timing of marriage for their daughters (Bicchieri, 2011; Lowe, Joof, and Rojas, 2020). Lowe, Joof, and Rojas (2020) posit that as a framework, the social norms theory captures the perceptions and collective behaviors of individuals which are key and central to the subject of child marriage.

Ethnicity and Religion. These two serve as socio-cultural identities in The Gambia. The Gambia is a multi-ethnic as well as a multi-lingual country; the three main ethnic groups with their eponymous languages are the Mandinka who comprise 34.4% of the population, the Fula (24.1%), and the Wolof (14.8%) (Gambia Bureau of Statistics and ICF, 2021). People that belong to the same ethnic group not only share the same language, but the same traditions, values, and often the same last names as part of their collective identity. The main religious groups are Islam (95.7%) and Christianity (4.2%). Most individuals automatically assume their families' ethnicities and religious beliefs.

Literacy. In this context, literacy can be interpreted as the ability to read and write full sentences. Also in The Gambia, education levels are stratified into primary (from grades 1 through 6), junior secondary (grades 7 through 9), senior secondary (grades 10 through 12), and tertiary levels (post-secondary studies).

Thus, using evidence from existing literature to guide the framework, this study will focus on the role of individual-level factors (of both respondents and their parents) that influence the decision to marry off young girls. Since it has been shown that these micro-factors are not independent of the macro-factors, the conceptual framework in **Figure 1** above highlights how the former is often driven by the latter as will be shown throughout the paper.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study design and setting

This particular study is part of a larger study being conducted by the Society for the Study of Women's Health (S.S.W.H.) in The Gambia on their intervention project titled "Prevention of early marriage in rural Gambia: Testing an intervention." Using a paper-based structured questionnaire, a cross-sectional household survey was conducted and used to collect primary data in order to investigate the characteristics of adolescents and their parents. The study was conducted in 24 rural settlements in the Lower Baddibu district of the North Bank region of The Gambia; there are five regions in The Gambia, and they serve as the first-level administrative units in the country as shown below in **Figure 2** below.

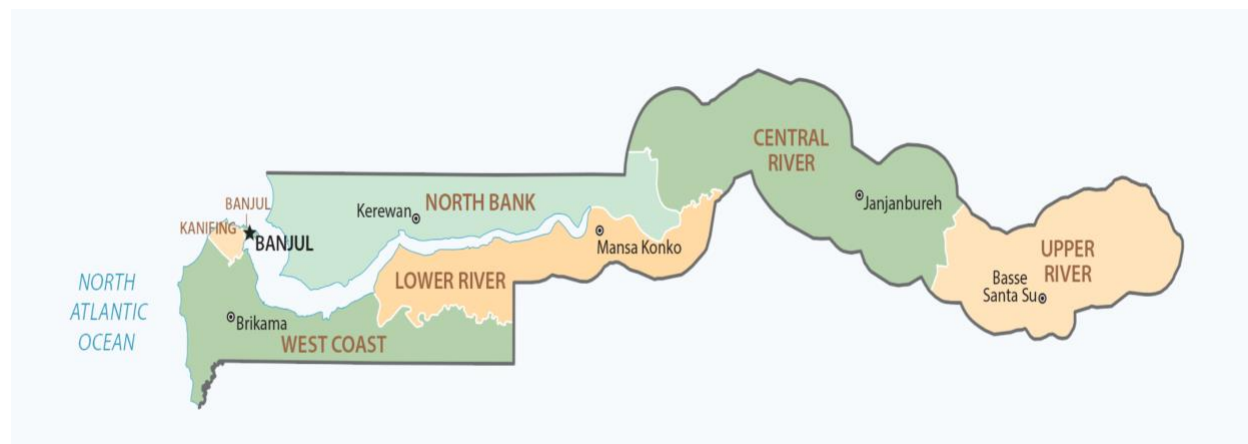


Figure 2. A ‘regions’ map of The Gambia showing the five administrative regions including the North Bank region. Source: [GisGeograpy](#)

The Lower Baddibu district found in the North Bank region is also shown in **Figure 3** below; this district has a population of about 17,961 people with a median age at marriage of 17.3 years, the second lowest median age in the country (Demographic and Health Survey: The Gambia, 2013). The 24 rural settlements that took part in this study are categorized based on ethnicity as those are the main ethnicities that dwell there, as shown in **Table 1**.

