
**COMMUNITY INTERVENTION FOR THE ERADICATION OF EARLY MARRIAGES
IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF BONDOUKOU (IVORY COAST)**

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Abstract

Preserving the period of adolescence for young girls is an essential action for their development and well-being. When they have the opportunity to study and exercise a profession knowing their rights, the social, economic and political development of their country would be accelerated. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of early marriage compromises the development of adolescent girls. This study aims to explain the mechanisms advocated by the population of Bondoukou in the fight against early marriage. The data collected is based on both qualitative and quantitative surveys carried out in the municipality of Bondoukou. They show that the strategies of local communities rely on the commitment of community leaders. The strategies of the institutional or non-institutional structures result in the creation of a platform and the synergy of the action initiated by the non-governmental organizations, the social center and the security forces. The data also indicates the presence of support structures for victims of early marriage. The schooling and empowerment of young girls and the involvement of victims are appropriate and dynamic solutions for respondents in the fight against early marriage.

Keywords: Strategies, early marriage, girls, community, community engagement.

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Introduction

The marriage of children under the age of eighteen (18) has been at the center of debate over the past 40 years (UNFPA Report, 2016). Each year around the world, around 15 million young girls are married before their 18th birthday. Some countries in sub-Saharan Africa feature on the sad list of States in which the proportion of child brides reaches the 75% mark; such is the case of Niger (Corniou, 2020). Human rights defenders and development practitioners consistently advocate for policies and actions that seek to end this practice, which is a violation of human, women's and children's rights (Gina Crivello and Gillian Mann, 2020). Child marriage is also high on international development agendas. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which set the priorities for global sustainable development up to 2030, aim to "eliminate all harmful practices, such as child marriage, early or forced marriage and female genital mutilation" and also to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (Gina Crivello and Gillian Mann, 2020).

Côte d'Ivoire is acutely confronted with the phenomenon of early marriage of young girls. Indeed, the Ford Foundation report (2013) indicates that five countries in West Africa (Cape Verde, Togo, Burkina Faso, Benin and Mauritania) had regressed to an even younger age at marriage, while trends of four countries remained practically unchanged (Ghana,

Niger, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali). Also, the French Development Agency (AFD) noted in 2016 that early marriages continue to be practiced in Côte d'Ivoire (General Commission for Refugees and Stateless Persons, 2018), especially in the North and North -Is with respectively 52.1% and 48% of women married before the age of eighteen. Faced with the scale of the social phenomenon, early marriages are considered a violation of the rights of women and the rights of children. To do this, actions have been put in place by the government. This is the Accelerated Plan to Combat Early Marriage launched in 2014 to help empower girls and protect their rights (Equilibres & Populations, 2017). In November 2020, sixteen days of activism were dedicated to the fight against violence against women and girls.

Mechanisms for the protection of women and children have been put in place by the government. These include the installation of 65 multisectoral platforms to combat gender-based violence (GBV) in socio-educational complexes, the creation of 1,138 safe spaces for young girls, the creation of 42 gender reception desks in police stations and stations, the provision of a toll-free number "1308", to inform, denounce and guide. In addition to these actions of the Ivorian government, the populations of the commune of Bondoukou, aware of the phenomenon of early marriages, are also developing actions to remedy it. What are the perceptions of the population of Bondoukou on strategies to fight against early marriage? What are the proposals made by the population of the municipality of Bondoukou?

Kiesler's theory of commitment (1971) was used to analyze the community contribution of the population of Bondoukou in the fight against the early marriage of young girls. This theory highlights the prior behaviors (preparatory acts) that can be obtained from it. This theory posits, in fact, that the subject or the person is not committed by his ideas, but by his actions. For Kiesler, the main theoretician of commitment corresponds to the link that exists between the subject and his actions. Although intuitive, this definition teaches us two things: first, only our actions commit us and second, we can be committed to varying degrees by our actions. The effects of commitment highlight the behavioral aspect (cf. Joule and Beauvois, 1987) and the attitude aspect (cf. Beauvois and Joule, 1981 and for a summary: Joule, 1994). At the level of the behavioral aspect, committing to an act has the effect of making this act more resistant to change (freezing effect, cf. Lewin, 1951). It also has the effect of making the emission of new behaviors in the same direction more likely. In terms of attitudes, numerous studies show that an individual engaged in a behavior modifies his attitudes a posteriori to make them better agree with what he has done.

