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Executive Summary

This report describes the research problem, objectives, methodology, activities and outputs, as well as outcomes from a five-year implementation research project funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The overall goal of the project was to design and implement a relevant and scalable package of interventions to reduce the prevalence of early marriage in The Gambia. The project was implemented from October 2018 to October 2023 in 53 rural communities across two districts— Lower and Central Baddibu Districts in the North Bank Region of The Gambia. In the initial exploratory phase, the goal of the project was to uncover the social and cultural factors contributing to early marriage for girls through an exploratory mixed methods that included a cross-sectional household survey with a sample of 181 female and 169 male adolescents, focus group discussions with 16 parents, and 8 key informant interviews with community-based decision makers. The baseline exploratory research found that ethnicity and the fear that girls may engage in premarital sex are two important factors associated with early marriage for girls in The Gambia, in addition to the lack of meaningful alternatives to marriage, including work opportunities in rural areas, which may also limit the options and resources available to girls, resulting in early wedlock.

During implementation, the project designed and tailored the package of intervention based on the findings of the formative research. The intervention aimed for one key outcome— changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage and its prevention at the individual and community level. Evaluation of the effects of the intervention revealed that the project has contributed to an increase in the average age of marriage for girls from 16 to 18 years and a change in attitudes towards early marriage among parents and adolescent boys and girls in the implementation districts. The project also empowered adolescent girls with information and knowledge on sexual and reproductive health and rights through educational workshops and livelihood skills training on tie and dye techniques, soap making and hand-sewing. The training on tie and dye techniques, soap making and hand-sewing has improved the economic development opportunities of girls who were trained on these livelihoods and they have now formed ‘saving clubs’ through the revenues generated from sales of the soap, tie and dye, and hand-sewed clothes. Additionally, aiming to reaching young and women with messages on early marriage, the project recruited and trained 246 young men and women aged 18 years and above to form peer educators and use them to organize educational workshops and training for young men and women with discussion topics around early marriage, sexual and reproductive health, gender and social norms, and provided educational support to five adolescent girls at risk of early marriage and school dropout. The project has also engaged young men as advocate of change to dispel gender norms around early marriage and male dominance through training, drama and role play at community level and has contributed to building research capacities in The Gambia.

A key lesson learned from implementation of the project is that locally-based interventions focused on engaging communities and building the capacity of key community stakeholders can potentially prevent early marriage for girls in The Gambia. Another lesson is the importance to join efforts with other organizations working towards the same goal to amplify each other's impact. This is the case with our collaboration with Girls' Pride Gambia. The lessons learned and the findings derived from the project research have been presented and published at various scientific conferences and peer-reviewed journals.

The Research Problem

Early marriage or child marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18 is perceived as a grave violation of human rights. Although it is prohibited by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, early marriage remains a common marital practice affecting mainly girls globally. In the last decade early marriage for girls declined worldwide from 25% to 21%. However, the rate of decline has been slowest in West and Central Africa, the region with the highest prevalence of child marriage. Within the region, estimates vary from 76% in Niger to 18% in Cape Verde. In West and Central Africa four in ten girls marry before the age of eighteen and one in three marry before age 15. At this rate, the number of child brides in West and Central Africa is projected to increase from 6.4 million in 2015 to 7.1 million by 2030. Boys in the region, also marry early although girls are disproportionately more affected by the practice of early marriage. The reasons why early marriage is so common in West and Central Africa are wide-ranging and can be grouped under religion, tradition and culture, poverty, and gender inequalities⁵⁻⁷.

In The Gambia, early marriage declined significantly over the last two decades but still remains a common marital practice. Historically, early marriages were common in The Gambia, with 58% of women aged 40-49 marrying before age 18. But this declined over the past two decades, and now an estimated 30% of women aged 20-24 marry before 18. The reasons for this decline include the introduction of the law banning child marriage in 2016 and the increasing enrolment of girls in school. Despite the decrease in early marriage in The Gambia, the practice continues. To contribute to the decline in the prevalence of early marriages in The Gambia, a five-year project titled, '*Addressing Teen Pregnancy and Early Marriage in The Gambia*', was implemented by the Society for the Study of Women's Health (SSWH), in partnership with the Agency for Development of Women and Children (ADWAC).

Objectives of the Project

Overall objective

To design and implement contextually relevant and scalable package of interventions to reduce the prevalence of early marriage in rural communities in Lower and Central Baddibu Districts in the North Bank Region of The Gambia.

The overall objective of the project has been met. The project has designed and implemented package of interventions including community engagement forums and discussion sessions on early marriage, empowered adolescent girls with skills and information, community engagement forums and discussion session, education support for girls, group formation for adolescent boys and girls and capacity building for key community stakeholders. The package of interventions has contributed to an increase in the average age of marriage for girls from 16 to 18 years and a change in attitudes towards early marriage for girls at the individual and community level.

Specific objective

1. To determine the factors that affect (either led to a decline in or are perpetuating) early marriage in Lower Badibu District. This objective has been met. The project