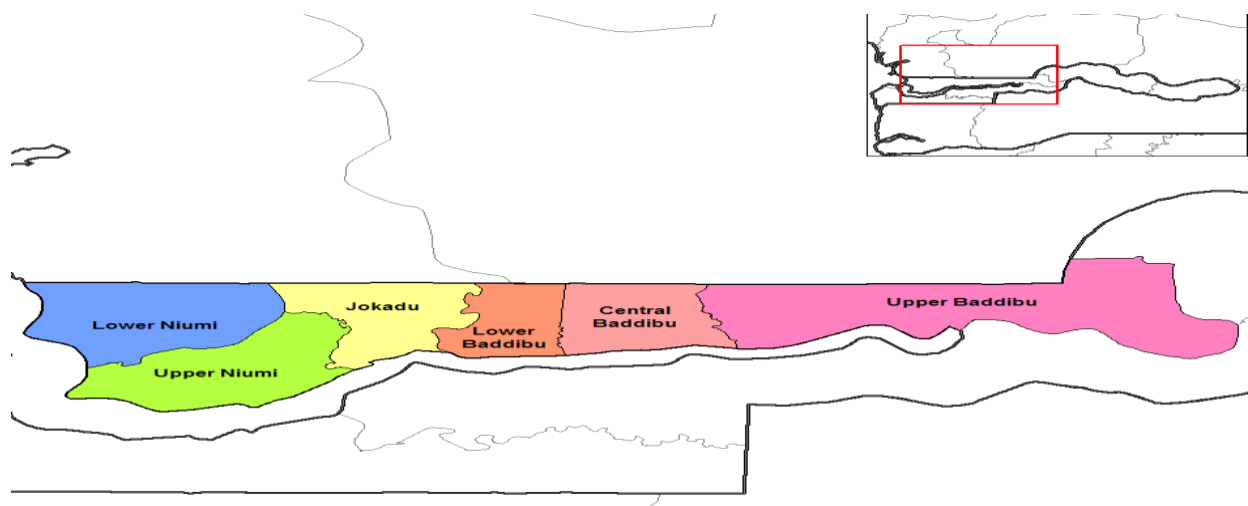


Figure 3. Map of the North Bank region of The Gambia showing the districts including our study site, Lower Baddibu district. Source: [Wikipedia](#)

Table 1. Study sites grouped by ethnicity.

Major ethnic group	Name of settlements
MANDINKA	Kerewan
	Gunjur
	Suwareh Kunda
	Kinteh-Kunda Janneh-ya
	Banni
	Saaba
	Daru Salam
FULA	Tallen Fula
	Choken Fula
	Torro Bah
	Yallal Bah
	Kerr Bannu
	Mbaburr Kunda
	Foday Biran
	Njie Kunda
	Torro Tayam
	Amdalai
WOLLOF	Tallen Wollof
	Taiba (Jebel Satou)
	Njawara
	Tawakaltu
	Panneh Bah
SERER	Samba
	Choken Misera

3.2. Selection and recruitment of study participants

3.2.1 *Cross-sectional surveys.*

The sampling frames for the cross-sectional surveys are drawn from a census frame from The Gambia Bureau of Statistics (2013). The sample size includes 321 adolescent respondents and 531 parents, stratified by age and ethnicity. Samples were collected in two phases; all the settlements were randomly selected and then grouped under the four main ethnic groups of The Gambia (Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, and Serer), and this was determined based on probability proportional to the population size of 10 years and above in that settlement. Age stratification was done for the respondents as follows: a) 10-19; b) 20-39; c) 40+. The estimated proportion of the population of the country that falls into these age groups is 35% for the first age group, 42% for the second age group, and 23% for the third age group (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2013), and these proportions were used to determine the number of interviewees within the age groups.

The second phase included a systematic sampling approach which was used to select every other household in each settlement, and then followed by a convenience sampling method in selecting respondents within those households. A maximum number of two respondents per age group per household were interviewed, and data were collected in each settlement until the required numbers were obtained before moving on to the next settlements.

3.3. Data collection

A Female Adolescent Questionnaire (FAQ) and a Parent/Guardian Questionnaire (both found in the “Appendix” section of this paper) were used to conduct face-to-face interviews for primary data collection. The questionnaires were adapted from a study similar to ours that was

conducted in Ethiopia (Gage, 2009) as well as from the Demographic and Health Survey, The Gambia (2013). The FAQ was used to collect data on independent variables such as age, ethnicity, religion, literacy, and other characteristics pertinent to the objectives of the study. Data was also collected on the outcome variable for both datasets which is the marital status of the adolescent. Since this study was focused on early marriage among female adolescents, only responses from the first age group (10-19) were considered (n= 181) for analysis.

Data collection was similar for the parents; the sample size was 531 respondents but only parents of female respondents were included in this analysis for a total number of 288 parent respondents.

The surveys were pre-tested in settlements with similar characteristics to our study site, and this allowed for revisions before implementation. The face-to-face interviews were conducted by trained data collectors who all possess a thorough command of the main ethnic languages of The Gambia for ease of communication.

3.4. Data management and analysis

Data analysis comprises descriptive analysis and logistic regression analysis. Data were entered using Epi Info and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28. Questionnaires with missing values for a particular response were excluded from analysis for that response only. The SPSS software was used to calculate simple percentages and compare the responses of participants. Odds ratios and p-values have also been calculated. This study considers a p-value of < 0.05 to be statistically significant.

The results of these calculations have been tabulated and are found in the 'Findings' section.