It will therefore be:

- to show the perceptions of the population of Bondoukou on the strategies to fight against early marriages and
- to analyze the proposals made by the population of the municipality of Bondoukou.

1- Methodology

The study took place in the town of Bondoukou, located in the northeast of Côte d'Ivoire. It should be noted that the choice of the commune of Bondoukou is justified by the fact that it is a locality where cases of early marriage are frequent. The empirical study is based on a questionnaire and interviews. The quantitative study technique took into account the inclusive and exclusive characteristics of the population. Thus, to take part in the quantitative survey questionnaire, one must be female, be married, be at least eighteen years old and have recorded at least five (5) years of conjugal residence in Bondoukou. For the qualitative data, the people who hold the information necessary for carrying out the study were selected. These are local state structures in charge of child protection, the police, local communities, customary and religious authorities, civil society and community leaders. The questionnaire was administered to 383 respondents and 15 interviews in a semi-structured fashion. Interactionist analysis was used for data analysis. Data collection took place from June 16 to August 30, 2021.

1- Perceptions of the population of Bondoukou on strategies to fight against early marriage.

1- The strategies recommended in the fight against early marriage

This section presents the strategies put in place to fight against early marriage in the commune of Bondoukou. These are individual and collective strategies. Indigenous communities and those of ECOWAS have, on both sides, initiated actions. The chiefdom of Bondoukou has provided within it a technique allowing it to settle these kinds of situations customarily. It is organized in a pyramid fashion. First there is the head of the family, the head of the district, the head of the village, the head of the canton, the head of the province and the king. The various statements below highlight their actions. They also present the means used by these local actors.

The representative of the village authority.

“Whoever does this to his child, the shame will make it difficult for him to come out and look others in the face. Certainly, there is no prison, but it is the humiliation that will lead you not to start again and give advice around you”.

The representative of the ECOWAS community

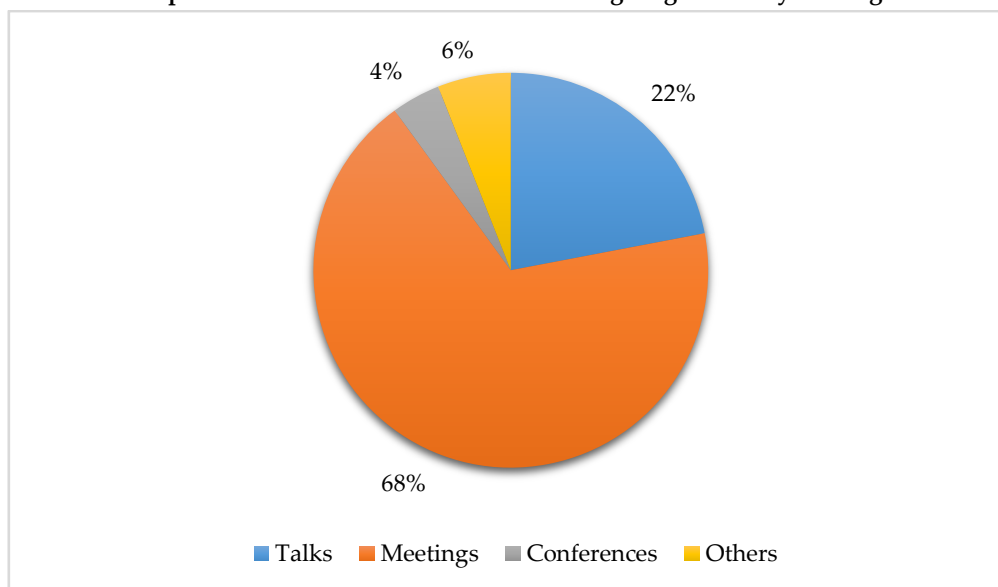
“We have community relays who are in charge of sensitizing ECOWAS members to the laws and the sanctions that a member incurs following the early marriage of young girls in the different neighborhoods”.