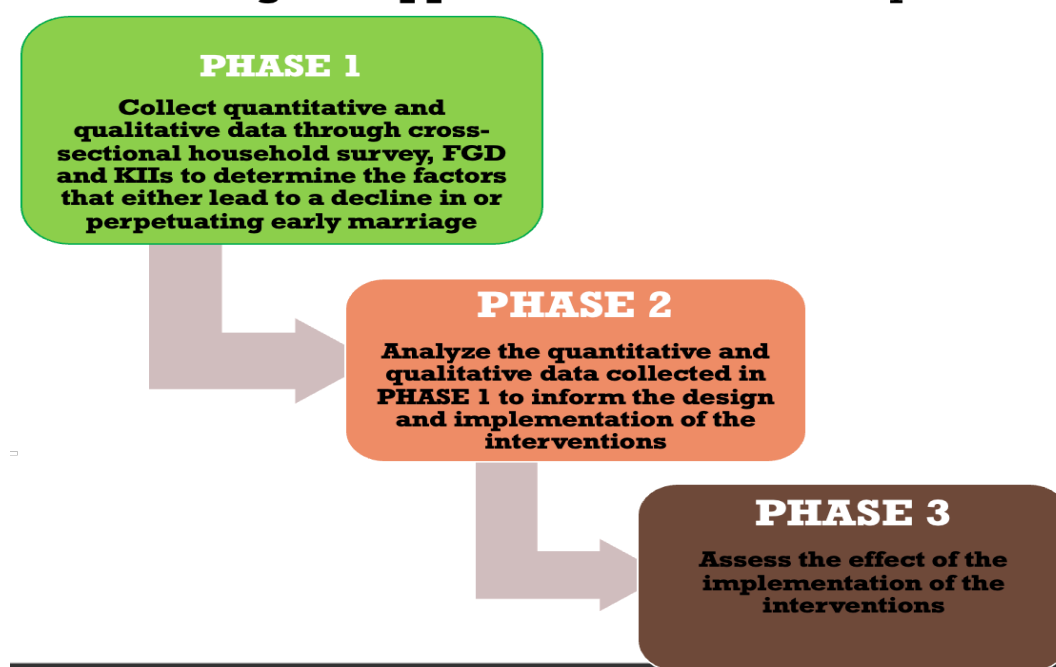
baseline formative research findings revealed that the Children's (Amendment) Act enacted in 2016, which prohibited child marriage and established the minimum age for marriage as 18 years may have contributed to the significant decline in early marriage in The Gambia (from 58% to 30%) over the last two decades. But other factors, such as the increasing enrolment of girls in schools and, more importantly, advocacy and awareness raising interventions by civil society and community-based organizations, have also played major contribution to the significant decline in early marriage in The Gambia.

2. To use the research findings and ongoing monitoring and learning to iteratively inform the design and implementation of a contextually relevant package of interventions in Lower and Central Badibu Districts. This objective has also been met. Based on the findings of the baseline formative research, the project has designed and implemented relevant package of interventions including community engagement forums and discussion sessions on early marriage, empowered adolescent girls with skills and information, community engagement forums and discussion session, education support for girls, group formation for adolescent boys and girls and capacity building for key community stakeholders. The package of interventions has been found to be relevant to the fight against early marriage and can be sustained and scale-up to other Gambian communities and districts.
3. To assess the effect of this package of interventions on knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage and its prevention. This has been done. The assessment found that the project package of interventions has contributed to an increase in the average age of marriage for girls from 16 to 18 years and a change in attitudes and knowledge towards early marriage for girls at the individual and community level.
4. To identify the relevant factors to consider in scaling up of the package of interventions in other Gambian regions. Review meetings of project implementation activities was conducted with project local steering committee (LSC) and community-based committee (CBC) was conducted to identify the relevant factors to consider in scaling up of the package of interventions in other Gambian regions. The stakeholders identified the community engagement forums and discussion sessions as effective and scalable to other regions. They also identified the continuous effective engagement of community stakeholders as a key factor that scale-up to reduce the prevalence of early marriage in other communities in The Gambia.

Methodology

The project methodology involved a phase and mixed methods approach, which is depicted in the diagram and further described below.

Methodological approach: Divided into 3 phases



Phase 1: In the initial exploratory phase, for the project **objectives 1 and 2**, a mixed methods approach that included a cross-sectional household survey with a sample of 181 and 169 female and male adolescents, 285 and 228 female and male parents and 5 focus group discussions (FGD) with 16 male and female parents, and 8 key informant interviews (KII) with community-based decision makers was conducted to triangulate and provide a more in-depth understanding research topic. The study was conducted in 24 rural settlements in Lower Baddibu District in the North Bank Region of the Gambia.

Phase 2: The qualitative and quantitative data collected in Phase 1 was analyzed to provide data to inform the design of the project package of interventions that were implemented in 54 rural communities in Lower and Central Baddibu Districts. The project team set up five committees during the preparatory phase of this project. The committees were: 1) a Local Steering Committee with representatives of key policy and program stakeholders involved in women empowerment and social welfare at national, regional and community level and b) four local Committees in the study area including people from both districts and consisting of community-based decision makers from each of the four main ethnic groups with equal representation of both sexes. The four local committees will be divided into women-only group and men- only group during meetings to ensure that women give meaningful contribution. A participatory approach will be used with members of both committees to co-create the package of interventions and through an ongoing interaction using findings derived from Phase 2 and ongoing monitoring and learning to guide and support the implementation of the interventions.

Phase 3: In Phase 3, the project team assessed the effect of the implementation of the project package of interventions in the two districts using a mixed methods approach for **Objective 3** of the project. The assessment involved a cross-sectional survey of 201 parents and 296 adolescents, in addition to 2 focus group discussions and 6 key informant interviews. It compared the project baseline and midline data in the analysis of the data.

For **Objective 4** of the project, a consensus panel approach was used with the LSC members and community-based committees (CBC) to identify relevant factors that would aid or can hinder scaling up of the package of gender transformative interventions in other communities and districts.

Project implementation and management

IDRC funding provided much need support to achieve a range of activities and outputs. This section of the report gives a detailed review of the activity implementation of the project. The review of project implementation and management is provided in light of what was achieved from October 2018 to October 2023, which are as stated below:

Establishment of community-based committees for ending child marriage

The project has been successful in setting up of four community and ethnic-based committees in the study area comprising of village heads locally known as “Alkaloes”, religious leaders, village development community (VDC) chairpersons, as well as young people and youth from each of the four main ethnic groups (Mandinka, Fula, Wolof and Serer) comprising of both males and females with equal representation. The inclusion of young people and youth in the ethnic based committee was to amplify and prioritize their voices. The ethnic based community committees were recruited from a community social mapping exercise. The ethnic based community committees were identified and selected by community members in the study area. They have now become a ‘core communication’ team for social mobilization and door-to-door campaign against early marriage in their respective communities.

