



Personal Narrative: Let Girls Be Girls—My Journey into Forced Womanhood

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For most women, a wedding day is something to look forward to, a day to plan in excitement. It is a day to make great memories to reminisce about for many years. It is an event that many girls think about and start planning from a very early age.

However, for millions of young girls around the world, including in many African countries such as my own, The Gambia, marriage is far from being a choice. It abruptly interrupts or prematurely ends their childhood, forcing them into vicious cycles that are all too often impossible to break. Child brides are forced to abandon school and focus on building families with their husbands, who are usually complete strangers to them.

There are a few exceptions to this rule, and I was one of them. My story is an exception to a norm that would have changed my destiny. Unlike so many other child brides, I never abandoned my education after getting married at 14. As a survivor of child marriage, I vowed to fight against that practice, as well as other forms of violence against women—all driven by absurd prejudices that circumscribe women to limited fields of action in our patriarchal society.

Prior to reaching menarche, I remember having conversations about it with older girls. I was so curious to know what it entailed and how it felt. Although the explanations were blurry, with faint description of what menstruation actually was, I wasn't surprised the night mine finally happened. That night, I had a conversation with two older girls in my neighborhood. The idea that one could get pregnant once we reached menarche scared me.

Although I understood that menstruation was normal, I hid it from my mother for two years! Had my cousin not seen a blood stain on my shorts one evening, my mother might still not have known. Perhaps I hid it because

sex and sexuality aren't common topics Gambian mothers or parents openly discussed with their children, especially girls. But I was also terrified to let my mother know because I didn't want the responsibilities that come with it. Once a girl reaches menarche, in many communities, especially mine, she is considered fit for marriage. In my case, a suitor, a potential husband, would be all it would take to make me bury my dreams of getting an education and being a successful leader.

In contemporary Gambian society, mothers and aunts begin preparing their daughters and nieces for marriage as soon as they reach menarche. They hold regular sessions during which girls are taught their roles and responsibilities as wives. Since our society is patriarchal, women must become obedient partners who live in the shadows of their husbands. As most Gambian girls, I was given numerous sermons on how to be a good wife by pleasing my husband and his family. At some point, I couldn't help but wonder if all a wife was supposed to do is give and never receive anything in return.

In some communities, it is unacceptable for parents to consider marrying their daughters off before they reach puberty. Getting married before reaching menarche would translate to putting the cart before the horse. Menstruation in Gambian society symbolizes maturity, womanhood, and the capacity to conceive; it basically translates to the readiness of a girl to engage in sexual activities. It is also widely believed that the female body grows to a child-bearing stage at this time. Hence, it sends a signal that once a girl begins to have her period, she should be married off for fear of bringing shame to the family by getting pregnant out of wedlock. This perception, I believe, is the driving force behind child marriages. Nonetheless, there are other factors that fuel child marriage, such as poverty and the high dependency rate of women on men.

In my case, as I feared, the much-anticipated suitor came along, met my parents, and asked for my hand in marriage without consulting me, his bride-to-be. My parents, too, without consulting me (which was considered quite normal in the Gambian society at the time), decided to marry me off, even though I was just 14. I would have been another dropout, except I was so desperate that I threatened to take my own life if I was pulled out of school for marriage. Fortunately, I was allowed to continue my formal education, although under very difficult circumstances. I was required to perform my matrimonial duties while going to school. This meant that I had to cook, clean, do laundry and other domestic chores for my husband's family before going to school. This would normally have had a negative impact on my academic performance but I was determined to beat the odds. No child should be forced to bear such burden.

My story of becoming a child bride is not unique. There are hundreds of women in The Gambia who have been subjected to marriage immediately after they reach menarche. Some parents accept bride prices from suitors as early as when the brides-to-be are toddlers. In some cases, the suitors take

care of all the financial and material needs of the girls from their childhood until they reach menarche, when they eventually get married off. Usually, some form of guarantee is provided to the suitor's family to ensure that their 'investments' do not go to waste. In July 2016, a presidential pronouncement, followed by the enactment of an Act of parliament, child marriage was banned in The Gambia. Despite the enactment of this law, child marriage remains prevalent in The Gambia. There are no proper mechanisms in place to monitor progress. And many parents feel that abject poverty, coupled with the high dependence of women on men in Gambian households, leave them no other choice.

Children's and women's rights activists, myself included, started the journey of campaigning to end child marriage many years ago. We have been creating awareness through the work we do with our various organizations on the health risks associated with getting married at such young ages. As a survivor, I am able to share my experiences with parents and potential child brides. I have traveled across The Gambia and have used my voice to speak against child marriage.

I now run Think Young Women, an organization that offers a girls' mentorship program where we train girls between the ages of 12 and 15 on sexual and reproductive health and rights. We also teach them about their bodies, especially about issues such as menstruation and the use of sanitary pads. This program enables these girls to become empowered and protect themselves from being at risk of child marriage. It teaches them life, communication, and advocacy skills with the objective of training them to be assertive so that they can protect themselves and other girls in their communities and schools from harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. We also build their knowledge on where to report should they or girls in their communities be exposed to such risks.

Although some communities still hold the belief that once a girl reaches menarche she must be married off to avoid attracting unnecessary shame to the family, my organization and I are raising awareness and building capacities of these communities to understand the severe consequences of child marriage and other harmful traditional practices for girls. I continue to hold government accountable and push for policies that serve the interest of girls. This includes lobbying with government to put in place mechanisms that will ensure the effective implementation and enforcement of the law to ban child marriage. Most importantly, we advocate for establishing monitoring bodies that will investigate and prosecute perpetrators of child marriages. To achieve this, I also conduct trainings and capacity-building workshops for relevant government officials as well as raise awareness about the legal rights of girls, particularly their right to be protected from forced marriages, under domestic international and regional human rights treaties.

Understanding that poverty is one of the triggers of child marriage, my organization and I, as well as other relevant stakeholders, have been lobbying

the Gambian government to create immediate and long-term economic opportunities for poor families. This, I believe, will prevent them from giving away their girls for marriage in exchange for economic gains. It would also increase employment opportunities for girls through microfinance schemes and livelihood skills, which will serve as alternatives to child marriage, especially for girls who are unable to continue their education. This also reduces girls' and women's dependence on men.

Bearing in mind that education plays a key role in curbing child marriages, my work also focuses on promoting the education of girls, building their leadership skills, and lobbying for increased investments in education. When education is accessible to and affordable for girls, it increases their chances of staying in school. Educating and engaging traditional and religious leaders through dialogue and lobbying them to discourage the practice of child marriage has also been an important part of my work. For a country, whose people draw inspiration and guidance from their religious and traditional leaders, this is essential.

In spite of the ongoing challenges registered by activists like me, we are making a lot of progress. With more concerted efforts, an increase in youth voices, commitment, and action, there is hope for a future where all girls are protected from the harms of child marriage and are able to fulfill their potentials and realize their dreams. I have a vision: to see a Gambia where women and girls have equal opportunities to dream and realize those dreams. I am on a mission to create safe spaces for women and girls and to empower, uplift, and protect them from child marriages. With support from my team and other stakeholders, I am going to change the social norm on child marriage and other harmful traditional practices in The Gambia and beyond. Nothing—not resource constraints, not backlash from communities or even my family—will deter me from achieving this.

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