ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Effectiveness of a community-based intervention in changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage in The Gambia

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Abstract

A study was conducted to assess the effects of a multi-component community-based project intervention on changing knowledge of, and attitudes towards early marriage for girls in The Gambia. The study involved a cross-sectional household survey of 201 male and female parents and 296 adolescent boys and girls aged 10-19. It also included two community-based focus group discussions and six key informant interviews. The study compared the project baseline and midline data in the analysis of the survey data. The findings 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. However, 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 findings show between (2%) and (7%) increase from baseline to midline on the view among adolescent boys and girls that girls have the right to choose who to marry. Findings from the focus group discussions and key informant interviews directly linked the changes in knowledge of attitudes towards early marriage among parents and adolescents to the project intervention. *(Afr J Reprod Health 2024; 28 [8s]: 41-50).*

Keywords: Early marriage; Gambia; rural; adolescents; boys; girls

Résumé

Une étude a été menée pour évaluer les effets d'un projet d'intervention communautaire à plusieurs composantes sur l'évolution des connaissances et des attitudes à l'égard du mariage précoce des filles en Gambie. L'étude impliquait une enquête transversale auprès des ménages auprès de 201 parents, hommes et femmes, et de 296 adolescents, garçons et filles, âgés de 10 à 19 ans. Il comprenait également deux groupes de discussion communautaires et six entretiens avec des informateurs clés. L'étude a comparé les données de référence et intermédiaires du projet dans l'analyse des données de l'enquête. Les résultats montrent une augmentation significative d'une valeur de base de (44,8 %) à (70,7 %) à mi-parcours parmi les parents qui estiment que la fille doit atteindre la majorité (18 ans) avant de se marier. Au départ comme à mi-parcours, on craint que les filles puissent briser leur virginité en se livrant à des relations sexuelles avant le mariage si elles ne se marient pas tôt. Cependant, il y a eu une diminution significative de (51,7 %) au départ à (10 %) (valeur p <0,001) de la proportion de parents qui pensent que les filles doivent se marier tôt pour éviter les relations sexuelles avant le mariage. Les résultats montrent qu'entre (2 %) et (7 %) l'opinion des adolescents, garçons et filles, selon laquelle les filles ont le droit de choisir avec qui se marier, augmente entre le début et la fin de l'étude. Les résultats des discussions de groupe et des entretiens avec des informateurs clés ont directement lié les changements dans les connaissances sur les attitudes à l'égard du mariage précoce chez les parents et les adolescents à l'intervention du projet. *(Afr J Reprod Health 2024; 28 [8s]: 41-50).*

Mots-clés: Mariage précoce ; Gambie ; rural ; adolescentes ; garçons ; filles

Introduction

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%[1].

However, the rate of decline has been slowest in West and Central Africa, the region with the highest prevalence of child marriage[2]. Within the region, estimates vary from 76% in Niger to

18% in Cape Verde[3]. In West and Central Africa four in ten girls marry before the age of eighteen and one in three marry before age 15[4]. 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[3]. 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 inequalities[5-6].

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[7]. But this declined over the past two decades, and now an estimated 30% of women aged 20-24 marry before 18[7]. The reasons for this decline include the introduction of the law banning child marriage in 2016 and the increasing enrolment of girls in school[8]. Despite the decrease in early marriage in The Gambia, the practice continues. Some of the factors responsible for the continuing perpetuation of early marriage in The Gambia include ethnicity, the fear that girls may engage in premarital sex, and 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[8].

Aside from violating human rights of girls, the practice of early marriage has adverse effects on women and girls in The Gambia. A *study* revealed that the practice of early marriage in The Gambia has resulted in men abandoning older wives for younger ones, leading to abuse toward women and girls[9]. Early marriage has also contributed to pregnancy-related complications as one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality for married girls ages 15 to 19, particularly among the youngest of this cohort[7]. To contribute to the decline in early marriages for girls in The Gambia, a five-year project, '*Preventing Early Marriage in Rural Gambia: Testing an Intervention'* was implemented by the Society for the Study of Women's Health (SSWH) and Agency for Development of Women and Children (ADWAC). This study aims to assess the effects of this project

intervention on changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage for girls.

Project description

The project '*Preventing Early Marriage in rural Gambia: Testing an Intervention'* was implemented from 2017 to 2023 in 53 rural communities across two districts— Lower and Central Baddibu Districts in the North Bank Region of The Gambia—with funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). At baseline, 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 community-based decision makers. The baseline research found that ethnicity and the fear that girls may engage in premarital sex are two important factors associated with early marriage, 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[8]. These findings were used to guide the design and co-creation of the project intervention componemts with relevant project stakeholders, including members of the local steering committee and community-based committees of the project in the intervention communities.