In addition to the statements made by respondents relating to community mechanisms to combat this phenomenon, means are also used by local actors.

➤ **The means used by local actors to fight against early marriage**

The meetings are used by the community in the fight against early marriage in Bondoukou. The graph below shows the opinion of respondents.

Graph 1: Breakdown of means used in the fight against early marriage



Source: 2021 Field Data

The data show the different means used in the fight against early marriage. These are mainly meetings (68%) followed by talks-debates, i.e. 22%. The testimony of a village authority to support his arguments:

“At all our major meetings, we take the opportunity to give advice, we have to educate the people. Today there is no better channel than the leaders during major meetings. At these great meetings, we take the opportunity to talk about these evils”.

Another testimony from a village authority:

“The man quickly understands the attribution that is given to him, therefore, we must raise awareness and never give up in raising awareness. A meat that is a totem in one family brings joy to another family. What we say is not good, the other loves it, that’s what we must always talk about, raise awareness and always continue to raise awareness.”

The meetings between community members are one of the means in the fight against this social phenomenon. These words of the respondents also highlight the accentuation of messages and information for the change of mentalities of the community.

To this end, a village authority stated:

“At all our major meetings, we take the opportunity to give advice, we have to educate the people. Today there is no better channel than the leaders during major meetings. At these great meetings, we take the opportunity to talk about these evils”.

Another testified that: *“The man quickly understands the attribution that is given to him; therefore, we must raise awareness and never give up in raising awareness. A meat that is a totem in one family brings joy to another family. What we say is not good, the other loves it, that’s what we must always talk about, raise awareness and always continue to raise awareness. »*

➤ **The creation of a platform**

The establishment of a meeting platform for actors was initiated in the town of Bondoukou. This platform is a consultative unit of about sixty (60) actors who meet every Wednesday of the month to discuss the various ills of the municipality.

Each actor reports cases encountered to show the extent of the problem and the involvement of everyone. The platform as a whole is a framework for promoting structures.

The testimony of an NGO official:

“ We work in synergy with the other NGOs present in the town of Bondoukou; during the meetings, we issue the different cases of early marriages that we encounter and by mutual agreement we propose solutions in order to accentuate awareness campaigns within the community”

The testimony of a security agent *“There are NGOs, the social center, a kind of platform, we hold weekly meetings for other subjects, but as soon as we are alerted by the NGOs, we seize the ‘affair. These meetings are organized by the social center».*

➤ **The synergy of actions**

The customary authority, the depositary of State authority (the prefect) as well as the regional directorate of the Ministry of Women, Family and Children (MFFE) pool their actions in the fight against marriage early in the commune of Bondoukou. Their words attest to their action.

The testimony of the customary authority *“The prefect cannot make a decision without consulting me. Even for certain problems brought to their attention, when things are not going well, they turn to me. It’s like justice, the judge does not know the custom, the limits of the villages so it is together that the work is done.”*

The representative of the management of the Ministry of Women, Family and Children (MFFE)

“Awareness raising, telling the population what are the risks faced by people who put children into marriage and what are the consequences of this marriage on children. It is to always talk about it in 2020 as part of the fight against violence against women and young girls, there was a commitment ceremony for community leaders since they are actors, community leaders and religious leaders who celebrate these marriages. We have not indexed a religion; it is all the religious leaders combined who made the commitment. Before celebrating the marriage, ensure that the parties concerned are at least 18 years old. Avoid celebrating marriages in the absence of those concerned.”