3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for the conduct of this study was already sought and obtained by the Society for the Study of Women's Health (S.S.W.H.) from the Scientific Coordinating Committee and the joint Gambia Government/Medical Research Council (M.R.C.) Research Ethics Committee as part of a larger study addressing early marriage and teenage pregnancy in The Gambia. Therefore, further ethics approval for this present study was unnecessary. Written and verbal informed consent was sought and acquired from all the study participants at the time of data collection. For unmarried minors (under 18 years), informed consent was sought from their parents. For married adolescents, consent was additionally sought from their husbands as it is customary in that setting for husbands to make decisions for their wives.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Descriptive statistics of respondents

4.1.1. *Female adolescents*

The descriptive statistics showing the numbers and percentages of responses are presented in **Table 2**. For their marital status, out of all the respondents, only 12% of the girls are currently or have ever been in a formal union or marriage. Those girls were also in the 16-19 years age category. About 80% of the respondents were above 13 years old, and over 70% belonged to the two major ethnic groups in The Gambia: Mandinka and Fula. Almost all respondents identify as Muslims. Furthermore, only a little over half of the respondents reported that they are literate even though almost 92% reported that they have ever attended school.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of female adolescents aged 10-19 (n=181)

Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age categories (in years)		
10-12	35	19.3
13-15	68	37.6
16-19	78	43.1
Religious identity		
Muslim	180	99.4
Traditional	1	0.6
Ethnicity		
Mandinka	70	38.7
Fula	59	32.6
Wolof	18	9.9
Others *	34	18.8
Marital status		
Currently/Ever married	22	12.2
Never married	159	87.8
Literacy status		
Can read & write	100	56.2
Cannot read & write	78	43.8
Education status		
Ever attended school	96	91.4
Never attended school	9	8.6
Main reason for no longer attending school		
Physical/Mental disability	2	2.0
Needed/Wanted to work	6	5.9
Domestic responsibilities	11	10.8
Poor performance in school	5	4.9
Lack of interest in school	20	19.6
Got married	22	21.6

School too far away	15	14.7
Expelled from school	10	9.8
Poor school quality	2	2.0
Pregnant/Had a baby	2	2.0
Had to care for family	7	6.9

*Note. *others include the Serer, Jola, and Bambara ethnicities but there were not enough observations for those ethnicities individually.*

When asked about the reason why they are no longer attending school, the respondents gave varying answers as shown in **Figure 4** below, but the four main reasons that most of them reported in the survey were due to getting married (21.6%), lack of interest in school (19.6%), the long distance of the school from their place of residence (14.7%) and having to participate in domestic responsibilities (10.8%).

