

# Findings and lessons learned from developing a five-year community-based intervention for preventing early marriage in rural Gambia

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**Background:** Early marriage below the age of 18 is common among girls in West Africa. *Preventing Early Marriage in Rural Gambia: Testing an Intervention* was a five-year (October 2018 to October 2023) implementation research project that aimed to reduce the prevalence of early marriage for girls in The Gambia.

**Methods:** A pre-post-intervention research design with baseline and midline data was used to document the findings and lessons learned from developing this project.

**Results:** At baseline, the project aimed to uncover the social and cultural factors contributing to early marriage. The baseline survey found that ethnicity and the fear that girls may engage in premarital sex were two important factors associated with early marriage. Other factors included 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. This knowledge was used to design and implement the project package of interventions to reduce the prevalence of early marriage among girls aged 10-19 in 53 rural communities in Lower and Central Baddibu Districts in the North Bank Region of The Gambia. The package of interventions included community engagement forums and discussion sessions on early marriage, capacity building for key community stakeholders, livelihood skills training and group formation for adolescent boys and girls and support for girls to remain in school. Evaluation of the effects of the project at midline revealed its contribution to an increase in the mean and average age of marriage for girls from 16 to 18 years, with an example of an individual family's changed decision-making process through their involvement in the project. Findings from the midline evaluation also indicated a change in knowledge of, and attitudes towards, early marriage among parents and adolescent boys and girls in the project implementation districts.

**Conclusions:** A key lesson learned from developing this project intervention is that locally-based interventions that are carefully designed and implemented with meaningful participation from communities, including key stakeholders, have the potential to address the drivers of early marriage for girls in rural Gambia.

**Keywords:** Early marriage, Gambia, rural, adolescents, boys, girls

## Plain English

Early marriage, also defined as marriage below the age of 18, mainly affects girls. It is common in many West African countries, including The Gambia. This study sought to document the findings and lessons learned from developing a five-year implementation research project addressing early marriage among girls aged 10-19 in 53 rural communities in The Gambia.

## Background

Early marriage below the age of 18 is a common marital practice affecting girls in many African countries [1]. In The Gambia, nearly 8.6% of marriages involve girls younger than 15, and 46.5% of marriages are with girls aged 18 or under [2]. Early marriage in The Gambia has resulted in men abandoning older wives for younger ones, leading to a vicious cycle of abuse toward women [3]. It has also contributed to pregnancy-related complications and deaths as one of the leading causes of mortality for married girls between the ages of 15 and 19, particularly among the youngest of this cohort [2].

To contribute to the prevention of early marriage for girls in The Gambia, the Society for the Study of Women's Health (SSWH) and the Agency for the Development of Women and Children (ADWAC) implemented the project, *'Preventing Early Marriage in The Gambia: Testing an Intervention'*. 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. Funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the overall aim of the project was to determine the factors that either led to a decline in, or perpetuate early marriage. This knowledge was used to design, implement and assess a contextually relevant and scalable package of interventions that included community engagement forums and discussion sessions focusing on the social norms around early marriage, capacity building for key community stakeholders, empowerment of boys and girls with information on early marriage, sexual and reproductive health and rights and livelihood skills training for revenue generation, as well as supporting girls to remain in school. The package of interventions was implemented in Lower and Central Badibu Districts in the North Bank Region of The Gambia, the second poorest region in the country. This study aims to document the findings and lessons learned from developing the project package of interventions.

Methods

## Study design and settings

The implementation research study used a pre-and-post-intervention approach with baseline and midline surveys to document the findings and lessons learned from implementing a five-year community-based intervention for preventing early marriage in rural Gambia. The main research questions that the study sought to explore were: what are the findings and lessons learned from developing this project, and what are the characteristics and effects of the implementation of the project package of interventions in changing knowledge of, and attitudes towards, early marriage and its prevention at the individual and community levels.

The study compared quantitative data collected through a cross-sectional household survey at baseline in the year (2018) in 20 communities in Lower Baddibu District and at midline (2023) in 27 communities in both Lower Baddibu District and Central Baddibu District. Lower and Central Baddibu Districts were the two project implementation districts (**Figure 1**). They were chosen for the study because they have a high prevalence of early marriage. Both districts have a median age at first marriage of 17.3 years.