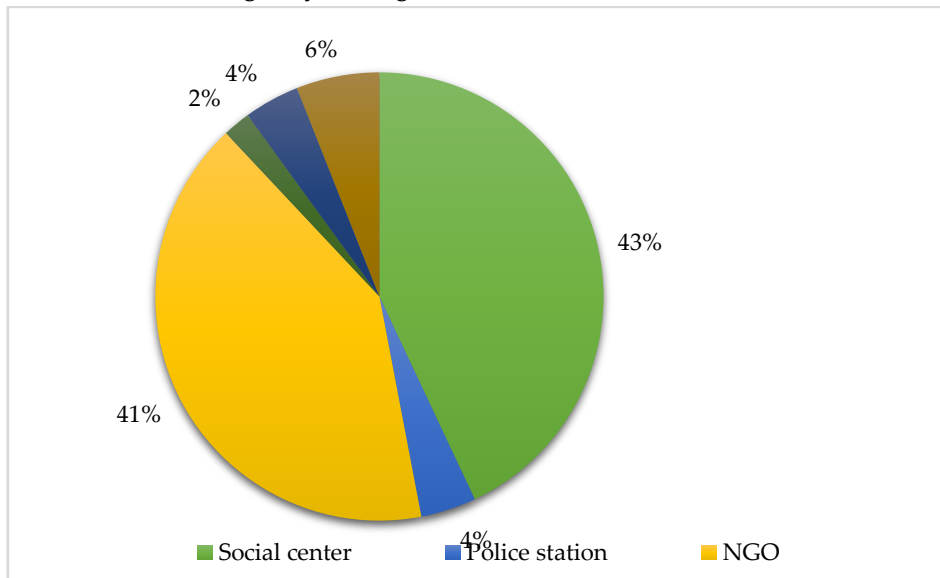
The testimony of a religious leader *“We are in perfect harmony; there were several radio broadcasts. There are NGOs that follow this kind of problem, we work together. If we are informed then we seize these NGOs. NGOs report cases to us in villages. As a religious authority, our role is not to punish. We must first raise awareness and forgive so that the person does not go back on these practices”*

Beyond the creation of platforms and the synergy of the actions of the various structures present in the city of Bondoukou. There are support structures for victims of early marriage.

➤ **Local structures to fight against early marriage**

The graph below presents known local structures in the fight against child marriage.

Graph 2: local structures for combating early marriage



Source: 2021 field data

The social center 43% and NGOs 41% are the best-known means. They propose, according to the specific needs of the communities and with the concern of the latter, to create both the link between people and cohesion in decision-making

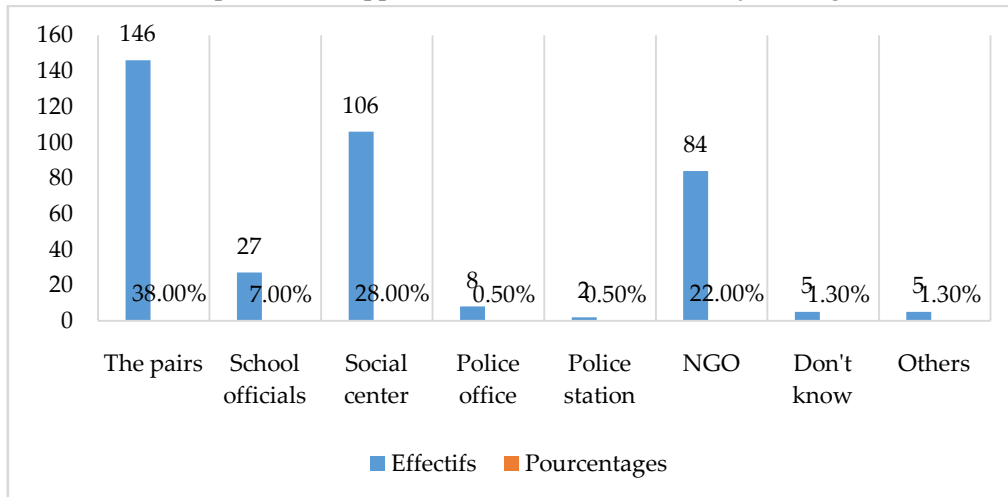
relating to the fight against early marriage. Also, the Ministry of Family and Children through the social center has installed in the neighborhoods, the child protection committee (CPE) in the city of Bondoukou. To illustrate the presence of structures fighting against early marriage.