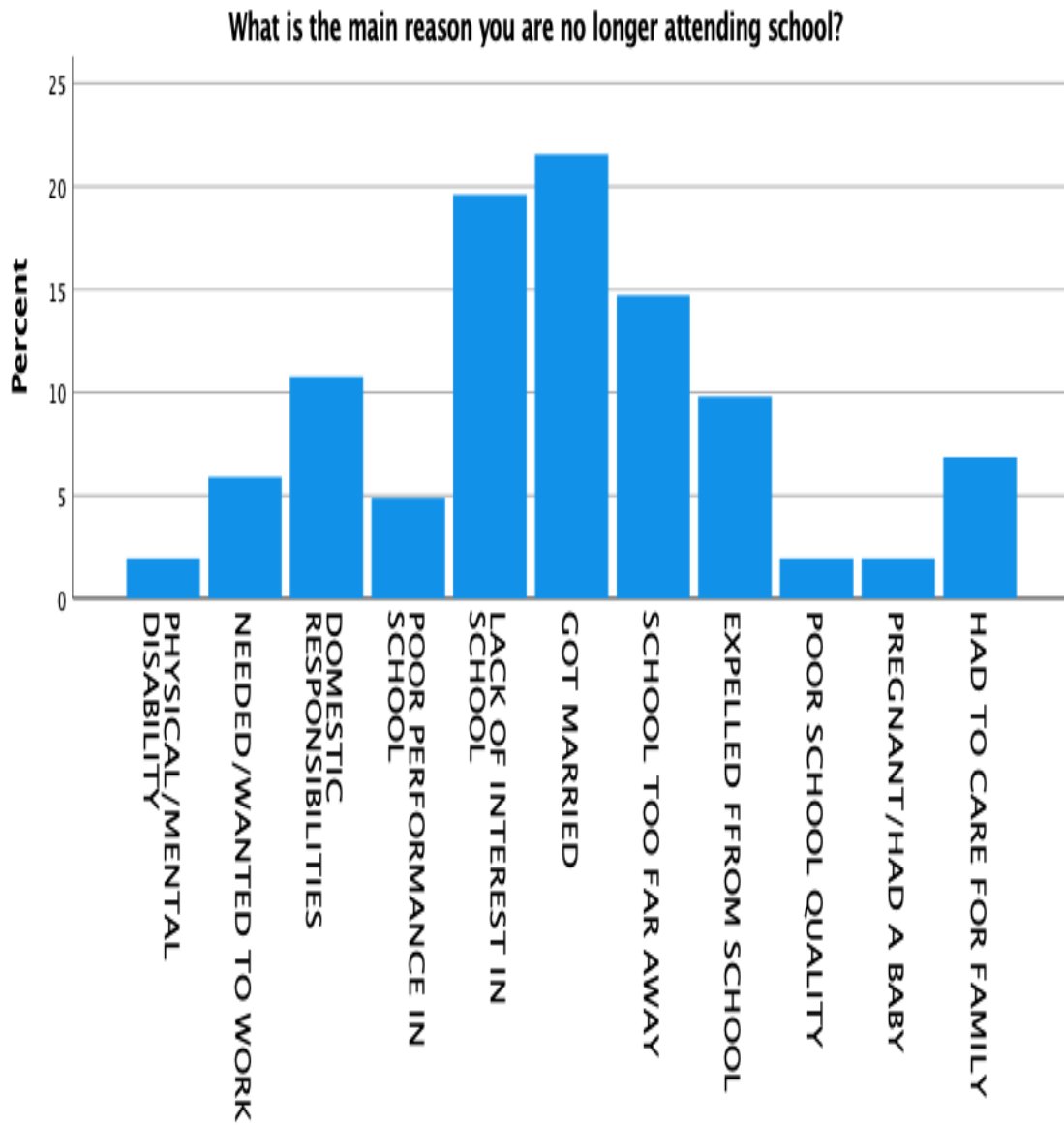


Figure 4. Distribution of respondents' reasons for not currently attending school.

4.1.2. Parents of female respondents

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of parents of female adolescents (n=288)

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Marital status of daughter		
Did not marry under 18	260	90.3
Married under 18	28	9.7
Literacy status		
Cannot read & write	230	84.2
Can read & write	43	15.8
Education level		
None	115	63.5
Primary	25	13.8
Secondary	35	19.3
Post-secondary	6	3.3
Employment type		
Government-employed	6	3.1
Self-employed	28	14.2
Farmer	163	82.7
Perceived benefits of E.M.		
Strengthen ties between families	49	8.0
Parents can see their grandchildren before their death	58	9.5
Parents can see their kids get married before their death	89	14.5
Avoid social stigma	32	5.2
Get service of future son-in-law	8	1.3
Avoid abduction	1	0.2
Avoid pre-marital sex	128	20.9
Ensure virginity at marriage	160	26.1
Reduce vulnerability to HIV	1	0.2
Financial security for women	5	0.8
No advantage	68	11.1

Don't know	14	2.3
Knowledge of legal minimum age of marriage		
Answered 18	69	23.9
Other answers	219	76.1

For the parents in this survey, only about 10% reported that they have daughters that first married under the age of 18 as shown in **Table 3**. Most of them have never been to school (63.5%) and the majority are also illiterate (83.9%). Furthermore, the majority of the parents in that community are farmers (82.7%) with the rest reporting to be self-employed or government employed. Parents also have different perceptions of the benefits of early marriage among girls as also presented in **Table 3** above; most of the respondents believe that getting married early will ensure the girl-child avoids pre-marital sex (20.9%) and ensure her virginity at marriage (26.1%). About 15% also believe that marrying early will allow the parents of girls to see their daughters married off before the parents die. Nonetheless, despite all these perceived benefits, a few parents also believe that there are no advantages or benefits to early marriage among girls (11.1%). When it comes to knowledge of the legal minimum age at marriage, even though most of the respondents answered yes to being aware of that age, only about 24% knew the exact minimum age of 18 years; the remaining parents either gave various responses ranging from 12 to 25 years or just didn't know.

Figure 5 further shows the distribution of parents' perceptions on when a girl ought to get married. Majority responded that the right time for marriage is when a girl experiences menarche (35%) and/or once she reaches adulthood (46%).