During implementation, the project tailored the project intervention components based on the baseline research findings and through ongoing learning and monitoring with project stakeholders. The project intervention components aimed for one key outcome—changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage and its prevention at the individual and community levels. The strategies included empowering girls with information and skills, engagement of boys and girls, mobilizing 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 project intervention used a social ecological framework

reaching out with focused interventions at the individual and community level 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 components package included community engagement forums and discussion sessions, empowerment of 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 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 reaching 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 and use them to organize educational workshops and training for their peers 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 forum and discussion sessions on the social and gender norms surrounding early marriage. The community engagement forum and discussion sessions were delivered through structured discussion sessions 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.

The aim of this study is to assess the effects of the implementation of the project intervention

components on changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage for girls.
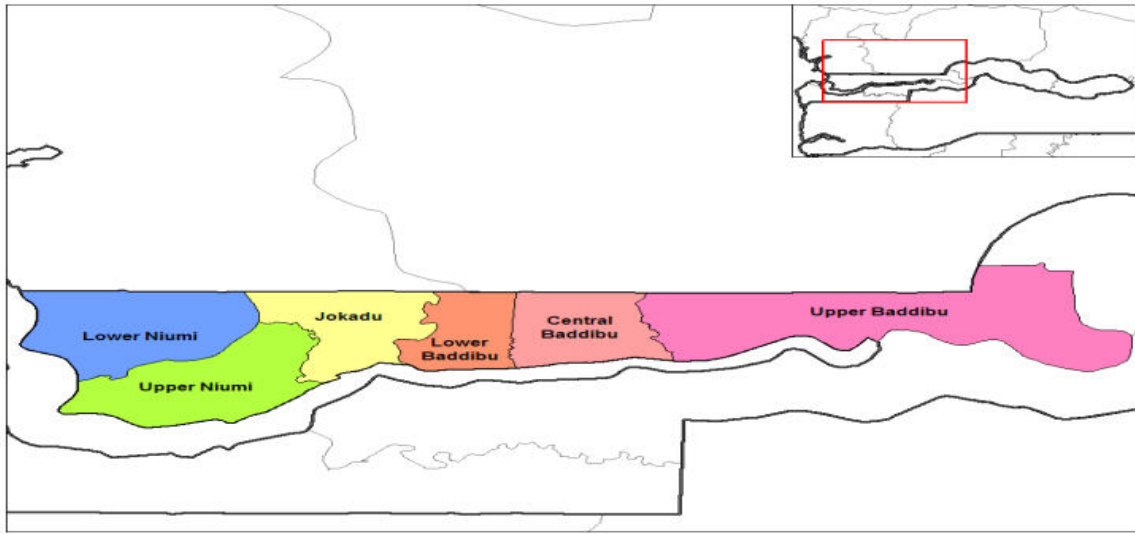
Methods

Study design and setting

The study used a mixed-methods with baseline and midline data, to assess the effects of the project intervention on changing knowledge of and attitudes toward early marriage for girls. It included collecting quantitative data through a cross-sectional household survey as well as qualitative data through focus groups and key informant interviews in twenty-seven communities in the project implementation districts (Figure 1). It compared data collected at baseline in 2018 and at the midline (three years) following the implementation of the project intervention and used mixed methods approach to triangulate and provide a more in-depth understanding of the effects of the project intervention package.

Sampling and recruitment

Cross-sectional household survey

For the cross-sectional household survey, communities were randomly selected and grouped under the four major ethnic groups, namely Mandinka, Fula, Wolof and Serer which are the dominant tribes in the two project implementation districts. A household list was obtained for all houses in the selected villages in the two districts, 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, the research team covered households having adolescents. One adolescent was interviewed from each selected household. If the household had more than one young person, then preference for the interview was

Figure 1: Map of the North Bank Region of The Gambia, including Lower and Central Baddibu Districts

given to the youngest who belonged to the age group that is disproportionately less among the three age groups a) 10-19; b)15-19; c) 20-24.

Focus group discussions

The participants were selected purposively and were mainly parents, including both males and females, who were recruited voluntarily with the help of the research team. The research team recruited 19 parents for the focus group discussions based on their role as household heads who have the potential to influence or determine marriage decisions for girls.

Key informant interviews

The participants for the key informant interviews comprised mainly 6 community-based decision makers and community-based committee members of the project who are also mostly members of the village development committees (VDCs). They are recruited purposively because
they serve as interface between the communities and the project.