A respondent stated: "Here, social workers receive young girls who are victims of marriage. They get in touch with their family in order to re-establish the broken family ties within this family and find adequate solutions". Another respondent continued by stating that "Awareness campaigns are organized by NGOs in the different neighborhoods of the city on the consequences of early marriage of young girls."

The various actions of the social center and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are part of the desire to change habits and traditional mentalities that push families to see girls as mothers and wives above all.

Institutional arrangements are made in the care of victims of early marriage. The graph below illustrates this.

Graph 3: Local support structures for victims of early marriage

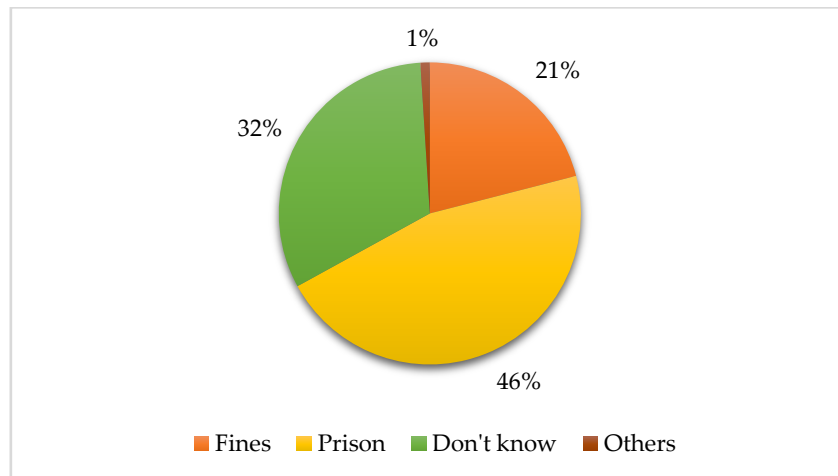


Source: 2021 Field Data

The graph shows the structures to which victims of child marriage turn. This is the social center, i.e. 28% of respondents and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) i.e. 22%. In addition to these structures, the vast majority of victims of early marriage confide in pairs (friends), i.e. 38%. This is explained by the fact that interaction with pairs (friends) contributes to the construction of a relational environment which contributes to the accompaniment of the victims of early marriage. According to Bidart (1997) friends, confidants embody values, attitudes and role models. Also, for the author Bidart, the strength of a friend's conviction does not lie entirely in the scope of his arguments, but also in the place that everyone gives him in his life.

1-2 - The opinion of respondents regarding knowledge of the sanctions

The opinion of respondents is presented in this section with regard to knowledge of the sanctions. The graph below shows the opinion of respondents.



