CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF EARLY MARRIAGE IN GAROWE DISTRICT, PUNTLAND STATE OF SOMALIA

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1.0. RESEARCH CONTEXT

Early marriage, also known as child marriage, is an international issue which is widely practiced in many parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. While Somalia is not an exception, little is known about the real causes and effects of this century’s old socially accepted harmful practice which seriously impacts the lives of the many under-age girls who are victims of it. This traditional practice prevents young girls from realizing their full potential in life, limiting their physical, psychological and economic development.

Meanwhile, early marriage affects not only the female minors married under the age of 18 and their family members but also the whole society. In other words, this is a societal challenge as it limits the personal growth of many female minors who have often married off to older men without their consent which finally leads them to drop out from the secondary schools and colleges because of this traditional practice.

Moreover, the age of maturity is often contradictory and inconsistent across cultures and religions. In the case of Muslim countries, maturity is primarily determined by the start of puberty; menstruation in women and ejaculation of men as well as secondary sex characteristics.

According to Nur (2016) early marriage has a negative physical and psychological effect on the young girls who have been married away under the age of 18 years. In Somalia, particularly in Puntland State, early marriage is believed to be one of the key contributing factors pushing girls to drop out of the local secondary schools and colleges according to the local women’s organizations, politicians, and school teachers.

In Somalia, early marriage is a common practice mainly in the nomadic communities where the family of the groom offers about 10-25 camels to the family members of the bride and in Garowe and its whereabouts this is not an exception.
However, there is a need for an empirical study which investigates this issue of early marriage in-depth to understand more about the causes and effects of this traditional practice. Therefore, the research leader devoted herself to understand and explain more about the causes and effects of early marriage in Garowe, and finally come up with a possible solution to reduce the impact of this harmful centuries old traditional practice.

1.1. RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the causes and effects of early marriage in Garowe District?

1.2. OVERALL AIM

The overall aim of this research is to contribute to the existing knowledge on the causes and effects of early marriage.

1.3. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The specific objective of this research is to investigate the underlying causes and effects of early marriage in Garowe and come up with a possible solution to reduce the impact of early marriage in Garowe, Puntland State of Somalia.
Early marriage, also known as child marriage, is a harmful traditional practice where one or both of the marrying couple are under the age of 18. Forced marriage is a marriage that is arranged without the consent of either one or both spouses and it is always the girls who are the victims of this traditional practice and whose consent is not respected (Owusu-Ekuful, 2015).

Child marriage is an internationally alarming issue and “If the current child marriage rates continue, more than 140 million girls will become brides between 2011 – 2020” (www.un.org, 2013). Over 40 per cent of young girls who are under the age of 18 were married on the African continent alone according to data from the World Fertility Survey. Early marriage is practiced more commonly in Central and West Africa victimizing 40 per cent and 49 per cent of young girls respectively (Owusu-ekufual, 2015) while it is 27 percent in East Africa and 20 per cent in North and Southern Africa.

In the case of East Africa, particularly Somalia, “nearly half of the Somali girls are married by the time they are 18 years” (Brides, 2017). The legal age for marriage in Somalia is 18 years for both the females and males, but the girls can get married at the age of 16 with the consent of their parents. Furthermore, in Somalia child marriage is widespread and there are situations of transactional marriage where young girls are married off often to older men in exchange of financial resources mostly in the form of camels, cows or cash.

To many, ending child marriage is ending the cycle of poverty. In other words, the cycle of poverty will continue unless intervention is made in this harmful traditional practice which hinders young girls in taking charge of their own lives.
3.0. RESEARCH METHODS

There are several hypotheses for what motivates early marriage also known as child marriage in Somalia, particularly in Garowe District of Puntland State. There is an argument which suggests that cultural norms, gender inequality, poverty, and insecurity are the root causes of this traditional practice which cuts lives and the personal growth of many young girls in Somalia. However, the research leader takes the view that there is a lack of a solid empirical data to back up this argument according to the available literature. Therefore, to close this existing gap, there is a need for an extensive investigation into the causes and effects of early marriage in Somalia, particularly in Garowe district of Puntland State.

The researcher investigated this centuries old traditional practice in-depth. The research leader intended to conduct qualitative research using a mixture of data collection techniques in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to gather empirical data from a total of 23 respondents consisting of the below primary and secondary key informants: five members from affected young girls in Garowe District, five members from parents of the affected girls in Garowe District, three school teachers at schools in Garowe District, and two female staff members from the Ministry of Women, Development and Family Affairs of Puntland State of Somalia. In addition to the semi-structured interviews of the above groups, the researcher also conducted focus group discussions for the following secondary key informants: four members from the women’s groups in Garowe District and three members from amongst the traditional elders in Garowe District.