### **Sampling and recruitment**

For recruiting the study respondents, communities at both the baseline and midline surveys were randomly selected and grouped under the four major ethnic groups (Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, and Serer), which are also the main dialects and local languages in the two project implementation districts. A household list was obtained for all households in the selected villages in the two implementation districts. The villages and households were randomly selected. Households selected in randomly selected villages were numbered and a random list was picked using a computer. Based on this sampling procedure, two hundred and one household heads were selected and interviewed on their knowledge of, and attitudes towards, early marriage and the importance of its prevention. The research team selected households having either one of the parents (male or female). One parent was interviewed from each selected household. At the household level, respondents were selected through convenience sampling for the survey.

For the survey of adolescents at baseline and midline, the research team covered households having adolescents. One adolescent was interviewed from each selected household where the parent interview was conducted. Adolescents in the selected households were interviewed away from their parents and other members of the family where they could speak freely. The targeted adolescents for the interview were those within the age range of 10-19, 15-19 and 20-24. However, preference was given to the youngest of these age groups.

### **Data collection**

A Parent Questionnaire, a Male Adolescent Questionnaire and a Female Adolescent Questionnaire were developed and used to conduct interviews with 513 female and male parents and 350 adolescent boys and girls at baseline in 24 communities in Lower Baddibu District. The interviews were conducted in the four main local languages (Mandinka, Fula, Wolof and Serer) in the two implementation districts by trained data collectors who are fluent in these languages.

The midline survey data collection, on the other hand, was conducted with 201 parents and 296 adolescent boys and girls in both Lower District and Central Baddibu District. The survey questionnaires for both baseline and midline surveys collected data on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, their perceptions of the appropriate age of marriage, reasons for the practice of early marriage, and early marriage decision-making roles.

## **Data analysis**

Descriptive analysis of survey respondents' demographic characteristics was first conducted using the means and standard deviations for continuous variables and the frequencies and percentages for categorical variables. Apart from the simple percentages, the study also compared the responses between the baseline and midline, which included a test of statistical significance between the baseline and midline. However, the data analysis for the midline does not include multivariable analysis because it was mainly aimed at establishing the difference in knowledge level and attitudes towards early marriage between baseline and midline of project intervention, which was determined using Chi-square test. The data analysis compared the responses between the baseline and midline, between ethnic groups, and among males and females. The baseline survey recorded demographic characteristics of respondents. The questions for the baseline survey and midline survey were worded identically on both surveys to facilitate measurement of change at midline. All the analyses were conducted in Stata version 12.0 produced by StataCorp in College Station, TX.

## **Results**

The results are presented in three sections. First, data on socio-demographic characteristics of respondents in the baseline and midline surveys are presented. Second, a presentation on how the project intervention was designed and implemented based on the findings of the baseline survey is made. Finally, a comparison between the project baseline and midline data is done to show effects of the implementation of the project intervention package.

### **Demographic characteristics of respondents in the baseline and midline surveys**

The baseline survey was conducted with 513 female and male parents and 350 adolescent boys and girls in 24 communities in Lower Baddibu District. Nearly 70% of female adolescents who were surveyed belonged to the Mandinka and Fula ethnic groups and are older than 13 years. About 12% of them are currently married. On average, female adolescents have 4.2 years of schooling and about 45% are currently attending school. For the survey of parents, nearly 55% of the mothers were less than 34 years old, higher than the 36.4 % observed in the same age groups for fathers. More than 90% of both fathers and mothers are currently married. About 73% of mothers have zero years of education and more than 90% of fathers did any type of work in the year that preceded the survey.

For the midline survey, in total, 201 parents participated. Ninety-nine were interviewed in Central Baddibu District (CB) and 102 in Lower Baddibu (LB) District in the North Bank Division of The Gambia. More males (CB=67%, LB=76%) than females (CB=33%, LB=23%) participated in the survey, and 97 did not indicate their sex as males or females. Eighty-three, representing (42%), belonged to the Mandinka ethnic group, 49 (25%) Fula, 55 (28%) Wolof, and only (3%) of respondents came from the Serer. In terms of employment, many of the parents reported being engaged in farming (78.6%), a few in business (7.8%), and self-employment (7.7%), with only one working for the government. Only three have had a university education and five had technical/vocational education, but the majority (36) did not have any certificate although they

have ever been to school. A little more than one-quarter (20.8%) could read and write in English. All parent respondents of the midline are Muslims with no Christians nor traditional believers.

For the survey of adolescents, it was conducted with a total of 296 adolescents, comprising 149 (50.3%) males and 147 (49.7%) females. One hundred and fifty-two were interviewed in the Central Baddibu District and 144 (48.6%) in Lower Baddibu District. The majority (46%) of these respondents belonged to the Mandinka ethnicity, (24.9%) Fula, and (26%) Wolof. Serer represents only (3%) of the ethnic groups.