Graph 4: The opinion of the respondents relating to knowledge of the sanctions

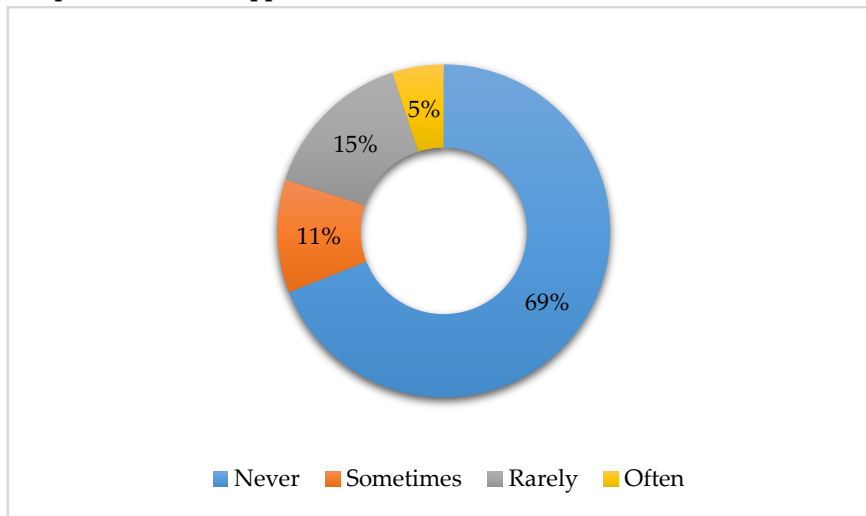
Source: 2021 Field Data

The persons surveyed are aware of the existence of the sanctions. They are 21% to know the fines, 46% mentioned the prison and 32% do not know the existence of the sanctions, which is not negligible. Jail and fines are means of regulating the norms of society. They are a necessary element for the development of Man and society. It is because it is certain that the rules will be broken that thinking about the sanction is necessary (Arendt, 1999). The purpose of the sanction is therefore to remind individuals that the rules collectively enacted by the group cannot be ignored or violated without these having consequences for individuals (Prairat, 2011). Lack of knowledge of the existence of sanctions expressed by 32% can cause inappropriate or unacceptable behavior by people who will tend to practice early marriage which affects the human rights of young girls.

➤ **The opinion of respondents on the application of sanctions**

The opinion of respondents regarding the application of sanctions is shown in the graph below.

Graph 5: Opinion of respondents on the application of sanctions



Source: 2021 Field Data.

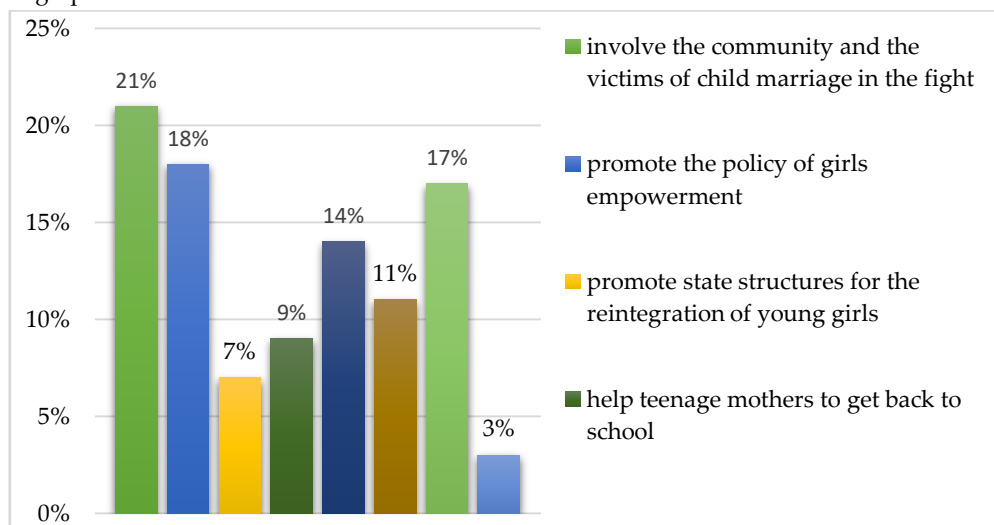
The data shows for 69% of respondents, the sanctions have never been applied. This situation is explained as underlined by the respondent.

“The case of early marriage is settled amicably because Bondoukou is a special city. Here it is like a family, the houses you see are considered as one house”.

The following section lists the solutions expressed by respondents.

2- The solutions put forward by the population of the municipality of Bondoukou

The phenomenon of early marriage is frequent in the city of Bondoukou. The solutions recommended by respondents are presented in the graph.