Establishment of a local steering committee

A local steering committee comprising of stakeholders from the media, relevant government ministries and civil society organisations has also been successfully set up. The local steering committee (LSC) are stakeholders from the state media – Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS), Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MoHSW), Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE), Women’s Bureau, and Ministry of Youth and Sport (MOYS), and other civil society organisations, including the National Child Protection Alliance (CPA) and Population and Development Advocacy Group (PDAG) – a youth-led organisation. The LSC were selected based on educational background (such as having completed at least senior secondary school); age (which included both old and young people to capture the diversity of our study respondents); occupation (such as those working in recognised government institutions and civil society organisations); and personality (which included having no track record of corruption). These person specifications were sent along with a letter of invitation to all the respective institutions of the different stakeholders prior to their identification and nomination to serve in the project’s local steering committee by their respective institutions.

Introduction meetings with LSC and community-based committee members

Following the identification and nomination of different stakeholders to serve in the ethnic based community committees and in the local steering committee (LSC), meetings were held with these stakeholders. The meetings were focused on developing terms of reference for the ethnic based community committees and the local steering committee, reviewing of project proposal, preparing an action plan for the conduct of the baseline formative research, and developing a Theory of Change (ToC) for the project.

At the meeting of local steering committee (LSC), a Chairperson and a Secretary were selected to lead the LSC. The Chairperson is a Child Safe Guarding and Focal Person at the National Child Protection Alliance (CPA) and the Secretary is a news correspondent at Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS) based in North Bank Region of The Gambia, where the project was implemented. In particular, the selection of a news correspondent to the position of Secretary in the local steering committee facilitated three major interviews about the project on Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS). The interviews were done by the Project Leader and the Secretary to the LSC as part of his report of activities happening in North Bank Region.

Secured ethical approval

Before the start of the project, the Project Leader submitted the project proposal to the Scientific Coordinating Committee (SCC) MRC Unit The Gambia at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). He was then invited to present at the meeting of the SCC. Approval was later obtained from the SCC following presentation of the project proposal. The approved project proposal by the SCC was then subsequently forwarded to the Joint Gambia Government/MRC Ethics Committee for further consideration. The Joint Gambia Government/MRC Ethics Committee also provided ethical approval for the study after the comments on the project proposal were addressed.

Pre-testing of data collection tools

Following approval from the SCC and the Joint Ethics Committee, the study tools were pre-tested in three rural settlements with similar characteristics to the study area, comprising of the three major ethnic groups (Mandinka, Fula, and Wolof) in Sabach Sanjal district in North Bank Region of The Gambia. The pre-testing allowed revisions and finalization of the data collection tools before they were put to full-scale administration at baseline.

Baseline data collection

The baseline data collection was conducted between January 15 to February 8 2019. It employed the use of a concurrent mixed methods study design, involving a cross-sectional household survey of 915 respondents (aged 10+ stratified by ethnicity and age) and focus group discussions with community members and in-depth interviews of community-based decision makers in three selected communities in the 24 rural settlements in Lower Baddibu District in North Bank Region of The Gambia. The baseline formative research was aimed at determining the factors (that either led to a decline in or are perpetuating early marriage; then to use the information generated to design, implement, and assess contextually relevant and scalable package of interventions that will be tested in both Lower and Central Badibu Districts in North Bank Region of The Gambia.

Designed and tailored project package of interventions

The package of interventions for the project was defined based on the findings derived from the baseline formative research and through meetings and consultations with the Local Steering Committee (LSC), community-based committees (CBC) and communities in Lower and Central Baddibu Districts in the North Bank Region of the Gambia. The package of interventions were designed to be multi-component and includes the following strategies: (1) community engagement forums and discussions sessions on early marriage with communities and community leaders; (2) empowering girls with information, life and livelihood skills through training on gender norms and relations, sexual and reproductive health and rights and on tie and dye, soap making and embroidery (hand-sewing) for income generation; (3) supporting girls to remain in school through the provision of school materials; (4) engaging boys and men as advocate of change to dispel gender norms around marriage and male dominance through training, drama and role play at community level; and (5) creating safe spaces and group formation for young girls and boys to help them build friendships, gain confidence and social networks which they can leverage on to challenge existing gender and social norms around child marriage and the role of the boy and girl child.

Livelihood skills training for adolescent girls

As part of the project package of interventions for empowering girls, six adolescent girls from three rural communities, namely Kinteh Kunda, Suwareh Kunda and Saaba in Lower Baddibu District were trained on tie and dye making. In addition, four adolescent girls from two rural communities, namely Koli Kunda Fula and Kerr Biram Kumba in Central Baddibu District were also trained on embroidery (hand-sewing) of table clothes and bed sheets. The project aimed to enhance the vocational skills of girls and improve their access to economic development opportunities through livelihood skills training. The training of adolescent girls on tie and dye and embroidery was a response to the project baseline study finding that lack of meaningful alternatives, including work opportunities in rural areas is among the main reasons for why adolescent girls are getting married early. The finding suggests a need to provide girls with employment-oriented education including vocational skills which may result into more empowerment and a delay in marriage. The training of adolescent girls on tie and dye and embroidery (hand-sewing) was also a demand from the communities and adolescents during the dissemination of the project baseline study findings with communities and adolescent girls. The material support provided to adolescent girls who were trained included sewing materials, including needles and plain clothes, soap making materials.



In Photo: Adolescent girls trained in embroidery through the IDRC-funded early marriage project in The Gambia.

Cluster sensitization and awareness raising in project intervention communities

Awareness raising and sensitization campaigns on early marriage have also been conducted across 33 settlements in Central Baddibu District as part of the community engagement forum and discussion sessions. The awareness raising and sensitization campaigns were facilitated by the Project Leader, the District Coordinators and the Community-Based Committees (CBCs). The District Coordinators were trained on adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender norms and relations surrounding the practice of early, forced marriages to facilitate their discussions with community members. The training for the District Coordinators was done by the Project Leader and the Gender and Equity Expert. As a result of social distancing and other requirements during the Covid-19, the project team organized radio programs at Farafenni and Kerewan community radios to mitigate the consequences and potential impact of Covid-19 on early marriage for girls and on the planned activities of the project.