To gain an in-depth understanding of both the causes and the effects of child marriage in Garowe District, the researcher conducted a retrospective study which looks back in time to explore the push and the pull factors behind child marriage in Garowe. The study also considered the possible interventions to tackle this harmful traditional practice.

The researcher opted for semi-structured interviews as the data collection method since this type of interview allows both the interviewer and the interviewee to diverge enough and pursue a detailed conversation on the topic of discussion – causes and effects of early marriage in this case. The researcher adopted a deductive approach which sheds light first on the global child marriage trends which then boils down to the early marriage in Garowe
District, Puntland State of Somalia. The research leader also proposed to generate primary data through semi-structured interviews in the forms of interviews and focus group discussions. This is partly because there is a limited secondary data on the motives behind early marriage in Somalia, particularly in Garowe.
4.0. Finding, Discussion and Analysis

4.1. The Current Situation of Early Marriage in Garowe

Data suggests that early marriage is commonly practiced in every region of Somalia and Garowe is not an exception. This is believed to be an age-old problem, but it is unacceptably on the rise now in the rural communities and amongst IDPs according to the key informant interviews. In addition, although research participants demand intervention across-the-board, there are no meaningful ongoing initiatives to discourage early marriage.

On the other hand, data reveals that poverty, illiteracy, and separation of parents are the main drivers behind early marriage. In addition, the data identifies that there is an economic factor which pushes many parents to marry off their daughters to older men in an exchange of 10-15 camels as a bride price. Consequently, some young girls cannot choose their prospective husbands and they are subjected to emotional stress, sexual abuse or domestic violence which is a violation of basic human rights as Hawa Aden; a female participant from Galkayo Peace and Development Centre stated:

“Child marriage is wide spread and it is perpetuated both through culture and religion. Although it has always been an issue, the situation is much worse today with increased radicalisation and weak government. Many girls are married off today at age 14 – 16” (Hawa, 2016)

Another female participant who was a victim of early marriage brought the attention to the members of FGDs that child marriage is a global issue which demands attention from the Somali political and religious leaders, and international partners. She was quoted as saying:

“Although there are many international laws that prohibit to compel and force a young girl to marriage it is widely practiced in many parts of the world including Somalia. This is a gross violation of human rights and demand from the political leaders, religious leaders, and other stakeholders to understand the consequence of the early marriage and address it accordingly” (Affected girl, 2017).

1Affected Girl KII 31/07/2017
On the other hand, there were ideas that were strongly supporting such activity as they reason it is the religion and the tradition which supports the girl to marry from an early age

“Somali tradition is normally based on Islamic religion which strongly supports girls can be married at the age of 15 if they are physically mature”\(^2\) (Traditional-Elder, 2017).

### 4.2 Age to Consider Early Marriage

Data identifies that the marriage of a 15-years girl is not considered as an early marriage. This is based on the Islamic sharia law. Islam allows the marriage of 15-years old girls under certain limited contexts according to some of the research participants who have a religious background; puberty, physical and mental growth, consent of parents and the girl are vital. However, some take it out of that context. One parent was quoted as saying:

“I married off my daughter at the age of 14 to a man who is much older than her but I asked for her consent before I arranged the marriage and she accepted, she is well and good now and she is a mother of four healthy children”\(^3\) (Affected Parent, 2017).

### 4.3 Causes of Early Marriage in Garowe District

Data reveals that poverty, cultural practices, peer pressure, social media influence, failing in secondary schools, separation of parents and societal attitudes are the common causes of early marriage.

#### 4.3.1. Poverty

Poverty is one of the main factors which influence early marriage, particularly in the rural communities. Rural communities are prone to repetitive droughts and environmental degradation which make many households vulnerable to poverty. In other words, extreme poverty pushes many parents to marry off their daughters to deal with family problems of poverty.

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\(^2\)Tradition Elder FGD 30/07/2017

\(^3\)Affected Parent KII 02/08/2017
Moreover, interviewees argued that marriage at a very young age is a survival strategy for young girls and probably for many other female minors in some communities. In other words, some of the interviewed girls believed that early marriage is a coping mechanism to break the cycle of poverty and sometimes support their education; for example, some young girls who are married under 18 attend schools, their husbands being the school grantors, pay schools fees, uniforms, travel expenses, education materials and other expenses for other special needs for schooling. Some even suggest that these men support the families of the girl financially if they are poor although this cannot be generalised. The affected girl was quoted as saying:

“My family was very poor I was not able to find basic needs, my father died while I was young and my mother was not able to care for all of us, additionally I had no access to education so that I have decided to marry a man who can take care of me. I could not tolerate the difficulty situation I had. So, I take the view that marriage could help me out of this situation.” (Affected-Girl, 2017).

