

*Study Report
- Summary -*

QUALITATIVE STUDY ON FAMILY DYNAMICS AND DECISION-MAKING REGARDING CHILD MARRIAGE

*An investigation of attitudes and social norms related to child
marriage before and after implementation of the
Girls' Holistic Development Program
in Nemataba Commune, Velingara Department, Senegal*

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STUDY REPORT SUMMARY

A major threat faced by young girls in Southern Senegal, as in many places in Africa, is child marriage, i.e. marriage of girls before the age of 18. This practice, which violates girls' human rights, and which has serious consequences for their lives, reflects a deep-seated cultural norm.

While many NGOs have developed programs to challenge and change this practice, the results have been limited. Many programs have focused only, or primarily, on girls, and have not given sufficient consideration to the family and cultural contexts in which girls are embedded and with which they identify.

Grandmother Project-Change through Culture recognizes the importance of family and social influence on the continuation of this practice. Over the past 10 years, GMP has developed the innovative *Girls' Holistic Development Program* (GHD) to address child marriage, girls' education, teen pregnancy and female genital mutilation. This program has been implemented in the Velingara area of Kolda Region in Southern Senegal, and since late 2016, in Nemataba Commune. In order to bring about community-wide change to support girls' rights and development, GHD involves all categories of community members, but especially grandmothers, given their influence on social norms and their culturally-designated responsibility for girls' development and socialization. The GHD strategy consists of strengthening communication between generations (elders, other adults, and adolescents) and between men and women, catalyzing discussion between them on child marriage and other priority issues related to GHD. A key component of the strategy involves increasing grandmothers' knowledge of the detrimental effects of child marriage and strengthening their confidence to discourage the practice in families and communities.

According to local education sector and administrative officials, where the GHD program is carried out, "the incidence of marriage of girls under age 18 has decreased considerably". Unfortunately, neither the education nor health authorities have precise data on the trends in child marriage in the area.

This study was carried out in September 2019 in Nemataba and focused on better understanding the current situation concerning child marriage. The purpose was to investigate family dynamics related to making decisions about the marriage of young girls. Specific study objectives were:

- Understand the role and influence of different family members, including young girls, on decisions regarding the age of marriage and the choice of husband;
- Determine if attitudes towards child marriage have changed in villages in Nemataba Commune since the GHD program was initiated;
- Identify key aspects of the GHD program that have contributed to changes in community views and norms related to the marriage of young girls.

The study methodology involved qualitative data collection through group interviews that were conducted with several categories of community members: grandmothers (24), community elders and religious leaders (9), women of reproductive age (WRA) (31), adolescent girls (35) and fathers

(9). Interviews were conducted in the local language, Pulaar, and notes were taken in French. The information collected was analyzed manually using the thematic analysis technique. Responses of the different categories of interviewees were triangulated to formulate the study findings related to the study objectives.

Key study results:

COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING AROUND GIRLS' MARRIAGE :

According to tradition, decisions concerning the marriage of daughters are mainly made by fathers, because of their status as the leading *family authority*. Culturally, the father is the one who formalizes marriages of daughters. The study shows that there has been a significant shift and nowadays various family members are involved in the decision-making process regarding the age of marriage and the choice of girls' spouse: namely, fathers, uncles, mothers, grandmothers and adolescent girls themselves. The current study indicates that today, while the father still exercises final authority regarding marriage matters, the decision-making process around marriage is considerably more participatory than in the past. Today, the opinions of other family members are more often taken into account, especially those of young daughters and of grandmothers, particularly paternal grandmothers.

GIRLS' OPINIONS ARE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT:

The majority of those interviewed agree that girls are now systematically involved in decisions concerning marriage, contrary to the practice in the past. Today, their opinions count substantially, even if they cannot simply decide to marry without consulting their parents.

INCREASED INFLUENCE OF GRANDMOTHERS ON DECISIONS REGARDING THE MARRIAGE OF GIRLS:

marriage of young girls. The study reveals that today, grandmothers exert considerable influence on fathers' decisions concerning their daughters' marriages. The various categories of community members interviewed state that nowadays if a father decides to give his daughter in marriage before she is 18, it is the grandmother who has the greatest degree of influence to dissuade him from doing so. This is due to the grandmother's newly acquired confidence and knowledge, and also to the father's increased receptivity to the advice of the grandmothers.