Graph 6: Breakdown of solutions proposed by respondents in the fight against early marriage

Source: 2021 Field Data

The respondents made eight (08) proposed solutions relating to the frequent case of early marriages in the city of Bondoukou. These are, in order of priority: The involvement of the community and the victims of marriage in the fight (21%), the promotion of the empowerment of the young girl (18%) and the monitoring of the policy of schooling of the young girl (17%), the behavior of the young girl responsible for her sexuality (14%), the encouragement of the actors to work in synergy (11%).

3- ANALYTICAL SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The data collected illustrates the different provisions to be implemented in the fight against early marriage. Educational factors, the decentralization of community actions and taking into account the realities of each community are aspects to be considered.

➤ Taking education into account in the fight against early marriage

The aspects relating to the promotion of the empowerment of the young girl and the monitoring of the policy of schooling for the young girl also mentioned by the respondents as a solution lead to reflection. Education contributes to the development of the individual and allows young girls to escape early marriage. The importance of access to education for young girls makes it possible to transmit the benefits of this education to future generations. Investing in girls' education yields economic and social benefits. Also the education of the young girl allows the socio-professional integration of this one and also contributes to the increase of her personal income and reduces poverty in the community. Education is an important agent of change. For respondents, it represents an aspect to be taken into account in the fight against the early marriage of young girls. For some authors, as Sen (2000) points out, education allows the individual to become more autonomous and to broaden the scope of their freedoms. Also, "a child who has no access to any form of schooling suffers a deprivation which lasts throughout his life (activities, even the most elementary ones which suppose that one knows how to read, write and count will be forbidden" (Sen, 2000). Education contributes to autonomy and, correlatively, dependence on others is reduced (Poirot, 2005). It delays the process of early marriage since the more girls pursue their studies, the better the more educated they are, the more chance they have of escaping this scourge (Tichit, 2002).

Also, they can be supported by certain institutions whose objective is to combat early marriages as long as the opportunities are open to them (MASSN, UNFPA, UNICEF, 2009). In this sense, the intervention studies conducted in 13 countries (Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mexico, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe) are unanimous on one point, making girls more independent and helping them to continue their education are universal protective factors (NGO Population Council, 2017). In addition, Kaboré (2009) specifies that adolescent girls in rural areas also need a wide coverage of localities in school infrastructure (formal and non-formal education, socio-professional training and literacy) to enable adolescent girls to learn. Also, these structures should be provided with many quality human and material resources. Some teenage girls want training in sewing, knitting, soap making, hairdressing, animal husbandry or gardening. Their access to school could push back the age at marriage.

Yéo et al (2016) list strategies to combat early marriage. These strategies are consistent with our results, which highlight the schooling of young girls. These authors therefore proposed the need for the implementation of literacy programs, the effectiveness of free education and the increase in the educational offer. Tackling early marriage requires community engagement. This commitment must translate into the schooling of young girls. The education of young girls is essential. It contributes to their access to economic autonomy and is a major development issue.

➤ The decentralization of actions to fight against early marriage

Respondents from the municipality of Bondoukou implement mechanisms. They are made according to the socio-political organization of the community. In addition, the synergy of the actions of the actors in the fight against this phenomenon is also essential. Pooling actions is necessary to achieve the objectives of the fight against early marriage; when all actors (NGOs, state structures, security forces, community leaders) act together and have a common mission as their objective, the result is greater than the work had been done individually. Diarra (2019) suggested that in the fight against early marriage, studies should be holistic and integrated in order to arrive at more effective solutions. Also, taking into account three complementary perspectives is essential.