4.3.2. Cultural Practices

Child marriage, which is also known as early marriage, is believed to be a serious problem in many parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America and Somalia and Garowe district is not an exception. Additionally, there is a consensus that this is a harmful traditional practice which affects young girls who are married off to a man without their consent or will. This culture is basically a violation of human rights as girls’ rights to schooling and personal development to realise their full potential is fully or partially rejected. This type of marriages is widely believed to be a hindrance to the potentiality of the female minors who are married off at a young age: they can hardly contribute effectively to their future wellbeing, family, and the society at large. According to the responses from the key informant interviews, this can be an explanation for why the number of females with higher education is limited. This culture prevents many young females from pursuing higher and quality education. One female participant was quoted as saying:

“My marriage was very important for my parents. They wanted to make sure that I get married. My mother used to tell me that girls should be married as soon as they get all signs of puberty.” (Affected-Girl, 2017)

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4 Affected Girl KII 31/07/2017
5 Affected Girl 31/07/2017
4.3.3. Peer Pressure

Peer pressure plays a very important role in early marriage. This means that the marriage of a young girl or a boy attracts other teenagers of the same age in the same area or schools to marry. In addition, girls are socially encouraged to marry at a young age to get as many children as possible. Some respondents even suggest that there is a general perception in the society that the smartest and the most beautiful girls are married as early as possible. Therefore, girls feel proud and responsible when they are married while they know that early marriage is a risky move, but they cannot resist the peer pressure.

“Most girls are influenced by their friends who mostly marry at young age, they feel a bit of responsibility and smartness to form a family in that early age”

(MOWDAFA-Official, 2017)

4.3.4. Social Media Influence

Social media is the daily tool for communication for many people, particularly the young generation. It is believed to be a contributing factor influencing early marriage. This is because the information of the weddings of the newly married young girls is shared on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and other forms of the social media and this attracts other girls or boys of the same age into marriage.

“Social Media plays key role in our youth today as they discus and communicate with their peer friends, most of the time they see people getting married on Facebook and this compels them to ask themselves when they will get married”

(Teacher, 2017)

4.3.5. Failing in Schools

Failing in grade 8 of the intermediate schools and secondary schools creates frustration among many female minors. Some who desired scholarships fail to achieve their dreams, some others do not manage to continue their education for financial reasons and there is a

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6MOWDAFA official KII 04/08/2017
7Teacher KII 03/08/2017
limited intervention to deter these minors from turning to early marriage as an option. A teacher was quoted as saying:

“There is a clear correlation between early marriage and school drop outs; causes are many, but failing in standard 8 and secondary schools coupled with financial problems are the main the factors pushing the young to early marriage”

(Teacher, 2017)

4.3.6. Societal Attitude

Societal attitude plays a key role in early marriage. Participants argue that some parents marry off their daughters to protect their dignity. They have the perception that it is better and safer for both girls and the family dignity to have an arranged marriage, i.e. girls cannot be easily divorced because members from the side of the bride and the bridegroom discuss and agree on certain terms including the bride price, who and how to solve any disagreement between the prospective husband and wife as well as in the case of divorce which is to be strictly avoided. Marrying a 15-year-old girl is socially acceptable. One participant was quoted as saying:

“There is a social attitude and stigma attached to society that it’s better for the family to marry off their daughter early to avoid any kind of humiliation such as marring without the approval of their parents or eloping with someone”

(MOWDAFA-Official, 2017)

4.5. Ideal Age of Marriage

The socially accepted ideal age of marriage in Somalia and in many Muslim countries is when puberty starts for both boys and girls, but the physical appearance and the mental growth are other factors which are considered according to the respondents. In addition, the Islamic religion appears to be the base for the case of puberty because Islam considers a fifteen years person to be an adult on condition that he or she has all the signs of puberty.

"Age is an imperative biological factor in marriage, the person who is going to marry should reach both physical and mental maturity to fulfil marital
responsibilities, however, a female body should be ready for marriage and child bearing so that if girl has the general signs of puberty and become old enough she has the choice to marry”. (Affected-Girl, 2017)

4.6 Effect of Early Marriage

Early marriage is commonly practiced across all regions in Somalia, particularly Garowe District which is the area of research. According to the responses from the KIIs, early marriage has an obvious negative effect on the young girls who are married off at a young age: they predominantly and foremost suffer psychologically, emotionally and physically.

