

Early marriage in rural Senegal: uncovering young women's agency

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Early marriage has been consolidated in the global development agenda as a harmful practice that should be eliminated. This human rights based approach has been criticized by various scholars for decontextualizing young women's lives and portraying them only as passive victims, constructing an unhelpful dichotomy of 'victim' versus 'violateur'. Moreover, the voice of young women experiencing early marriage is largely absent from literature, which has been mainly focused on causes and consequences of the practice. Engaging in the debate of universalism versus relativism, this paper aims to uncover decision-making processes that inform young women's preferences about whether, when and who to marry by exploring local understandings around marriage, family formation and sexuality. The paper presents the results of semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation conducted in ten rural communities in the Southern region of Kolda. The main findings indicate that living in a context of strong gender division of labor, low quality education and little economic resources, young women in rural Kolda: i) have a functional view of family and marriage, seen as the main source of socio-economic support, ii) base their marriage preferences on a rational analysis of their livelihood opportunities rather than on socially constructed variables like age, and iii) opt for accommodation and negotiation as agency strategies to participate in marriage decisions without risking their futures. The paper concludes that the participation of young women in the practice of early marriage should not be undermined and calls for local contextualization to base early marriage policies and interventions on young women's needs. The eighteen years old boundary of the human rights approach risks to ignore the agency of some, and deny protection to others.

Key words- early marriage, agency, young women's perspectives, Senegal