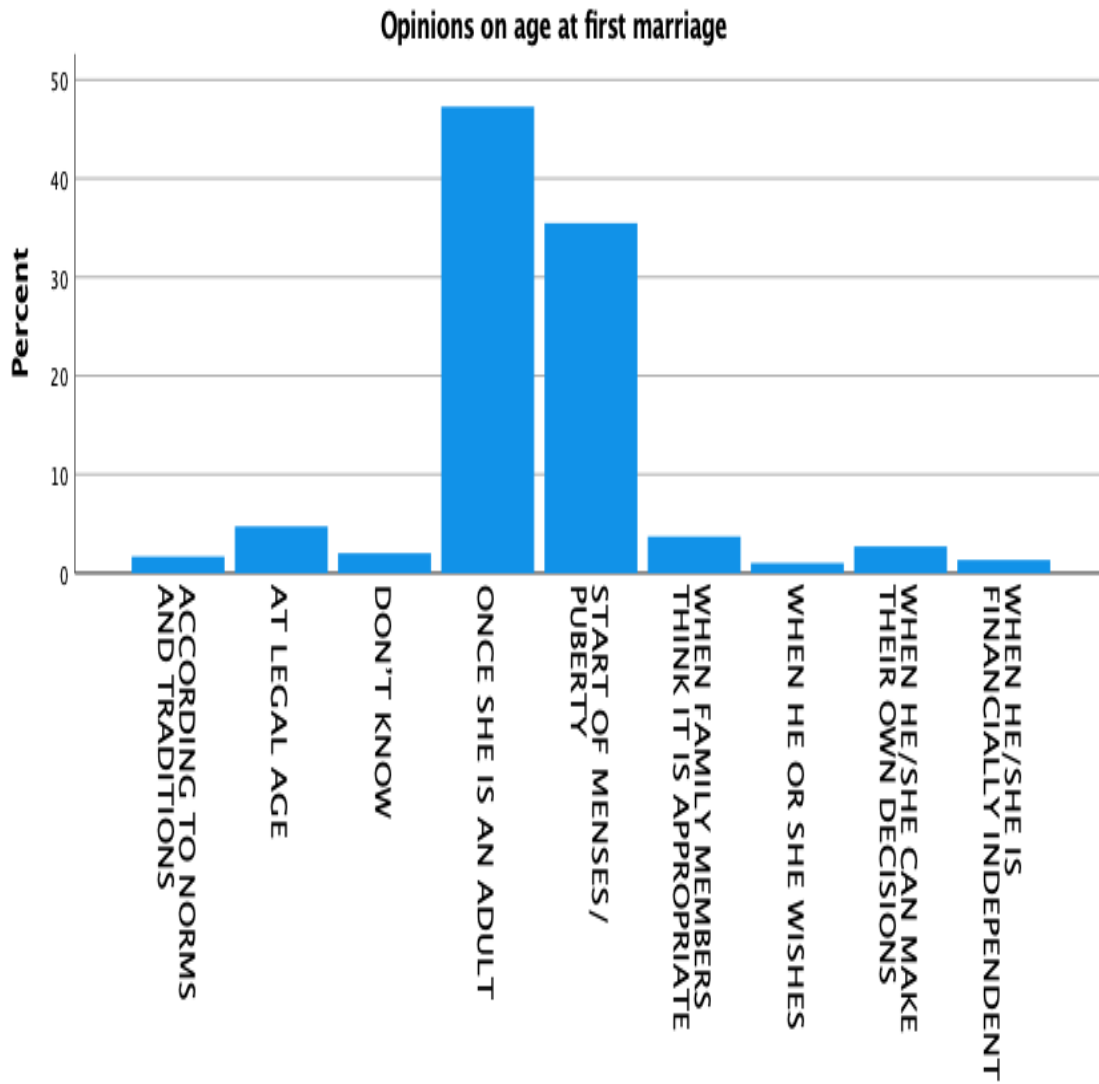


Figure 5. Distribution of parents' perceptions of the right age at first marriage.

4.2. Risk factors associated with child marriage

4.2.1. Individual-level risk factors

From the logistic regression analysis, the age category of female respondents (16-19), the number of siblings they have, what ethnicity they belong to, and whether they are literate all show significance when determining the risk of girls getting married early.

Since our married respondents were in the 16 – 19 age category, the odds risk was only calculated for those who reported those ages. Our results show that 16 and 17 year old girls have lower odds of getting married than 19 year old girls. Girls who come from large family sizes with more than 5 kids are also at greater risk (3.242 times) of being married early than girls who have less than five siblings.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that girls from the Fula ethnic group are about four times more likely to get married during their adolescence than their Mandinka counterparts. The literacy status of the adolescents also plays a role in the risk of them getting married at a young age; girls that could read and write showed lowered odds of getting married than the ones who couldn't.

Table 4. Bivariate logistic regression analysis of individual-level risk factors for early marriage among females 10-19

Variable	Crude Odds Ratio	95% CI
Age (in years)		
19	RC	
16	0.130*	0.027 - 0.624
17	0.179*	0.036 – 0.887
18	0.302	0.081 – 1.130
Number of siblings		
Less than 5	RC	
More than 5	3.242*	1.131 – 9.293
Ethnicity		
Mandinka	RC	
Fula	4.044*	1.360 – 12.024
Wolof	1.625	0.288 – 9.154
Literacy status		
Cannot read & write	RC	
Can read & write	0.316*	0.122 – 0.189
Education status		
Never attended school	RC	
Ever attended school	0.233	0.040 – 1.377

Note. RC refers to the reference category for that variable. ** means $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$

4.2.2. Parental-level risk factors

Examining the parental level factors associated with the risk of underage marriage among Gambian girls, this present study found that variables such as the age category of the parents, the age at which they first got married themselves, and their education status, were significant. Other significant factors also include whether the parents, at the time of their own marriage, gave consent and whether they believe marrying under 18 is too early for girls.

Girls with parents who are older than forty are at a greater risk of marrying early than girls who have younger parents (OR= 6.786; 95% CI= 2.859 – 16.108). Girls whose parents were also victims of child marriage have greater odds (OR= 4.153; 95% CI= 1.515 – 11.384) of having the same fate. In addition, girls are at heightened risk for early marriage if their parents did not consent to get married back when it was their time (OR=3.2; 95% CI= 1.134 – 9.031). Moreover, parents who believe that under 18 is not too early for girls to be married or in a union increase the odds that their girl child will be married before 18 (OR= 4.706; 95% CI= 1.754 – 12.624).

Not least, girls whose parents attended school have lower odds of getting married early than those whose parents never are uneducated (OR= 0.101; 0.013 – 0.764).

Table 5. Bivariate logistic regression analysis for parental-level risk factors for E.M among adolescent girls.

