

I will never advise my daughter to marry at an early age: Self-reports of Well-being for Mozambican women who marry early

By Maximo Costumado

Ana, born and residing in Namaacha District (a rural area located in Maputo province, Mozambique) was 46 years old when I met her in late 2018. She only completed the 4th grade of primary school and since she married early, Ana became pregnant at age fifteen and in total has eight children and 13 grandchildren. The sense of responsibility and respect for their community traditions such as the acceptance of early marriage and teenage pregnancy influenced Ana decision to accept the marriage. She described feeling happy with her marriage, despite the marriage difficulties adding:

“I am happy with my marriage, but we have our own problems. Show me a marriage without a problem? My husband is a good man and he likes to be the leader, and because I know him, there are things I rather not say to him to make him angry”.

The current African population demographics with almost half of its population below 15 years of age, majority of female youth population (which according to United Nation is projected to increase in the upcoming decades), and the existence of a strong patriarchal tradition, incites the occurrence of early marriage practice. These are unions where one of the partners, in many cases girls under the age of 18 are more likely to marry older men and it occurs mostly in rural areas with high poverty levels and families experience economic difficulties. Recent data from UNICEF positions Mozambique among the ten countries worldwide with the high prevalence rates of child marriages.

Maria, Paula and Tomasia with 18, 22, and 38 years old respectively at the time of the interview told us that their parents and extended family forced them to accept marriage at an early age, when they were not mature.

Maria added:

“I moved into my husband’s parents’ house when I got pregnant because my parents forced me.”

Similarly, Tomasia, married at 16 and mother of 6 at the time of the interview shared the same experience as Maria adding:

“When I got pregnant of my first child I was living with my parents. When my baby was born my father said I should live with my husband. Then, my husband paid “lobolo” (the custom involving the provision of marriage payments in cattle or cash, from the groom’s family to the parents of the bride) and I moved in with him at 16”

My research about the impact of early marriage for women’s health and well-being highlights challenges women face within marriages which affects their personal well-being. Between 2017 to 2018, our team interviewed 15 women between the ages of 18 to 48 years old who reside in Namaacha District of Mozambique. All women married before 18 years with older partners and

were all mothers. The marriages were not for love, but obligation as per tradition. All women at the time of the interview were working in small trade and low paid jobs due to their low level of education and limited economic opportunities and felt sad for not having the opportunity to study further. They understood the power of education in moulding their future and knew that the lack of it prevented them from acquiring greater opportunities for personal and professional development. Ana for example, at the time of the interview was working as a “mukherista”, a term that in the Mozambican local language “Xichangana” means “cross border (small) business women”, helping businesses transporting and delivering goods from Swaziland’s border to the Mozambican border located in Namaacha District. In other cases, they were housewives, only caring for the household chores and the family. The women interviewed faced deprivation of their basic needs as children, including lack of quality education, shelter, food and health care. Scarcity of employment opportunities and other basic services motivate parents and guardians to allow their children to marry at an early age as traditionally expected. A report from UNICEF, 2015 found that households belonging to higher wealth status are less likely to incite their young daughters to marry at an early age. Instead, they motivate their daughters to pursue further education. Thus, girls from poor households were always exposed to early marriage, and as customarily expected, men had to carry the economic burden to make it a reality.

The Impact of early marriage for women`s health and well-being

The women I spoke to agreed that early marriage negatively affects women’s well-being, particularly their health, and ultimately the exercise of their Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). Fatima, a 25-year-old woman, married at 17 and mother of two, expressed a sense of disapproval and frustration because of the negative effect of early marriage in girl’s life:

“when a girl gets married early, she will be pressured to become pregnant, and she might face health complications due to her small body; Sometimes they will find husbands who don’t respect them, abuse them and bring diseases to the house; some jealous husbands won’t allow their wives to study”.

When asked why she would not advise her daughters to marry at an early age, Ana stated:

“I wanted my children to be independent and financial stable...if a girl gets married on her teens, she has to stop her studies to take care of her family; she won’t go back to school and will have those small jobs like mine, or in a farmer or as a domestic worker”.