Dissemination meetings with community-based committees

A community-based committee dissemination meeting was conducted in Kerewan in Lower Baddibu District on August 16, 2022, by the District Coordinator of the project. The main objective of the meeting was to disseminate the findings of the mid-term evaluation of the project, but also to make a collective review of the project progress and to identify and discuss the challenges faced by community-based committees in their routine community or household sensitization. Thirty-one (31) participants attended the dissemination meeting. The participants were members of the community-based committees established by the project in the twenty-five (25) communities in the Lower Baddibu District, where the project is being implemented.

Presentation of research findings at the sexual and reproductive health conference in Kigali, Rwanda

Among the expected key research outputs of the early marriage project, includes presenting the project research results at regional and international conferences. On August 16, 2022, our Project Leader, Dr. Mat Lowe, whose abstract entitled, “Effectiveness of a community-based intervention in preventing early marriage for girls in rural Gambia”, was accepted for oral presentation at the “Sexual and Reproductive Health: Informing Policy and Practice through Research and Preservice Training” conference. The conference, which was organized by the Center for International Reproductive Health Training at the University of Michigan (CIRHT-UM) was held in Kigali, Rwanda from 5-7 October 2022. The three-day conference served as a platform for education and research in family planning and abortion. It showcased research and evidence in the form of original oral and virtual poster presentations, plenary lectures by international experts, and workshops. The abstract presentation of our Project Leader, entitled, “Effectiveness of a community-based intervention in preventing early marriage for girls in rural Gambia”, was based on the findings of the mid-term evaluation of our early marriage project. It was awarded best ORAL Presentation among many researchers and practitioners of sexual and reproductive health who presented at the conference.



Photo: Our Project Leader, Dr. Mat Lowe, presenting at the SRH Conference in Kigali

The findings on the effectiveness of the project package of interventions in changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage were also presented at the Sixth Reproductive Health Network-Kenya Annual Scientific Conference, held in Mombasa, Kenya.



In Photo: Dr. Mat Lowe, Project Leader, presenting at the sixth RHNK Annual Conference

Supported thesis research on child marriage in The Gambia for students

Building the capacity of Gambians to use our project data and research findings was among the expected outcomes of our early marriage project. The project has supported the thesis research of two Gambian students. A from The University of The Gambia (UTG) completed her Master's her thesis from the project. Her thesis aimed to explore the effects of early marriage on school dropout in The Gambia.

Another Gambian graduate student in Global Public Health from Queen Mary University (QMU) in London also completed her Master's thesis on our project baseline data under the supervision of our project leader. The student, whose research looked at child marriage and related-risk factors in The Gambia, shows that socio-cultural identities, such as religion and ethnicity, education status, and family size, are significant factors that increase girls' odds of early marriage in The Gambia. In addition, parental factors associated with the risk of early marriage for girls in The Gambia were also showed to include the parent's education level, age at first marriage, and perception of appropriate age at first marriage. This thesis research findings earned the student a grade point average of (80%). The research supervision provided to the student by our project leader has also enabled the student to effectively write a research proposal and analyse quantitative data on child marriage.

Educational support to adolescent girls at risk school dropout and early marriage

The project is providing school materials (books, uniforms, and shoes) to three school girls: Isatou Njie, Mariama Njie and Mariama Minteh in Lower Baddibu District as part of the strategy for supporting girls to remain in school. The educational support being provided to these young girls is to ensure their retention in school, thereby possibly reducing their risks of school dropout and delaying their age at marriage. Both Isatou Njie, Mariama Njie and

Mariama Minteh are still going to school and have continued to receive support from the project. In addition, the project has also contributed (GMD 10,000) towards the repayment of Isatou Njie's dowry, whose marriage was postponed as a result of the project intervention. Isatou was supported by the project to undergo a vocational training on sewing at the capital city, Banjul. She has now graduated as a trained tailor. The following human-interest story illustrates Isatou case.

Human interest story: case study 2

During the course of the project baseline formative research, from January 15 to February 8, 2019, our project contributed to a marriage cancellation of Isatou Njie. Isatou, who was less than or about 16 years at the time was supposed to be married off to a man from a neighboring Senegal to man twice of her and who she said had only met once. Coincidentally, on the day of her marriage, our data collection team had just arrived in the village to conduct focus group discussions and interviews with community members. As soon as our focus group discussions and interviews ended, the information had already reached the Isatou's parents that our data collection team were in the community to talk about preventing early marriage for girls. For fear that they may be prosecuted, the parents decided to call off the marriage immediately. Through a member of the project community-based committee (CBC), our project leader was able to meet and discuss with Isatou. Isatou told our project leader that she was been forced to get married. This decision was against her wish of staying in school. After meeting and discussing with Isatou, our project leader also met and spoke with the village head (locally known as "Alkalo") and Isatou's parents. The parents explained to our project leader that they wanted to marry off Isatou due to fear that she may become pregnant out of wedlock. However, when probed whether she shared the same sentiment with that of her parents, Isatou explained in the affirmative: "I know many girls who are pregnant: They are not married. However, I am confident that this will not happen to me. The only thing I want now is to continue with my schooling".

Isatou parents, including her very old, grand-mother who was very key in the decision to marry her off were persuaded by our project leader to postponed the marriage. Following the decision to cancel Isatou's marriage, the project provided educational support to Isatou including a bycycle to facilitate her going to school because the school was far away and because the travel distance to school was a major obstacle to Isatou. Isatou was also supported by the project to undergo a vocational training on sewing at the capital city, Banjul, where she has now graduated as a trained tailor and has finally gotten married based on her choice. This case study is truly a human story. It shows the kind of achievement that happens when research partners that are supported by donors are embedded in the communities, understand their issues and are deeply committed to resolving them beyond just conducting research.

Cluster community sensitization on early marriage

A cluster sensitization on early marriage in Saaba village was organized on December 22, 2023. The Cluster sensitization is part of the project intervention package, which sees community meetings as the most effective method of disseminating information regarding child marriage and teenage pregnancy. The meeting was meant to stimulate discussions around early marriage among community members and to increase their knowledge and understanding of the gendered socio-cultural practices affecting early marriage. The meeting was well attended by members of the community-based committees in Saaba and other

elected members of local governance, including the chairman of the village development committee (VDC).