Variable	Crude odds ratio	95% CI
Age of parent (in years)		
Less than 40	RC	
More than 40	6.786**	2.859 – 16.108
Age at first marriage (in years)		
Over 18	RC	
Under 18	4.153*	1.515 – 11.384
Literacy status		
Cannot read & write	RC	
Can read & write	0.185	0.024 – 1.402
Education status		
Never attended school	RC	
Ever attended school	0.101*	0.013 – 0.764
Consent given for marriage		
YES	RC	
NO	3.200*	1.134 – 9.031
Opinion on whether marriage under 18 is too early for girls		
YES	RC	
NO	4.706*	1.754– 12.624

Note. RC refers to the reference category. ** means $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$

5. DISCUSSION

Despite a significant decrease in prevalence over the past 20 years, child marriage continues to be a problem in The Gambia not unlike other developing nations. According to UNICEF (2022b), there needs to be an annual rate of decline of about 31.4% among 20 – 24 year old Gambian women to eliminate the practice and meet the S.D.G. Target 5.3. Due to the high prevalence rates of early marriage practices in sub-Saharan Africa, numerous studies have been conducted across various settings over the years to identify risk factors and provide solutions to addressing this global health challenge, yet very few studies have been conducted in The Gambia and fewer if any studies have specifically examined the individual-level and parental-level risk factors (to my knowledge). This study aimed to identify these relevant factors and determine what significant risks they pose for girls when it comes to perpetuating the practice in The Gambia.

Similar to most countries in the same global region and economic setting, the present study finds that the most significant factors that contribute to the risk of Gambian adolescent girls getting married do include some of the individual factors hypothesized in the conceptual framework; socio-demographic characteristics like girls' education and literacy status as well as their cultural and religious identities are very important factors; parental level factors were also found, and they include the parents' educational attainment as well as their social circumstances. All these factors are interlinked and form pathways that increase girls' overall odds of getting married during their adolescence.

Starting with the individual-level factors, socio-cultural identities play a crucial role in most people's lives as they influence people's behavior patterns and the decisions they make regarding important life events. Almost all the female respondents in this study identified as Muslims

(reflective of the predominance of Muslims in the country) and that reality seemingly predisposes them to the practice; however, the association could not be measured since there was no reference category. The study however showed ethnic differences in the risk of early marriage. It revealed that girls from the Fula ethnic group have higher odds of marrying below 18 years than their Mandinka counterparts (OR = 4.044; 95% CI = 1.360 – 12.024). The specific reason why this is likely is unknown and will need an in-depth perhaps qualitative study to get the Fula people's perspective; however, it is reasonable to suggest that the likelihood may be due to traditional beliefs and values held by the Fula. A study about ethnic differences in age at sexual debut in The Gambia also found that girls from other ethnic groups (specifically the Mandinka and Wolof) are less likely to engage in coitarche at a young age than girls from the Fula ethnic group (Lowe and Rojas, 2021). Therefore, without implying causation, it is plausible that the early age of sexual debut may result in higher odds of Fula girls being married off earlier. The role of ethnicity as a risk factor for child marriage has also been reported in other studies conducted in Tanzania, Burkina Faso (Misunas et al., 2021), and Mali (Zegeye et al., 2021). More on socio-cultural identities will be discussed below as they influence parental factors as well.

Family size was another variable measured, and it is found to have significance in early marriage practices in The Gambia. The analysis showed that girls who have more than 5 siblings are about 3 times more likely to get married before 18 than girls who have less than 5. Other studies in Ethiopia (Bezie and Addisu, 2019) and Mali (Zegeye et al., 2021) also found family size to be a significant risk factor. According to Bezie and Addisu (2019), large family sizes increase the risk because most of these families are already poor and therefore marrying off their daughters may reduce the burden on families to provide for multiple members.

Education has been extensively documented across many studies as a protective factor when it comes to early marriage (Avogo and Somefun, 2019, Misunas et al, 2021; Zegeye et al, 2021). The education level of female adolescents had no significance in the risk of early marriage in this particular study, and this lack of association can possibly be explained by the fact that almost 90% of our female adolescent respondents reported that they have never been married and over 90% also reported they have been enrolled in school; the interdependent nature of the two variables is thus evident. A study conducted in The Gambia posits that a decrease in child marriage rates over the years may have allowed an increase in school enrolment of Gambian children (Jouhki and Stark, 2017). The converse scenario could also be true. A comparative analysis to determine child marriage prevalence and school attendance rates over the years could perhaps reveal an association between the two. While most of our female respondents reported that they have been in school before, it is worth noting that not all of them could read and write; yet the literate ones had lower odds of getting married before reaching 18 years. Sagalova et al. (2021b) posit that even low-grade education levels including reaching literacy have protective effects against early marriage.

Going back to socio-cultural identities: as has been previously mentioned, they also reinforce social norms and beliefs and play a role in parents' decisions to marry off their daughters. These norms influence beliefs about the right age for first marriage as shown in **Figure 5**. Most parents believe that girls should get married once they become an adult or once they reach menarche/puberty, indicating that age is a significant risk factor. However, it isn't clear what age corresponds to adulthood as oftentimes, the onset of a girl's period is the only determinant for maturity and an indication of the girl's 'readiness' for marriage, not the actual age in years. Adolescent age as a risk factor was not effectively measured in this study since it wasn't

determined at what exact age the participants got married; the data only reported their current marital status.