Data collection

Quantitative data

A Parent Questionnaire, a Male Questionnaire and a Female Questionnaire were developed and used to conduct interviews with 201 parents and 296 adolescent boys and girls. The questionnaires collected data on respondents' socio-demographic

characteristics, their perceptions of the appropriate age of marriage, reasons for the practice of early marriage, early marriage decision-making roles.

Qualitative data

For the qualitative data collection, two focus group discussions that included 19 participants including both male and female parents were conducted in two selected case study settlements (Chosen Misira and Foday Biran) in Lower Baddibu District, one of the project implementation districts. The focus group discussions typically lasted for 1 hour and were facilitated by a question guide. The question guide explores perceptions of early marriage and of the project contribution in changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage and its prevention. In addition, five key informant interviews were conducted with five representatives of the project community-based committee (CBC) members. The CBC members interviewed were three males and two females. The focus group discussions and key informant interviews were conducted in the two main local languages (Wolof and Mandinka) and were audio-recorded through the support of the field coordinators of the project.

Data analysis

Quantitative data

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 test of statistical significance between the baseline and midline. The study does not include multivariable analysis because it was aimed at detecting difference in knowledge level and attitudes towards early marriage between baseline and midline of the project intervention, which was determined using Chi-square test.

The variables used in the analysis include gender, age, ethnicity, religion, employment status, education status. *Gender* was categorized into male and female. *Age* was categorized into three groups 10-19, 20-39 and 40 years and above based on the different characteristics of this population in relation to the outcome of the study. *Ethnicity* was categorized into the three main ethnic groups, including Mandinka, Fula, Wolof and Serer respectively. *Religion* was categorized into Muslim and Christian. *Employment* was categorized into employed, worked on the last 12 months, self-employed, Government employed, business, farmer, and daily laborer. Education was defined as ability to read and write, ever attended school, technical and vocational certificate, University and college diploma and currently attending schools.

Outcome variables

Right time for a girl to get married was coded as 'once she is an adult', 'when she is financially independent', 'when she can make her own decision', 'according to norms/traditions', 'start of menses/puberty', 'at legal age', 'when she wishes', and 'when family deems appropriate'. *Reasons for getting married early* was categorised as 'parental decision', 'religious beliefs', 'poor family', 'friends getting married', 'family unable to afford school', 'dropped out of school', 'finished school', 'lack of secondary schools', 'puberty/looks like grown up', 'teen pregnancy/premarital sex', 'ignorance', 'financial gain'.
View on who should decide when a girl should marry was categorized into: 'the parents of a girl should decide when their daughter gets married' and 'fathers as heads of household and not mothers should arrange for their children's' marriage'.

The quantitative 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.

Qualitative data

Analysis process for the qualitative data involved listening to all sound recording files from focus group discussions and key informant interviews by the main author before transcription began. After transcription, the transcribed text was read multiple times to make sense of totality of the data. This process of transcription and reading of the transcribed texts allowed identification of thematic categories, which were later developed into major themes. Coding and analysis of all data were subjected to manual thematic analysis[10], and NVivo 11 Pro was used to manage the qualitative data.

Results

Quantitative results

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of parents in the cross-sectional household survey. In total, 201 parents participated in the survey. Ninety-nine (99) 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 (83), 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.

Table 1: Parents' socio-demographic characteristics

District	Respondents
Central Baddibu	99 (49.25)
Lower Baddibu	102 (50.75)
Ethnicity	
Mandinka	83 (41.92)
Fula	49 (24.75)
Wolof	55 (27.78)
Serer	3 (1.52)
Religion	
Muslim	200 (100)
Christian	0
Education	
Ability to read and write	40 (20.83)
Ever attended school	36 (22.50)
Technical/Vocational Certificate	5 (2.5)
University/College Diploma	3 (1.53)
Other (Grades)	188 (95.92)
Employment	
Worked in last 12 months	155 (80.73)
Self-employed	13 (7.74)
Government employed	1 (0.60)
Business	13 (7.74)
Farmer	132 (78.57)
Daily labourer	4 (2.38)
Others	5 (2.98)

Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of adolescents

District	Adolescents Male	Female
Central Baddibu	73 (48.99)	79 (53.74)
Lower Baddibu	76 (51.01)	68 (53.74)
Ethnicity		
Mandinka	60 (42.25)	73 (49.66)
Fula	45 (31.69)	27 (18.37)
Wolof	33 (23.24)	42 (28.57)
Serer	4 (2.82)	5 (3.40)
Religion		
Muslim	148 (99.33)	148 (100)
Christian	1 (0.67)	0
Education		
Ability to read and write	85 (57.05)	70 (47.95)
Ever attended school	104 (70.27)	78 (78.00)
Technical/Vocational Certificate	0	0
University/College Diploma	0	0
Other (Grades)	0	0
Currently in school	66 (49.38)	50 (62.5)
Employment		
Worked in last 12 months	70 (48.61)	20 (14.08)
Self-employed	6 (7.50)	2 (3.13)
Government employed	1 (1.25)	1 (1.56)
Business	6 (7.50)	3 (4.69)
Farmer	33 (41.25)	16 (25)
Daily labourer	19 (23.75)	4 (6.25)

Table 2 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of adolescents in the cross-sectional household survey. 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 (152) 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.