These are human rights, violence against women and above all social and cultural norms. It is also necessary to actively involve and empower victims and potential victims in this fight against early marriage. They will be able to report on the daily experience of being married before the age of 18. In addition to this aspect, Djélo Ba (2020) argued that the solution to effectively fight against early marriage is the establishment of a Child Protection System as is the case in Guinea. The

Child Protection System in Guinea (SYPEG) solves protection problems through its divisions, which are the Protection Committee (CPP) at the village level; the Local Child and Family Council (CLEF) at the community level; the Local Protection Committee (CLP) at municipal level; the Prefectural Coordination for Child Protection (CPPE) at prefectural level; the Regional Child Protection Committee (CRPE) at the regional level; the Guinean Committee for Monitoring the Rights of the Child (CG/SDE). According to Djélo Ba, this method decentralizes the management of child protection measures at all administrative levels and favors awareness-raising and mediation at the local level.

Through the implementation of the system, each local committee undertakes through its actions to reduce the phenomenon of early marriage, as is the case in Guinea. The creation of the actors' platform is a commitment of the various NGOs in the fight against early marriage in the city of Bondoukou. Indeed, doing or taking actions under the gaze of others is more engaging than in anonymity. Also, repeating an act is more engaging for a person than doing it once. It is in this logic that the NGOs are part of working mutually with the other structures present (Social Center, the police station) in the city of Bondoukou.

The decentralization of actions allows the participation, the grassroots commitment, of the forces that make up a community. Thus, each entity of the community by consensus recommends adequate actions to fight against the early marriage of girls. The coalition of respondents' actions in achieving the objective of combating early marriage. The interactions between these actors contribute to a well-coordinated approach at all levels. The involvement of respondents also contributes to more responsibility and more commitment to this phenomenon.

➤ **Taking into account social realities in the fight against early marriage**

The meetings constitute channels of information relating to this social phenomenon to the community. The interaction produced during the meetings between the different members of the community will have the effect of changing behavior and commitment to the early union of young girls. Each actor within the community is directly or indirectly linked to this social phenomenon, hence the need for the involvement of victims of marriage in the fight. The latter's involvement reflects belonging, respect and consideration of the decisions of the community. It contributes to the latter's commitment to reduce early marriage in the community by taking action to change the behavior of community members. Madjiyam specifies that the fight against early marriage implies realistic and adapted solutions to put an end to this practice. It is not enough to enact laws and sign international conventions. The weight of traditions and the influence of religious principles explain this situation; hence the need to increase poverty reduction strategies, which is a realistic solution in the case of Chad.

The report of the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) in line with our results emphasizes that the mobilization of communities is essential in the fight against early marriage. The OFPRA report on forced marriage in Senegal showed that this mobilization allows the participation of men in integrated programs and the commitment of community and religious leaders so that they can abandon the practice of forced marriage. As for POLONOVSKI (2008), she indicates the various initiatives of certain Western countries (France and the Netherlands) against the frequent forced marriage within foreign communities residing on their territory. According to the author, it is a question of reforming mentalities by aiming to promote better communication or dialogue between parents and children. Also, educational assistance measures, protective orders against family abuse are recommended.

In addition, government structures apply measures for the protection and implementation of the rights of the child and the rights of women, listening devices, telephone reception, homes or accommodation structures, mediation and dialogue with communities.

The phenomenon of early marriage persists throughout the world. The causes are socio-cultural and economic. It is necessary to define the mechanisms to put an end to this social phenomenon. The definition of the mechanisms must take into account the context, the particular reality in which communities are confronted with them.

Conclusion

Community action is essential in the fight against early marriage. It makes it possible to issue mechanisms taking into account the social reality of the said community. These mechanisms result in a consensual will of the members of the community. This demonstrates a commitment to the development and well-being of young girls. Community action also contributes to the creation of a platform and the synergy of the actions of the actors (non-governmental organization, social center, security forces). In their own way, the inhabitants of the same territory, therefore, the common interests

make efforts to guarantee the change of mentality and behavior of the members imbued with the cultural and religious values which are the causes anticipating the early marriage of young girls.

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Conflict of Interest

None

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from study participants

Ethical Statement

This research was approved by the scientific committee of the National Institute of Youth and Sports of Abidjan

Author Contribution

All authors Contribute equally.

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