Additionally, although about 11% of parents responded that there are no advantages/benefits to early marriage, almost 50% of them believed that the practice is advantageous in avoiding pre-marital sex and ensuring virginity at marriage (**Table 3**). Pre-marital sex and pregnancy carry an enormous social stigma in most of these places, especially in religious societies. Fears around these two situations have also been documented in other studies (Jouki and Stark, 2021; Lowe, Joof, and Rojas, 2020; Misunas et al., 2021), and marrying girls off is believed to mitigate the risks and avoid shame.

Other variables explored at the parental level and found to be significant risk factors in this study include the age of the parents, the age they got married, their education status, whether they gave consent for their own marriages, and their opinion on whether girls getting married under 18 years of age is early or not. Girls whose parents are currently older (more than 40 years of age) are found to have higher odds of getting married early than those whose parents are less than forty; this may suggest that older parents are more likely to adhere to traditional beliefs and values that perpetuate the practice of early marriage. Additionally, girls whose parents married before 18 also have higher odds of marrying under 18 as well. A study also found this factor to be significant as it is sometimes challenging to break away from generational norms; girls whose female family members married early tend to follow suit thereby perpetuating the same practice (Avogo et al., 2019).

The odds of being married early were found to be lower for girls with educated parents. These results are similar to findings in a study conducted in Ethiopia that examined the education status of parents as a risk factor for child marriage (Bezie and Addisu, 2019). Mooyart and

Liefbroer (2016) also posit that children with educated parents are more likely to be educated too and also have career aspirations naturally leading to a delay in marriage. Not only does education delay marriage for girls, but it also helps them with family planning and equips them with the knowledge and life skills needed to take care of themselves and their future offspring.

Consent for marriage and perceptions of marriage timing also showed significance at the parental level. For parents whose consent weren't sought prior to their marriage, the odds of their girl children getting married early were higher. Similarly, for parents who responded that getting married under 18 was not too early for girls, the odds were greater for early marriage among their daughters.

Agency and consent were not evaluated in this study for the female adolescent respondents, but they are two important concepts when discussing child marriage. Marriage, just like domesticity and motherhood, is intrinsic to the societal value placed on women, and therefore, women should have agency when it comes to making these life choices. As mentioned earlier, women should be empowered to not just have agency but to make good choices rather than illusory ones that offer no great benefit. Jones et al. (2020) suggest that to empower girls to make these good and real choices, efforts should be made to educate them about the immediate as well as life-course risks involved. Moreover, socio-economic policies for alternative pathways to delaying marriage should be designed and put in place for girls and their families alike.

Klugman et al. (2014) further emphasize the importance of empowering women by increasing their agency and amplifying their voices as key to achieving societal development; empowering girls and women alike has the potential to yield huge dividends by boosting shared prosperity. Delaying marriage can also lower a woman's fertility which can in turn increase her life expectancy.

5.1. Implications for policy

As noted earlier, the legal minimum age of marriage in The Gambia is 18 years. The Children's Act of The Gambia (2005a) also prohibits parents and guardians from subjecting a child to marriage or betrothal. Additionally, a National Child Protection Strategy Plan was launched in The Gambia in 2016 with the goal of mapping and assessing issues related to children's health and welfare. Yet, the political will to stop the practice still seems lacking as evidenced by the persistence of the practice. As Melesse et al. (2021) succinctly reasoned, "healthy adolescents are critical for the achievement of S.D.Gs."

With this reasoning in mind, legislation needs to be enforced to tackle the problem of early marriages in The Gambia. Our study findings show that most of the parents are aware of a legal minimum age for marriage but do not know the specific age nor the legal repercussions associated with the violations. Registration of marriages should be made mandatory to prevent future practices from taking place and this should especially be enforced in rural areas where early marriages are more common.

It may, however, be challenging to enforce the law because The Gambia recognizes four different legal systems under its Constitution namely Sharia, Christian, civil, and customary laws, and child marriages are only prohibited under civil law. Therefore, where enforcing legislation may prove a challenge, efforts could be targeted at engaging community and religious leaders since in most cases, these leaders officiate the marriages. Engaging parents as well as community heads in programs and policies geared towards the cause, in addition to educating them on the legal aspects of early marriage and the harms associated with the practice among girls, can help enforce legislative action and remove bottlenecks to law enforcement. It can also

help reframe the idea of girls' transitioning into adulthood without the possibility of marriage looming over them since these leaders have the power to endorse societal change.

Since avoiding pre-marital sex and ensuring virginity at marriage are the major reasons identified as the justification for early marriage by parents in this study, intervention programs should also consider potentially allaying these fears that are often influenced by culture and religion, by encouraging positive parent-child relationships. A study in Burkina Faso found that positive parent-child relationships had protective effects against early marriage for girls and that girls who share their aspirations with their parents and lived in communities with empowered women had lower risks of being married early (Misunas et al., 2021). By building trust and by developing healthy and safe relationships with their children, especially the girl children, early marriages could be reduced consequently.

Child marriage negotiations are mostly carried out by the heads of the households which most often than not are the fathers. It is therefore imperative to engage them in policymaking and intervention programs. Men in the community in general, including adolescent boys, should be brought on board, and engaged in the discourse as well since they will become the future partners of these girls; their participation as allies can play a significant role in eliminating these practices. Additionally, parents who believe that early marriage has little or no benefits for young girls should be enlisted for advocacy campaigns against child marriage practices.