Table 3 shows age at which girls normally get married according to parents and adolescents. When parents were asked to give the age when girls usually get married in their villages, the results show that the median age is 18 (IQR 16-19) at baseline from all 234 parents and 18 (IQR 18-20) at midline from all 76 parents. Although the median age remained the same between the baseline and mid-line surveys, there is a significant change (p-value 0.03) in the distribution of the ages such that the baseline ages are widely distributed over lower ages compared to the midline. Among several options, the baseline results show that 44.8% of

parents stated that the right time for a girl to marry is once she is an adult, while 2.6% think the right time is when a girl is financially independent. For the midline, 70.7% and 18.7% of parents respectively indicated the same views. The significant increase in the percentage of parents opting for a girl to marry only when she is an adult point to a change in attitudes and shift in practice towards allowing girls to reach adulthood before marriage. Despite the increasing belief by parents that girls should reach adulthood before marriage, there were differences among them in the reported age considered too early for girls to get married, with male parents reporting lower ages than female parents. The possible explanations for this gender difference could be because mothers tend to have better knowledge of the household difficulties, such as the heavy workload within the household and pregnancy-related complications that await girls when they get into marriage early.

Table 3: Age at which girls normally get married according to parents and adolescents

Variable	Baseline	Midline	P-Value
Parents	**N=234**	**N=76**	
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
Male adolescents	**N=166**	**N=76**	
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

Table 4: 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

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 (Table 4). Being a virgin until marriage continues to be an essential social and gender attribute for marriage in The Gambia on which the responsibility for this to happen falls mainly on mothers. Because of the social importance of being a virgin, premarital sex for girls is frowned upon and can be more disgraceful to mothers, who traditionally are expected to be the custodian of girls. This explains the main reason why fear of virginity is a major deciding factor in parent's decisions to marry of their girls. Although fear of premarital sex is widespread and constituted a major reason for early marriage of girls, 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.

Table 5 presents parents' view on who decides when girls and boys should marry. The results show an increasing acceptance by the adolescents that parents should decide for their children to marry. But 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. Further, when the results were disaggregated by gender, the adolescent male results show an increase of about (51%) at midline over the baseline in the belief that parents should decide for their children to marry. In comparison, there was a marginal (7.9%) increase in the females' response from (52.5%) to (60.5%) over the same period of the project. Adolescent males and females believe parents should decide for their children's marriage because, in households in The Gambia, parents are traditionally the primary decision-makers on marriage-related matters. This decision-making role and belief among adolescents could influence the perpetuation of early marriage for girls. Therefore, early prevention programs should work on challenging this notion and empowering girls to decide who they want to marry.

Qualitative results

Themes identified during the focus group discussions and key informant interviews revealed that one of the possible reasons parents have changed their minds about early marriage for girls includes their exposure to early marriage prevention messages by the project, which provides information about the harmful effects and legal implications of early marriage, such as explained this participant: *"We didn't know what we were doing [referring to the practice of early marriage] was harmful to girls. But after we met with the project team, we realized how detrimental our actions were* [KI 2, Village development committee chairperson]

Another male participant had this to say: "We have learned through the early marriage project that it is better to delay marriage for our girls. Equally, we have learned there is a minimum legal age of marriage and that early before age 18 is prohibited by law" [FGD 1].

Table 5: Parents' view on who decides when girls and boys should marry

Variable	Response	Baseline	Midline	P-value
The parents of a girl should decide when their daughter gets married	Agree	119 (52.7%)	54 (72.0%)	
	Partially agree	24 (10.6%)	2 (2.7%)	0.007
	Disagree	83 (36.7%)	19 (25.3%)	
The parents of a boy should decide when their son gets married	Agree	119 (52.7%)	54 (72.0%)	
	Partially agree	24 (10.6%)	2 (2.7%)	0.007
	Disagree	83 (36.7%)	19 (25.3%)	
Fathers as heads of household and not mothers should arrange for their children's' marriage	Agree	137 (60.4%)	54 (72.0%)	
	Partially agree	8 (3.5%)	2 (2.7%)	0.19
	Disagree	82 (36.1%)	19 (25.3%)	