Community-Based Committee (CBCs) Training workshop

The project organized an interactive training workshop for members of the community-based committee (CBCs) project in Central Baddibu District conducted at Njaba Kunda village. The training was attended by 40 CBC members (both male and female) attended it. The topics discussed during the training included traditional gendered practices, including early marriage for girls and the role of men in preventing harmful gendered practices. The CBC who attended the meeting deemed it quite significant in their work because it has increased their gendered norms, which will facilitate their work at the community level.

Education support to adolescent girls at risk of school dropout

The project provided educational support to few girls who were heightened risk of school dropout and early marriage girls in the two project implementation districts. It provided these girls with school uniforms and school bags, shoes, and money for school lunch for Mariama Minteh in Minteh Kunda, who was one of the girls. Two other school girls, Fatoumatta Keita and Fatoumatta Sillah, also received educational support from the project. The handing over of the school support for these girls were witnessed by members of the CBC in Minteh Kunda and Conteh Kunda, parents, and the teachers of these school girls, respectively. It was a great moment as the parents appreciated the gesture and were very happy about the support.

Human interest story from the project educational support: Case study 1

Another girl who has benefitted from the educational support of the project is Mariama Njie. Mariama Njie lost his father (Mori Njie) when she was three. Following his father's death, she was given to her grandmother for adaptation. The grandmother is now old and constantly struggling for her well-being. Due to the condition of the old granny, it has been so tough and challenging for Mariama to attain her educational rights or dreams and even her social well-being. The household in which Mariama and her granny belong is economically challenged. This, amongst others, has made the child so vulnerable. Still, thanks to the project's coming, Mariama has enrolled in lower primary school to start her educational career. The project has supported her and has continued to monitor her situation given her vulnerability context. During the current reporting period, the District Coordinator visited Mariama at Mariama's home based on the IDRC program specialist's recommendation to establish the facts or realities behind her discomfort during the meeting with the project staff. This visit by the District Field coordinator revealed that the guardians of Mariama are not giving her enough care in the household, and she is constantly on errands for the family. The guardian's wife will not plait her hair to wash her clothes or uniforms. She sometimes goes to School without lunch, while the children of her guidance are given money for food daily. But the reality is that she never disclosed such situations to anybody because if they knew it, she would be in a problem. The project closely monitors Mariama's case. The Project Leader has initiated discussions with the Regional Gender Focal Officer and the Child Welfare Officer of the Ministry of Gender, Women, Children, and Social Welfare. These officers have promised to meet with the District Coordinator of the project and will conduct a family visit to Mariama's home. Following their visit, the Regional Focal Officer and the Child Protection Welfare will continue to visit Mariama's home as part of their regular family visit and monitoring to ensure Mariama stays in School and gets the needed support and care from his guardians.



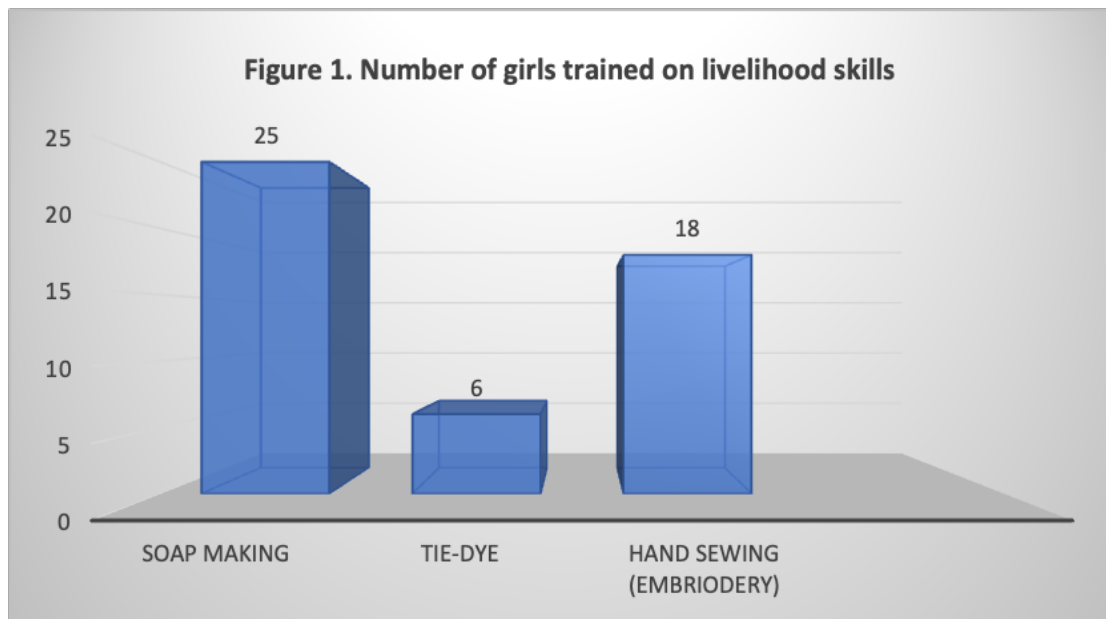
In Photo: Mariama holding the school materials that were bought for her by IDRC Senior Program Specialist, Marie-Gloriose during her visit to The Gambia

Training of peer educators / CBC on drama on early marriage, teenage pregnancy and the rights of the girl child

From the 24th to the 26th of December 2023, a training workshop for peer educators and CBC members on a drama on early marriage, teenage pregnancy and the rights of the girl child was conducted. The participants peer educators and CBCs were trained on presentation and dramatic techniques to help them know how to approach communities with messages on early marriage, teenage and on the rights of the child through drama. Topics that were discussed during the drama sessions were the definition of child marriage and forced marriage and the rights of a girl child, which includes non-discrimination, the right to survive and development of potential and protection from harmful abuses and exploitation and full participation in family, cultural, and social life.

Stocktaking exercise to document project outputs

A stocktaking exercise to document the project outputs was carried out by the project team. This exercise revealed that the project has reached many adolescent boys and girls and their parents in the intervention communities directly with information and messages about early marriage and has enhanced the livelihood skills of forty-nine girls through training on soap making, tie and dye and embroidery (hand-sewing) for income generation (*Figure 1*). A total five school-going girls have also been provided with education sponsorship by the project. In addition, the project has conducted a total of six training workshops for peer educators for two hundred and forty-six (246) peer educators on early marriage and its harmful effects and their sexual and reproductive health knowledge and rights.