Most importantly, empowering girls is found to be the most promising approach when considering child marriage intervention strategies followed by community, schooling, and economic approaches (Chae and Ngo, 2017). Girls must be empowered as soon as they reach the threshold for being at risk for marriage by enrolling and retaining them in school, providing them with access to knowledge and life skills pertaining to their reproductive health, and allowing

them agency to advocate for their needs and personal aspirations. State and non-state actors should engage girls on their gender-specific needs so they can reach their full potential as empowered individuals.

According to our findings, school attendance rates were higher than non-attendance in Lower Baddibu but there's room for improvement. Some of our respondents could not read nor write even though they have been in school. Efforts need to be made in ensuring all girls are included by making education affordable (including expenses that come with school attendance), accessible, and of good quality for all. One of the main reasons our female respondents gave for not attending school was mostly due to lack of interest in school (**Figure 4**); incentives to keep them in school may include providing them with school supplies and engaging them in different extracurricular activities to diversify and keep their interest. Moreover, the Children's Act of The Gambia (2005b) stipulates that not only does every Gambian child have a right to compulsory education, but that the government also must provide free basic education, and the parents and guardians must ensure children attend and complete basic school. In addition, the Women's Act of The Gambia (2010) also stipulates the rights of every woman to basic education as well as training for self-development; it also puts the onus on the government to promote literacy among women as well as promote their enrolment and retention in schools; for girls who leave school prematurely due to any circumstances, the Act obligates the government to provide other forms of training and to organize programs for their personal development.

Finally, just as norms are created and adopted by society and individuals, they can also be transformed or revised. Community empowerment programs have been proven to work in changing practices and perceptions that are harmful through capacity building and training. The

government should engage and endorse non-state actors in their efforts to facilitate community-led abandonment of harmful practices like child marriage.

5.2. Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Social desirability bias is a possibility since interviews were administered by an interviewer and participants might not be very forthcoming with their responses, especially since child marriage is a sensitive topic in those areas. Recall bias is also a possibility, especially with participants reporting their age since most of them do not have a birth certificate. Additionally, there were a lot of missing responses for the various predictor variables which may have affected the strength of associations between the variables.

Lastly, while quantitative methods are very important, they are self-limiting when it comes to painting a robust picture of the root causes of issues. Cross-sectional data combined with limited predictor variables limits our findings and conclusions. Moreover, only crude odds ratios were reported in the analysis, and therefore loss of association between the outcome variable and some of the predictor variables is possible when odds ratios are adjusted. To cite Choy (2014), important characteristics including beliefs and perceptions need to reference people's local context and cannot be meaningfully reduced to just numbers. Therefore, this study may not be generalized to other parts of The Gambia especially since we have established that child marriage risk factors are often context specific.

Regardless of these limitations, the study still possesses great strengths as it is the first one in The Gambia to explore child marriage to such an extent. The literature on child marriage practices in The Gambia tremendously lacks sufficient empirical evidence, and the present study has now contributed to that endeavor.

5.3. Recommendations

From the findings in this study, the number of girls currently enrolled in school surpassed the ones that are not, and conversely, the number of girls who are not married is greater than the ones that are in matrimony showing a likely trend between the two variables. Recommendations for future studies include a comparative analysis of early marriage prevalence and education attendance rates over periods of time to measure the association.

Furthermore, qualitative studies interviewing the women affected by early marriage practices in The Gambia should be conducted to offer a more personal perspective on the practice and give a voice to the victims. Not only would this provide first-hand insights into how the practice affects women and allow them to narrate their own stories, but it could also offer solutions on what needs to be done to further reduce the practice. Therefore, I would recommend a qualitative approach or mixed methods study where qualitative data can highlight in-depth responses to some of the questions that arise from this data. Qualitative data could have given more nuanced information and explanations to some of the associations measured compared to the quantitative data derived.

Future studies should also explore the effects of child marriage on maternal and child mortalities and/or morbidities in The Gambia. The rate of these health indicators is currently high and of great concern to citizens and studies should be conducted to investigate the possible associations.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I will re-emphasize that the practice of child marriage is a global health challenge that continues to undermine the health and well-being of adolescent girls. Girls most at risk are poor with low levels of education found in the rural areas of developing countries. The Gambia has registered a significant decline over the past twenty years, but the rate of decline is still slow and off-track for the elimination of the practice by the United Nations target year of 2030. This research paper, as part of an intervention program of a larger study for the practice, identifies several risk factors at the individual and parental levels that include socio-cultural identities that are reinforced by social norms and socio-demographic characteristics such as age and family size. The expected use of the outcome of this study is to add to existing evidence on child marriage practices in The Gambia and the multifactorial pathways of risks in hopes that it will be used to fight against the harmful practice. Although the practice affects girls at the individual level, the consequences are far-reaching. Efforts should be scaled up globally to reach the goal of eliminating the practice worldwide but especially in sub-Saharan Africa where girls already experience overlapping vulnerabilities. Delaying marriage among adolescents will lead to shared prosperity for all.

Appendix

Appendix A..



Female Adolescent
QUESTIONNAIRE.d

Appendix B..



Parent
QUESTIONNAIRE.d

REFERENCE LIST

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