CHANGES IN FAMILY ATTITUDES AND COMMUNITY NORMS TOWARDS CHILD MARRIAGE:

The change in family attitudes towards child marriage has come about through the significant shift in the roles of both young girls themselves and of other family members in the decision-making process concerning child marriage. The study clearly reveals that, in the past, community members in Nemataba Commune were in favour of marrying off their daughters before the age of 18, whereas now most support the idea of waiting until girls are at least 18. While there is still a minority of parents who continue the traditional practice, most interviewees say that now most parents are against child marriage.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHANGES IN ATTITUDES AND NORMS CONCERNING GIRLS' MARRIAGE:

Triangulation of the responses from the several categories of interviewees, i.e. fathers, mothers, grandmothers and adolescent girls) supports the conclusion that the intergenerational and grandmother-inclusive GHD strategy has contributed to positive changes in norms and in attitudes related to child marriage. The study identified several key elements of the GHD strategy that appear to have contributed to these changes, namely:

- Creating spaces for open discussion of child marriage and other GHD issues,
- Increasing communities' knowledge of issues related to child marriage, and
- Empowering grandmother leaders to act collectively to discourage child marriage.

CREATION OF SPACES BY GHD FOR OPEN DISCUSSION

A key facet of GMP's program was the creation of spaces for open discussion of GHD issues through a series of activities that involved all categories of community members. According to interviewees, these activities elicited reflection on existing attitudes and practices, catalyzed discussion of new information on child marriage, and encouraged community members to identify strategies to overcome this harmful practice.

The *intergenerational forums* were the principal activity that strengthened communication between community actors and encouraged discussion of GHD. In contrast to the more directive approach to communication that traditionally prevailed between elders and young people and between men and women, in the intergenerational forums the communication approach used is based on listening and dialogue. Based on interviewee responses, it appears that an unintended consequence of the dialogue-based forums and other group activities has been the adoption of a more inclusive and participative approach in family decision-making concerning the marriage of adolescents and other issues.

INCREASED COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE ON ISSUES RELATED TO CHILD MARRIAGE

Through the community gatherings organized by GMP, communities have increased their knowledge of the problems associated with child marriage. Now, community members frequently refer to the hazards related to young girls' health if they marry at a very young age, associated with inevitable pregnancies and deliveries. They also are now more convinced of the importance of allowing girls to continue their schooling. When girls are married very young, this invariably force them to drop out of school.

STRENGTHENING THE CONFIDENCE OF GRANDMOTHER LEADERS TO CHALLENGE CHILD MARRIAGE

Thanks to the GHD activities, grandmothers have become more committed and involved in efforts to discourage child marriage. According to grandmothers themselves, the GHD empowering activities and acquisition of new knowledge has contributed to increasing their confidence and capacity to promote community understanding of the dangers of child marriage, and of the importance of letting girls continue their education as long as possible. The study shows that grandmother leaders have acted both individually and collectively, through consultation with other grandmothers, mothers, fathers, community leaders and young girls to promote community-wide consensus on the need to abandon the practice of child marriage. There are many examples of fathers whose intention was to marry their daughters and who were persuaded, by groups of grandmother leaders, to abandon their plans. These examples demonstrate the ability of empowered grandmothers to use their authority to protect girls.

Table 1: *Results of the Study on Child Marriage*, presents key results of the study related to the shifts in the attitudes and behaviour of family members (fathers, grandmothers, mothers and adolescent girls) from before implementation of the GHD program and since the GHD program was implemented.

TABLE 1: RESULTS OF THE STUDY ON CHILD MARRIAGE

March 20, 2020

The situation before and after implementation of the Girls Holistic Development (GHD) Program

Khadiatou Diallo, Sociologist (2020)