The project has also established collaborative agreements with community stakeholders in the project intervention communities, created three hundred and forty-five (345) community-based committees, and conducted capacity building for these community-based committees as well as community engagement forums and discussion sessions focusing on the social and gender norms around early marriage across all the communities in the two districts where the project is being implemented.

Training of trainers (field coordinators) on child marriage and teenage pregnancy through gamification-the funneh board game

A Training of trainer on Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy through gamification using the Funneh board game was organized by the project. The 3 days intensive and interactive training took place on 3rd, 4th, and 5th of May 2023 at SSWH Office hall in Kanifing. Three field coordinators, 1 male and 2 females from Lower Badibou and Central Badibou participated in the capacity building program. The training was conducted to provide adequate, accurate and expert knowledge on child marriage and teenage pregnancy. The rationale of the training was to ensure that the three field coordinators gain more knowledge on teenage pregnancy and child marriage and new knowledge on how to use and introduce gamification into their community advocacy and sensitization activities. Despite the fact that, the participants had some knowledge on the topics they were trained on, the activity also ensured that the field coordinators received accurate information on teenage pregnancy and child marriage and their health implications on girls from a health professional in a manner that misconceptions, taboos, and negative social norms will not overshadow the facts. The training also provided an in-depth knowledge of how teenage pregnancy and child marriage are interconnected with gender-based violence, period poverty and mental health. The training facilitated by Girls' Pride Gambia, which is a partner organisation to SSWH.

On the first day of the training, SSWH Administrative Officer (Awa Dubois) welcomed the team from Girls' Pride Gambia and the participants. Registration was done from 9am to 9:30 am. From 9:30am to 10am, self-introduction was done, and the trainer Fatoumatta Kassama shared the training agenda and the discussion points for the 3 days of the training. An online Pre-test survey was done before the training started. From 10am to 10:30am, all the

participants and the team from Girls' Pride Gambia (trainer and rapporteur) had 30 mins break for breakfast. The first part of the training session started from 10:30am to 1:50pm. During this period, Fatoumatta took the participants through the contents developed on child marriage using the Funneh board game produced by Girls' Pride Gambia. The Funneh board game on child marriage has a question-and-answer booklet that contains 70 questions and answers. The questions were developed considering very important areas of discussion on child marriage and covers the following topics:

- Who is child?
- Definition of child marriage
- Causes of child marriage
- What predisposes girls to child marriage?
- How child marriage affects girls' education?
- Physical health implications on child marriage on girls
- Mental health implications of child marriage on girls
- What individuals, families, schools, communities, and the government do to eradicate child marriage in The Gambia
- The child marriage laws in The Gambia and where cases of child marriage can be reported to in a safe and confidential way.

A very interactive discussion came up as Fatoumatta discussed all the 70 questions and their answers in the child marriage question and answer booklet with the participants. The participants also had the opportunity to share their experiences, stories and real-life case scenarios that opened room for more discussion around the topic. The participants had a lunch and prayer break from 1:50 pm to 2:30 pm.

After the break, the session continued until 4:40 pm. During this period, Fatoumatta introduced the field coordinators to the Funneh board game, how to use the game to learn and educate others on any topic especially topics considered to be complex, sensitive or a taboo, the rules that should be followed when playing the Funneh board game and how to play the game on child marriage. To make sure the participants have hands on experience on the game, participants play the Funneh board game together with the trainer for about 1 hour while the trainer guided them throughout the period. The Funneh Board Game was very easy to use, and the participants understood how it works during that short period. Upon completion of the Funneh board game session, participants had the opportunity to ask the trainers and each other questions. The session for day 1 ended at 4:40 pm

Day 2 of the interactive training of trainers' capacity building program using gamification started at 8:30 am as participants were eager to have more discussions on the child marriage laws and where and how to report cases of child marriage in The Gambia. At 9:am, Fatoumatta introduced the participants to teenage pregnancy, the question-and-answer booklet on teenage pregnancy and the areas of discussion on the topic. From 10am to 10:330 am, all the participants and the team from Girls' Pride Gambia (trainer and rapporteur) had 30 mins break for breakfast. Fatoumatta spent the rest of day 2 going through the 70 questions and answers from the teenage pregnancy question and answer booklet. Fatoumatta had another interactive discussion with the participants as they gave examples and real-life case scenarios of teenage pregnancies and their impact in their communities. The participants had a lunch and prayer break from 2:00 pm to 2:30 pm. The topics discussed under teenage pregnancy includes:

- Who is a teenager/adolescent?
- What is teenage pregnancy?
- Causes of teenage pregnancy

- What predisposes girls to teenage pregnancy?
- How teenage pregnancy affects girls' education.
- Physical health implications on teenage pregnancy on girls
- Mental health implications of teenage pregnancy on girls
- What individuals, families, schools, communities, and the government do to eradicate teenage pregnancy in The Gambia
- Other issues such as rape, the laws against statutory rape, fistula, abortions, and contraceptives were also discussed.

Before the end of day 2, participants had the opportunity to ask questions on teenage pregnancy. The session for day 2, ended at 5pm. The last day of the training was a short session. Participants completed an online post-test before the session started. From 9:am to 9:30 am, all the participants and the team from Girls' Pride Gambia (trainer and rapporteur) took 30 mins break and had breakfast. The rest of the day was facilitated by the participants. A simulation exercise on how the field coordinators will conduct training on teenage pregnancy and child marriage using the Funneh board game was facilitated by Alagie Gaye, one of the field coordinators. Dr. Mat and SSWH Administrative officer, Awa Dubois joined the participants and played the role of an audience. Alagie successfully demonstrated and explained how he will use the Funneh board game in his community to educate adolescent boys and girls and adults on teenage pregnancy and child marriage. He did a great job by making Dr. Mat and Awa understand how the board game works and he took 1:30 mins facilitating this session. During his session, all the participants, the team from Girls' Pride Gambia and SSWH had discussions around child marriage and teenage pregnancy and how everyone's efforts are needed to address these social issues. The simulation exercise is one of the evaluation strategies done by Girls' Pride Gambia team upon completion of all training of trainer programs. This is done to ensure that the field coordinators have adequate knowledge on teenage pregnancy and child marriage, and they understand very well how to use the Funneh board game and teach others on their own.