Although Maria was the youngest participant, mother of one and unemployed at the time of the interview, she was very articulate and well-opinionated:

“I won’t advise my daughter to marry at younger age...never!!! It is difficult to go back to school when you’re married with a child. There is no secondary school here, and because of my child I cannot study far away. I stopped going to school because I could not afford and due to my marriage responsibilities.

The study by UNICEF (2015) argued that early marriage closes female opportunities for personal growing and is closely associated with early pregnancy and health complications. This is likely to happen since it is expected that these women get pregnant soon after marriage while they are not physically ready for childbearing and have limited access to quality maternal health services.

Lucia, a 26-year-old, married at 16 and mother of three at the time of the interview had one abortion that could have been prevented if she had been informed properly about pregnancy care and had easy access to maternal health services with quality.

Claudia, who was 25-year-old, and mother of three agreed that early marriage negatively impacts girls' personal development, and she also associates it with teenage pregnancy:

“Be married as a child you suffer (laughing)...Pregnancy is not easy and you can die. It is better to study and later on find a husband”.

Paula, married at 15 and mother of three told us that women also experience intimate partner violence (IPV) which may decrease their freedom and opportunities for personal development. She believed when you marry at an early age you became submissive to your husband and family desires, and if you refuse, they can beat you up. She herself mentioned enduring bad treatment from her husband and his family adding:

“my mother-in-law always complained that I was lazy. That I did not know how to do household chores right. When my husband was angry and used to beat me, they never reprehended him. They used to say that he was educating me. I was so defenseless”.

Tomasia, married at 16 and mother of six also experienced violence within marriage at an early stage of her marriage adding:

“I had to do everything they asked me to do. I could not be tired and if one of my children cried, my mother-in-law would shout at me”

Ana also recalled experiencing emotional abuse from her husband at some point of their marriage. Similarly, Fatima and Lucia recalled hearing about other married women who were abused or not allowed to go to school or accessing specific medical treatment for fear of their husbands.

What has been done to end and prevent early marriage practice?

To avert this continuous trend that undermine the exercise of girls' and women's rights, the Mozambican Government has signed international agreements to protect the children rights which culminated with the approval in 2019 of the law that prevents and criminalizes early marriages practice. In addition, different initiatives are being implemented locally by the Government in partnership with local and international partners. A key intervention initiated in Mozambique since 2019 by the European Union and United Nations to fight and eliminate violence against women and girls is the Spotlight Initiative. This initiative implemented in conjunction with local and international non-governmental organizations (NGO's) aims to prevent and tackle gender-based violence (GBV), particularly violence against women and girls (VAWG) and child marriage at the national level with focus in three provinces namely Gaza, Nampula and Manica (Mozambique Annual Narrative Programme Report, 2021).

Other initiatives targeting early marriage were implemented by NGOs to educate local communities about the harmful consequences of the phenomenon, to empower the girls and women already in those marriages, to rescue many underage girls from illegal unions and to

penalize the adults perpetuating the practice within the communities. Save the Children found that in 2021, despite the implementation of the law no 19/2019, early marriage is still recurrent. As such, the organization implemented the project NORAD in 2020 with the aim of preventing and fighting early marriage. The project implemented in Manica province, located in the center of Mozambique strengthened the capacity of 114 Community Child Protection Committees-CCPC for prevention and reporting on children's rights; and decentralized the 116-phone line to denounce all types of violence and premature unions. The actions of Save the Children and its partners through the CCPC and the child phone line, culminated with the report of 92 cases of girls in premature unions and 60 of these girls from 12 to 16 years old were rescued and returned to their families. Although positive outcomes from those initiatives are seen in Mozambique, the recurrent pattern of early marriage is still visible which poses a challenge to the Government and local communities.

Similar to other research, we believe that there is still a need to share the knowledge about the law no 19/2019 hence many rural communities are still not aware of the existence of the law that criminalizes and prevents this harmful practice to the girl child. Our research also identified the need to develop and implement effective strategies to prevent and end early marriage practices with the involvement of international and national partners, including community members, parents and guardians of the child brides. Girls social and economic empowerment initiatives should also be prioritized to strength the capacity of civil society organization, community leaders and community members in general to report situations of violations of girl rights. These initiatives should also teach men, parents and guardians about their positive role within the family and communities to better promote the rights and personal well-being of women and children and end early marriage practice.

***Participants names are pseudonyms to protect their real identity**

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