### **Design and implementation of the project intervention package**

In the initial exploratory phase, the goal of the project was to uncover the social and cultural factors contributing to early marriage among girls through a mixed-methods approach that included collecting quantitative data through a cross-sectional household survey with a sample of 181 female and 169 male adolescents, as well as qualitative data through focus group discussions with 16 male and female parents, and eight key informant interviews with three female and five male community-based decision makers who were conveniently selected from Lower Baddibu District. The formative research found that ethnicity and the fear that girls may engage in premarital sex are two important factors associated with early marriage. Other factors included 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 [4]. These findings were used to guide the co-creation of the project package of intervention with stakeholders, including members of the local steering committee and community-based committees in the intervention communities.

During implementation, the project tailored the intervention based on the research findings and through ongoing learning and monitoring with project stakeholders. The intervention aimed for one key outcome—changing knowledge of, and attitudes towards, early marriage and its prevention at the individual and community levels. The strategies were used in combination and included empowering girls with information and skills, engagement of boys and girls, mobilising parents and community leaders in opposition to the practice of early marriage, community dialogue to promote gender and social norms change, and support for girls to remain in school to delay their age at marriage. The intervention strategy used a social ecological framework reaching out with focused interventions at the individual and community levels with identified adolescent boys and girls, parents and key community-based decision makers, including selected members from local governance such as village development committee members. The intervention package included community engagement forums and discussion sessions, empowerment of girls with skills and information, community engagement forums and discussion sessions, education support for girls, group formation for adolescent boys and girls and capacity building for key community stakeholders.

The project 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 to improve their economic development opportunities. Additionally, aiming to reach young men 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. These peer educators were in turn used to organise 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 adolescent girls at risk of early marriage and school dropout. The educational support included the provision of school uniforms, bags, shoes and other learning materials and transport fares to and from school.

At community level, the project carried community engagement forums and discussion sessions on the social and gender norms surrounding early marriage. The community engagement forums and structured discussion sessions were delivered with parents and other community members and through movie screening to stimulate discussions on the causes and effects of early marriage and to shift social and gender norms around early marriage. The project 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.

### **Evaluating the effects of the project package of intervention**

The results of the midline evaluation of the effects of the project intervention, which compared the project baseline and midline data, show a significant increase in the percentage of parents who believe girls need to come of age (18 years) before marrying: from a baseline of 44.8% to 70.7% at midline. 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 [4], there was a significant decrease, from 51.7% at baseline to 10% at midline (p-value <0.001) in the proportion of parents who think girls must marry early to avoid premarital sex (**Table 1**).

The results show an increasing acceptance by adolescents that parents should decide when their children should get married, which can potentially influence the perpetuation of early marriage (**Table 2**). However, there is between a 2% to 7% increase from baseline to midline on the view that adolescents have the right to choose when and who to marry. 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 that could possibly explain the increase in average age of marriage includes exposure to early marriage prevention messages by the project, which provided includes information about the health consequences and legal implications of early marriage but also the increasing enrolment of girls in school and the law banning child 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.

## **Discussion**

This study documents key findings and lessons learned from developing a five-year community-based intervention for preventing early marriage for girls in rural Gambia. The intervention aimed for one key outcome—changing knowledge of, and attitudes towards, early marriage and its prevention at the individual and community levels. The intervention strategies were used in combination across all the communities in the two implementation districts and included empowering girls with information and skills, engagement of boys and girls, mobilising parents and community leaders in opposition to the practice of early marriage, community dialogue to promote gender and social norms change, and support for girls to remain in school to delay their age at marriage.

In the exploratory phase, the goal of the project was to uncover the social and cultural factors contributing to early marriage for girls. During implementation, the project tailored interventions based on the baseline data collection. It then organised community engagement forums, direct advocacy and training of local communities and leaders to enlist their support in ending early marriage. The study found that compared with the baseline data, at midline, girls in both Lower and Central Baddibu districts marry at an average age of 18, indicating a decline in early marriages compared to the baseline, when the average age at marriage for girls was 16 years. This result suggests that increasingly the lawful marriage age of 18 years is becoming acceptable as many girls marry at that age.

Besides the fact that the average marriage age at both baseline and midline has remained the same (18), the age at which parents expect a girl to marry has increased from a minimum of 16 years at baseline to 18 years at midline. The new norm that is fostering the change in parent's attitudes towards early marriage for girls includes the increasing recognition of the value of girls' education [5]. This finding is supported by the survey data which shows that the percentage of female adolescents who agreed that girls were interested in education increased from 65.6% at baseline to 88.4% at midline, indicating a significant increase in the number of girls schooling within the period of the project. Similarly, the male adolescents who agreed that girls have an interest in school also increased from 70.3% at baseline to 82.9% at midline, showing a significant ( $p$ -value 0.02) jump of about 13%. A marginally higher number of parents 97.3% at midline indicated that girls had equal rights as boys compared to 53.4% at baseline.