Overall, the 3 days capacity building training was intensive, interactive, and successful. The trainer, participants and SSWH all showed satisfaction at the end of day 3. The organization and facilitation done by SSWH team made the training successful without any challenge. Upon completion of the evaluation, the participants had opportunities to ask more questions and shared whatever they had before the end of the day. They also shared their recommendations. They acknowledged that there are still gaps in knowledge and they will need more training on topics that are interconnected with teenage pregnancy and child marriage. They specifically mentioned that they would like to be trained on Gender-Based Violence and Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management. They also recommended that each community should have their own Funneh board game that they will leave with the communities to use and conduct step-down training sessions and educational activities among themselves. However, if all the communities cannot get their own Funneh board game, then the field coordinators should get more board games for their trainings as some communities are far from each other and they still need to leave the board game after their training session for participants to practice and teach other. The issue of gender equality was highlighted by both the trainer and participants, and they all agreed that both boys and girls need to be trained in different communities.

Gender Equality and Inclusion

The project adopted a participatory, mixed-methods approach that included both quantitative and qualitative data collection, including a cross-sectional household survey, focus group discussions and key informant in-depth interviews. A mixed-methods approach was essential to prioritize gender issues and amplify the voices and experiences of adolescent girls who are victims of early marriage, while challenging patriarchal norms. These data collection methods facilitated a deeper exploration of the intersecting social norms, attitudes, behaviors, and systems that represent the root causes – rather than the symptoms – of systems driving gender inequality perpetuating early marriage.

The quantitative data collection of the project prioritized achieving minimum sample sizes for each group of adolescent boys and girls and male and female parents to enable meaningful statistical analysis. The research team strategically sampled respondents based on ethnicity and sex to allow sufficient statistical power for cross-group comparisons and analyses during the quantitative data collection and analysis.

The project also included a gender-based approach to integrate both men and women in its activities. It took into consideration the power dynamics and relations between women and men by conducting separate focus group discussions for men and women during qualitative data collection. Women and men focus group discussions were separated to ensure freedom of expression without fear of reprisal from the other sex. The research team was also gender-balanced comprising of both male and female data collectors who were responsible for conducting interviews and focus group discussions for men and women.

Given that decision making is male dominated and largely done by men in The Gambia, the data analysis included analysis of power dynamics in decision making for early marriage at the family and community levels.

Project Outputs and Dissemination

Journal Papers:

1. Lowe M, Joof M and Rojas BM. Social and cultural factors perpetuating early marriage in rural Gambia: an exploratory mixed methods study [version 3; peer review: 2 approved] *F1000Research* 2020, 8:1949 (<https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.21076.3>)
2. Lowe M, Mendez Rojas B. Examining ethnic differences in age at sexual debut among adolescent girls in the Gambia. *Afr J Reprod Health*. 2021 Jun;25(3):78-82. doi: 10.29063/ajrh2021/v25i3.9. PMID: 37585844.

Scientific conference Presentations:

1. Effectiveness of a community-based intervention in changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage in The Gambia. Sexual and Reproductive Health Conference, Kigali, Rwanda, organized by the Center for International Reproductive Health Training at the University of Michigan (CIRHT-UM).
2. Effectiveness of a community-based intervention in changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage in The Gambia, Mombasa. Reproductive Health Network-Kenya, Sixth Annual Scientific Conference

Awards:

1. Best Oral presentation. Effectiveness of a community-based intervention in changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage in The Gambia. Sexual and Reproductive Health Conference, Kigali, Rwanda, organized by the Center for International Reproductive Health Training at the University of Michigan (CIRHT-UM).
1. Mat Lowe, Principal Investigator of the Project was given the prestigious award of African Science Leadership Fellow at the West African Science Leadership Programme/ African Science Initiative Workshop, held at the West African Centre for Cell Biology of Infectious Pathogens (WACCBIP), University of Ghana, from July 21-23, 2019, in recognition of his contribution to science and research in the Gambia. More information can be find [here](#).

Newspaper articles:

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fi2WVvcsVfQ>.
2. <https://www.voicegambia.com/2019/01/07/sswh-adwac-sensitize-communities-on-baseline-study-on-early-marriage/?fbclid=IwAR2qXv5hotWQy0KXFQ9TE5wpcUgeNGAfnwxv5EUEUxQBnIDkPtU-XLKluYs>

Master's Thesis:

1. Olliematou Sagnia. Effect of Child Marriage on Girls' Education in The Gambia. University of The Gambia, School of Public and Environmental Health.
2. Aisha Saho. Child Marriage and Associated Risk-Factors in The Gambia. Queen Mary University (QMU) of London.

Capacity building:

The project has enhanced the leadership skills of all the project team, but more especially the project leader, data collectors and field supervisors who were involved in the research process.

- The Project Leader who is the head of SSWH has devoted all of his time to developing and preparing for the study. The project leader has gained more insightful understanding of implementation research, increased knowledge of Nvivo software for qualitative data analysis, and understanding of the complexities involved in the issues of teen pregnancy and early marriage that the project sought to explore and address in The Gambia.
- With sponsorship support from the project, the project leader also completed an online comprehensive data analysis course using STATA
- Other project team members have also learned useful skills in terms of collecting data and have acquired meaningful understanding of the issues surrounding teen pregnancy and early marriage in The Gambia. One of the Field Supervisors explained that his participation in the baseline data collection has improved his knowledge of teen pregnancy and early marriage, and understanding of ethical considerations governing the conduct of research on tabooed and sensitive topics. He said he is now more motivated than ever before to build his capacity further to undertake more research and advocacy work on preventing teen pregnancy and early marriage. A Data Collector also narrated her experience as life-touching, noting that her involvement in the project, especially in the data collection process has strengthened her knowledge and sensitivity to different cultures and improved her interpersonal communication

skills. The Project Support Officer and one of the data entry clerks also reported improved knowledge of basic statistical analysis through their experience in the data analysis.