The qualitative findings also revealed that despite the increasing belief by parents that girls should reach adulthood before marriage, there were differences among them in the reported age considered too early for girls to get married, with male parents reporting lower ages than female parents. The possible explanations for this gender difference could be because, according to a female participant: *"Mothers tend to have better knowledge of the household difficulties, such as the heavy workload within the household and pregnancy-related complications that await girls when they get into marriage early."* [FDG 1]. This and other related statements explain the reason for the differences in perception of the appropriate age of marriage between male and female parents and demonstrate the general lack of division of labour between husband and wife, which also has implications for the gendered patterning affecting the health and social well-being of married adolescent girls in rural Gambia, such as explained by this female participant:

"The consequences for the heavy workload on women can be detrimental, especially for young pregnant girls who are not old and physically matured enough. This is why it is wrong for girls to get married early or at younger ages because they cannot endure the heavy household chores. We have learned these issues during the training organised by the project." [FGD 2].

Discussion

This study assesses the effect of a community-based intervention on changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage and its prevention at the individual and community levels in The Gambia. It is based on the project, 'Preventing Early Marriage in Rural Gambia: Testing an Intervention'. This project focuses on determining the underlying factors of early marriage and designing and implementing a relevant intervention to reduce the prevalence of early marriage for girls in rural communities in Lower and Central Baddibu Districts in the North Bank Region of The Gambia. 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. 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 time points has remained the same (18), the age at which parents expect a girl to get into marriage has raised 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 include the increasing recognition of the value of girls' education[4]. During the focus group discussions, participants said they have stopped marrying off their girls early because they want them to be educated and become economically independent later in life. 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 between the baseline and midline. 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 by, especially the adolescents, indicates a shift in knowledge away from perceiving the woman carer of the home. This has implications for the practice of early marriage. A study, for instance has established perceived gender roles as mainly associtated with the practice of early marriage[11].

During the focus group discussions, participants also said that among the factors that have led to the shift in perceptions of early marriage is exposure to early marriage prevention messages by the project, which provides information about the health consequences and legal implications of early marriage received from the project. Especially regarding the legal implications of early marriage, there is generally a low report rate of early marriage cases. However, the results of the midline evaluation show a gradual increase in reporting from zero percent (0%) at baseline to forty percent (40%) at midline among adolescents. This finding is in consonance with another Ethiopian study[12], which revealed that exposure to 10 or more messages increased the reported age to 17. Despite the potential of exposure to messages on early marriage in changing attitudes towards early marriage, the study showed that at both baseline and midline, there is still a fear that girls may break their virginity by indulging in premarital sex if they do not marry early. In addition, the results show an increasing acceptance by adolescents that parents should decide when their children should get married. These factors can potentially influence the continuous perpetuation of early marriage for girls in rural Gambia.

The qualitative findings also suggest that male parents provided lower ages considered too early for a girl to get married because of their limited knowledge of some of the difficulties encountered by married girls regarding household chores. The heavy workload for young married girls could also be explained by the general lack of division of labour between husband and wife.

Strengths and limitations

This study has showed the effectiveness of a community-based intervention on changing knowledge of and attitudes towards early marriage for girls 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 midline data collection did not also trace to collect data from the same respondents from the baseline. This has not made it possible to do individual-level analysis to measure the change accurately at the individual level.

Conclusion

Although this study is limited by its cross-sectional nature and the fact that it only collected data in two Gambian districts, which does not allow generalization of the findings, it is the first study that has attempted to assess a community-based intervention's effect in changing knowledge and attitudes towards early marriage and its prevention in The Gambia. The findings suggest that community-based interventions focused on engaging communities and building the capacity of key community stakeholders can effectively change knowledge of and attitudes toward early marriage and its prevention in rural Gambian communities. However, for such interventions to be more effective in preventing early marriage for girls, they need to be gender transformative by addressing the gendered socio-cultural norms, including the fear regarding virginity, which is the root cause of early marriage for girls, as well as shifting the gender and social norms shaping inequalities and giving girls decision-making power regarding who they want to marry.

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Ethical approval

Approval for this study was granted by the Scientific Coordinating Committee (SCC 1651v1.1) Medical Research Council The Gambia (MRCG) at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). The study was also approved by the Joint Gambia Government/ MRCG Ethics Committee (SCC 1651v1.2). Informed consent including (verbal and written consent) was sought and obtained from the adolescent boys and girls and their parents.

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Conflict of interest

No competing interests were disclosed.

Contribution of authors

The study was conceptualized, designed and written entirely by Mat Lowe. He wrote the first and final draft of the paper.

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