	Before the Girls Holistic Development (GHD) Program	After implementation of the Girls Holistic Development (GHD) Program
Fathers	They gave daughters away in marriage at puberty in order to protect them from pre-martial teen pregnancy.	They are convinced of the risks of child marriage and teen pregnancy.
	They made decisions regarding marriage in agreement with their brothers and brothers-in-law (the girl's uncles) without considering the options of their daughters, their wives, or their own mothers.	They want girls to succeed at school.
		Now they have more confidence in their daughters because they know that they are coached and supervised by the grandmothers.
Grandmothers	Their involvement in decision-making regarding their granddaughters' marriage was very limited. Fathers informed them of their decisions and they accepted them.	They are convinced that girls should not marry before 18 because they understand the risks of child marriage.
		They very much want girls to succeed at school.
	They shared fathers' concerns about adolescent girls getting pregnant before marriage and, therefore, were often in favor of marrying girls before they were 18.	They are empowered to use their authority to convince fathers to abandon their plans to marry girls before 18 years of age. In many cases, several grandmother leaders collectively block fathers' plans for child marriage.
	Relationships and communication between grandmothers and young girls were weak.	They have close relationships with girls to encourage them to think about their futures, to stay in school and to postpone marriage until after 18 years of age. They trust girls much more than in the past.
Mothers of adolescent girls	They were involved very little in family decision-making regarding their daughters' marriage.	They are aware of the risks of marrying girls before 18 years of age.
	Out of respect for their husbands they accepted their decisions regarding the marriage of their daughters.	They want their daughters to succeed at school. They have more self-confidence to express their opinions to their husbands regarding the education and marriage of their daughters.
Adolescent girls	They accepted their parents' decisions on the age of marriage and the choice of husband.	They feel empowered and supported by grandmothers and mothers. For this reason, they have more confidence to express their opinions and priorities to their fathers with regard to their education, the age of marriage and the choice of spouse.
	They express their opinions in the family context, specifically with their fathers.	They can confidently express their opinions and priorities regarding their education, age of marriage and choice of spouse.
		They are all determined to succeed at school. They all want to wait until they are at least 18 before getting married.

CONCLUSIONS

This study allowed, on the one hand, a better understanding of the sociocultural context and of the family dynamic surrounding early marriage, and on the other hand, to better grasp the mechanisms by which changes related to this practice are undertaken.

The results of the study offer evidence that today, in the municipality of Nemataba, the age of marriage of young girls is beginning to rise, thanks to a reconfiguration of roles and to changes in the decision-making process at the heart of families. Even if the hierarchy of roles and influence in the matter of young girls' marriages remains, in giving parents a power to decide, dialogue is now preferred. This allows other members of the family, most notably the young girls themselves and their grandmothers, to share their opinions on the matter and to influence decision-making. Even if the young girls remain subordinate to the authority of their parents, it must be emphasized that today they are often involved in the decisions relating to the age of marriage and to the choice of spouse.

Thus, another outlook on early marriages is settling in more and more, leaving more opportunity for girls to grow up and pursue regular schooling.

Several aspects of the GMP program have contributed to these changes: The inclusive approach in which the group of family and community actors participate; the founding of a community conversation space that favors dialogue between actors ; and the capacity of leading grandmothers to mobilize other members of the community to cease the practice of early marriage.

LESSONS LEARNED

Socio-cultural context of families and communities

Development of strategies to combat early marriage of girls should be based on initial investigation of the socio-cultural context of family and community systems related to this issue. Such analysis can be the basis for development strategies to promote change in deeply-engrained attitudes and norms.

Collective decision-making within families

In non-western collectivist cultures, decision-making on this and other issues related to family well-being is collective, i.e. various family members are involved, and there is a hierarchy of roles and influence which gives elders authority over younger family actors. The hierarchical nature of decision-making based on age and gender, clearly suggests the inadequacy of the predominant reductionist approach to combatting child marriage which focuses almost exclusively on girls and which does not explicitly involve and aim to change the attitudes of the *power holders* within families.

Involving family power holders in change strategies

Linear approaches to promoting abandonment of child marriage that do not involve the culturally-designated *power holders*, while empowering girls, to defend their rights and priorities often contribute to increased intra-familial tension rather than contributing to consensus-building within family and community systems in favour of girls. The GHD strategy is based on a systems approach to

promoting sustained change in community norms and practices by involving all key community actors and influencers in order to bring about community-wide support for change.

Grandmothers – a resource to protect and promote girls’ rights and development

For the protection and promotion of the rights and development of young girls, grandmothers are an important resource, especially in collectivist societies like the one in which the study was conducted. The study shows that when grandmothers’ knowledge and confidence are strengthened, they can have considerable influence on the decisions of men, the *heads of households*, because of the respect and power that they enjoy. The experience of the GHD program demonstrates that empowered grandmothers can be powerful change agents to protect girls and to promote their rights and development. These results suggest that they can also be a resource in initiatives to change other norms and practices related to GHD.

Figure 1: *Family Dynamics and the Process of Change Related to Child Marriage* presents key findings of the study related to the process of change in attitudes and social norms concerning child marriage.

FIGURE 1: FAMILY DYNAMICS AND THE PROCESS OF CHANGE RELATED TO CHILD MARRIAGE