Policy and practice:

- On October 5, 2021, an immigration attorney, Elizabeth Gibson, Esq, a Senior Staff Attorney at the Immigrant Protection Unit of New York Legal Assistance Group, a non-profit organization in New York that assists asylum seekers reached to the early marriage project leader after reading one of the research articles on the social and cultural factors perpetuating early marriage in The Gambia published as part of the early marriage project. The immigration attorney represented a Gambian woman seeking asylum in the United States after fleeing a forced marriage. He wanted more information surround early and forced marriages and unions in The Gambia. He used the findings presented in the article to argue for the case of the woman in the US court.

Project outcomes

Project outcomes have varied over a wide range of behaviors, attitudes, practices. Project specific contributions include the following:

- Project mid-term evaluation showed a trend towards increasing age at marriage of young women, with an example of an individual family's changed decision-making process through their involvement in the project
- Project findings also reinforced the importance of family and community bonds—translated to influence at the family level through increased family communication and norms around adolescent needs and goals
- The mid-term findings suggest significant changes in knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage and its prevention in the two districts, which could be attributed to the project although other interventions not part of the project may have also contributed to the observed changes: a smaller number of parents agreed at midterm that parents should decide when their daughters should get married. This finding is supported by the qualitative data, which showed that more parents are beginning to accept the decision of girls to decide when to get married. Perceptions of gender roles and norms have also shifted in the project intervention communities. For example, compared with the baseline results, the number of adolescent girls who believed that women have one responsibility—that is to get married, bear children and to raise a family has reduced
- Mean age at which girls get married in the two intervention districts have increased (while difficult to say that this only due to the project intervention)
- The project contributes to shifts in evidence-informed decision-making. For instance, the project has been featured by the [Learning Collaborative as norms-focused research and intervention that has examined and/or tried to change gender and social norms impacting a variety of sexual and reproductive health outcomes](#)
- US Senior Staff Attorney, Immigrant Protection Unit at New York Legal Assistance Group, who was representing a Gambian woman seeking asylum in the United States after fleeing a forced marriage. After reading article on early marriages in the Gambia (<https://f1000research.com/articles/8-1949>), the Senior Staff Attorney contacted our Project Leader to seek information on whether there are any laws that hinder a

woman's ability to run away from her husband or a forced marriage in The Gambia, and to know whether our Project Leader is aware of anything under civil, sharia, or customary law in the Gambia that would result in a woman being arrested for running away from a forced marriage or trying to seek a divorce without her family's consent. the potential impact of our research project on preventing early marriage in The Gambia

Overall Assessment and Recommendations

We have learned the project implementation that community-based interventions that are focused on engaging communities and building the capacity of key community stakeholders can potentially prevent early marriage for girls in rural Gambia. This lesson learned is supported by the mid-term evaluation results of the project, which indicated direct attribution of change in knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage and its prevention at the individual and community level to the project package of interventions, such as explained by these testimonies:

“We didn't know what we were doing [referring to early marriage] was harmful to girls. But after we were trained on the health consequences of early marriage by the project team, we have now realized how detrimental our actions were [KI 2, Community-based committee member]. Another participant added: “We have learned through the early marriage project that it is better to delay marriage for our daughters.” [FGD 1]

The effectiveness of the project package of interventions in preventing early marriage is also supported by the quantitative findings of the mid-term evaluation. The results of the evaluation show a significant increase from a baseline of (44.8%) to (70.7%) at midline among the parents who have the view that the girl needs to come of age (18 years) before going into marriage. At both baseline and midline, there is a fear that girls may break their virginity by indulging in premarital sex if they do not marry early. Although this fear is widespread and constitutes a primary reason for early marriage, there was a significant decrease from (51.7%) at baseline to (10%) (p-value <0.001) in the proportion of parents who think girls must marry early to avoid premarital sex. The results show an increasing acceptance by the adolescents that parents should decide when their children should get married, which can potentially influence the perpetuation of early marriage. However, there is between (2%) and (7%) increase from baseline to midline on the view that adolescents have the right to choose when and who to marry. Qualitative findings directly attributed the change in knowledge of and attitudes toward early marriage and its prevention to the project interventions. In the target communities, the study found that at midline, girls in both Lower and Central Baddibu districts marry at an average age of 18, indicating a decline in early marriages because, at baseline, the average age at marriage for girls was 16 years. One of the reasons why communities have changed their minds about early marriage or have led to the decline in early marriages includes exposure to early marriage prevention messages by the project, which includes information about the health consequences and legal implications of early marriage. Especially as it relates to the legal implications, there is generally a low report rate of early marriage cases. However, the results of the midline evaluation show a gradual increase in reporting. Forty percent of adolescents at midline were able to talk to someone for support to stop early marriage compared to 0% at the baseline.

To ensure the project achievements and impact are sustained beyond the project, we will make use of the already established community-based committees. These committees will be

trained on how to counsel and handle adolescent issues, including cases of early and forced marriages and unions. The community-based committees will be capacitated to identify and approach early and forced marriage cases diligently. This will enable them to identify and provide assistance to adolescents facing cases of early and forced marriages even after the project has phased out. Also, in considering scale-up to new community contexts, we have started the implementation of the community engagement forums and discussions on early marriage in Nyamanarr village, which is about 372 kilometers from the capital city, where there is high prevalence of early marriages. Already baseline data has been collected from this community and in combination with the results of the mid-term evaluation and experience gained from this community scale-up so far, we intend to use this scale-up experience and knowledge from the project implementation in Lower and Central Baddibu Districts to study the feasibility and acceptability of implementing the project package of interventions in other Gambian districts where there is high prevalence of early marriage. For this realization, we are seeking additional support of IDRC to enable us scale-up the project to other Gambian districts to ensure that adolescent girls in The Gambia are free from child, early, forced marriages, and unions (CEFMU) by the year 2030 in line with the sustainable development goals (SDGs).