The changing perception of the traditional roles of women within the household have also fostered change in attitudes towards early marriage and its prevention. When asked whether a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family, about 86% of parents at baseline and midline answered in the affirmative. Fewer 45% male adolescents at midline than at baseline 64.5% agreed that the woman's most important role is to take care of the home. The reduction in support for this assertion, especially by the adolescents, indicates a shift in knowledge away from perceiving the woman as the carer of the home. This has implications for the practice of early marriage. Other studies have shown that perceived gender roles of women are strongly correlated with early marriage [6].

### **Study strengths and limitations**

This study is the first of its kind that has shown the effectiveness of a community-based

intervention in changes in knowledge of, and attitudes towards, early marriage in The Gambia. However, in considering the findings and the conclusions of this study, the following limitations should be noted. First, the midline data was collected from Lower and Central Baddibu districts, while the baseline data was collected from Lower Baddibu. This does not give an even platform to compare changes across the two communities. The data collected at midline did not come from the same respondents as the baseline. This has not made it possible to do individual-level analysis to measure the change accurately at the individual level. The study also did not analyse each individual intervention to get more clarity on what types of intervention is more effective across the different communities and ethnic groups. These are major limitations that need to be considered in the future to lead to a more intersectional analysis since ethnicity was found to be among the main factors associated with early marriage at baseline.

## **Conclusion**

The study findings showed that the project has contributed to an increase in the average age of marriage among girls and led to an increased knowledge and understanding of the impacts of early marriage on girls and the appropriate age of marriage for girls. The findings also show that, overall, the objectives of the project, which were to change knowledge and attitudes towards early marriage and its prevention at the individual and community levels were reached. The data indicate that changes in knowledge of, and attitudes towards, early marriage and its prevention can be attributed to the project intervention package, including the community engagement forums and discussion sessions and the training of peer educators organised for adolescent boys and girls. A key lesson learned from implementing this project is that locally-based interventions that are carefully designed and implemented with meaningful participation from communities, including key community stakeholders, have the potential to address early marriage for girls in rural communities in The Gambia.

## **List of abbreviations**

ADWAC	Agency for the Development of Women and Children
CB	Central Baddibu
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
LB	Lower Baddibu
SSWH	Society for the Study of Women's Health

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### **Author contributions**

AD, AG, IN, MB, MJ contributed to the data collection. ML designed the study and conducted the data analysis and interpretation, and writing of the first and final manuscript.

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### **Availability of data and materials**

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this study.

### **Declarations**

#### **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The study on which this paper is based received ethical approval from the Scientific Coordinating Committee (SCC) at the Medical Research Council (MRC) The Gambia at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and from The Gambia Government/MRC Joint Ethics Committee. The SCC provided some inputs on the study proposal and tools following a presentation by the main author at its meeting. The revised study proposal and tools in relation to the issues raised by the SCC was re-submitted by the main author and later approved by the SCC, which provided approval with approval number SCC 1651v1.1. Following the SCC approval, the study proposal and tools were later sent to the Joint Gambia Government/MRC Ethics Committee for further consideration, which also provided ethical approval (SCC 1651v1.2) following review of the approved proposal. During data collection, informed consent, verbal and written depending on the level of literacy, were obtained from the study participants.

#### **Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

#### **Competing interests**

No competing interests.

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## Tables and figures

**Table 1.** Reasons for early marriage

Why girls marry early	Baseline (%)	Midline (%)
Fear of teenage pregnancy/premarital sex	47.6	50.7
Parental decision	24.5	15.1
Dropped out of school	5.7	6.8

**Table 1.** Age at which girls normally get married according to parents and adolescents

Variable	Baseline	Midline	P-Value
<b>Parents</b>	<b>N=234</b>	<b>N=76</b>	
Age before which it is considered too early for girls to marry	17 (15-18)	16 (15-18)	0.058
Age before which it is considered too early for boys to marry	20 (20-25)	20 (18-25)	0.11
<b>Male adolescents</b>	<b>N=166</b>	<b>N=76</b>	
Age before which it is considered too early for girls to marry	18 (16-19)	18 (15.5-18.5)	0.57

Age before which it is considered too early for boys to marry	20 (19-25)	21 (20-25)	0.68
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**Figure 1.** Map of The Gambia showing districts, including Lower and Central Baddibu Districts