4.6.1 Maternal Health Problems

Many of the young girls in Somalia more widely and particularly in Garowe District have less access to reproductive health services in both rural and urban areas. They are forcedly given away to their husbands before they are physically mature and psychologically ready. Obstetric fistula is one of the problematic effects which impact young girls and they encounter stigma from society. It also exposes girls to profound health risks from early pregnancy and difficult childbirth, therefore it exposes the baby to complications of premature birth.

Girl children face serious or life threatening effects which inflict severe health problems on them. Every interviewee, including those who married under 18, suggested that early marriage has enormous effects involving severe health problems. Maternal complications and mental stress due to the early pregnancy and continued malnutrition, are the most common effect indicated by one of the women, in the focus group discussions:

“Young girls face a higher risk of maternal complications, malnutrition and deaths as a result of early pregnancy and childbearing, young girls face more risks in maternal complications than the older women in Garowe in particularly rural communities and internally displaced people”. (Woman, 2017)

4.6.2 Psychological Impact

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10 Affected Girl, 1 Aug 2017 at Puntland State University PSU Garowe

11 Women FGD Aug 3 2017 in Wabberi village community centre
Somalia, particularly Garowe, like other districts in the country, has a long-standing tradition of early marriage. The marriage of female minors, often 14 years (the youngest) is generally acceptable although it is more common in the rule communities and amongst the Internally Displaced People (IDPs). This type of marriage is often arranged by relatives of both bridegroom and bride. However, data claims that early marriage causes psychological problems for young girls; depression, hopelessness, and anxiety are among the reported psychological effects of early marriage although these claims should be approved by psychologists.

4.6.3 School Dropout

Data identifies that early marriage is an obstacle to the girls’ school enrolment. It affects school age girls who are attending standard 8 and the secondary schools, and consequently, early marriage affects the number of female graduates from colleges and universities. According to the data gathered from the key informants, female secondary graduates are much fewer in number than their counterparts (male) in secondary schools in Garowe. One schoolteacher was quoted as saying:

“School dropouts and education gaps are the key effects of early marriage; it reduces girls’ school enrolment in intermediate and secondary schools. Additionally, secondary education is very important to reach a degree of success”.

4.7 Recommendations for Intervention in Early Marriage

Early marriage can be reduced by the mainstreaming of certain remedial actions continually for years if not decades. Early marriage will not fade away anytime soon because it is always difficult to change age-old customs and traditions and early marriage is no exception. However, the research prescribes the following recommendations which are based on relevant literature and the empirical data gathered through focus group discussions and key informant interviews:

- Increase public awareness of the problems of early marriage; interventions should prioritize schools, IDP and rural communities and other vulnerable groups such as parents.
- Policy change; enact clear government policies and strategies to criminalize child marriage.
- Establish counselling and legal assistance centers for the female minors in need of assistance.
- Train law enforcement officers to deal with those who offend the laws protecting female minors.

4.7.0 Conclusion

This paper discusses causes and effects of early marriage in Garowe District, the capital city of Puntland of Somalia. This research utilised a qualitative method employing semi structured interviews as a tool for data collection. The research participants comprised different groups from Garowe District; affected young girls, parents of the affected girls, school teachers at schools in Garowe District, female staff members from the Ministry of Women Development and Family Affairs of Puntland State of Somalia, women’s groups and traditional elders. The study revealed that cultural and traditional beliefs, poverty, peer pressure and societal attitudes are the main causes of early marriage.

The study identifies that cultural practices are the key factor which influences young girls to marry early. Additionally, there is a view which argues that the Islamic religion encourages youth to marry to avoid all kinds of illegal sex and celibacy. Additionally, the research identifies that there is a tradition which applies a special pressure on girls at puberty to marry; parents are always the main push factors with the intention of avoiding the elopement of their girls with some men without the consent of the parents.

The study also indicated that poverty is another push factor which causes young girls to marry early; rural and IDP communities are overrepresented according to the view of the participants.

Finally, the study shows that social perception is another motivating factor which encourages early marriage. For example, the interest in ladies over 20 years starts to decline among men in Somalia. In rural communities, a lady who is over 20 can be regarded too old to be
married. This is called guumey's in the contemporary Somalia language; mainly in rural communities.

References
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