

A Closer Look at Forced and Early Marriage in African Immigrant Communities in New York City



Sauti Yetu
CENTER FOR AFRICAN WOMEN AND FAMILIES
Giving Voice To Our Potential

PREFACE

The purpose of this report is to inform emerging policies and practices on early and forced marriage by highlighting the lived experiences of African immigrant and refugee girls and young women in New York City. Sauti Yetu supports policies and practices that are informed by the diversity of experiences in which early and forced marriage occurs across a variety of immigrant communities that protect the health, well-being, and futures of immigrant young women.



ABOUT SAUTI YETU

Sauti Yetu Center for African Women and Families is a nonprofit organization dedicated to mobilizing African immigrant women and families to improve the quality of their lives, strengthen their families, and develop their communities. Sauti Yetu's direct services, public education, and advocacy promote immigrant girls' safe transitions into adulthood, curb violence in the family, and give poor and low-income women access to life skills and leadership opportunities.

www.sautiyetu.org

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is produced by Sauti Yetu Center for African Women and Families, and is a part of a series of occasional papers the organization publishes that documents the lived experiences and contributions of immigrant African women and families in New York City. It focuses on the issue of forced early marriage within African immigrant and refugee communities in New York City.

Sauti Yetu extends its gratitude to all the African immigrant girls who have spoken candidly to our researcher about their experiences and challenges regarding coercion and social pressure to marry early. Each of them paves new paths in seeking opportunity, economic security, and happiness in this new environment she calls home. All of these women are conscious of their responsibility to the “sisters” who will follow them.

Our gratitude is also extended to the many community partners, individualism and agencies that have stepped in to support African immigrant girls in our communities over the years with limited policies and procedures to address the specific challenges, such as early forced marriage, they face and bring to agencies delivering services. Finally, we thank the young women who so graciously offered their stories and insights to this study.

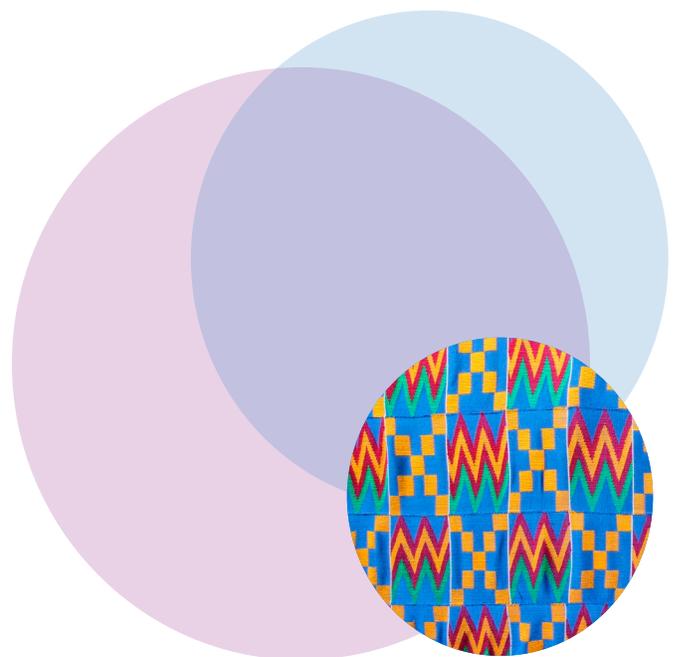
Lead Author and research was conducted by Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Program Director- **Girls Empowerment and Leadership Initiative (GELI)**, with contributions from Trinh Tran, Legal Advocate-**Violence Against Women and Girls Program** and Katrina Schermerhorn, Program Director-**Children and Family Services Program at Sauti**

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TERMINOLOGY

The following terminologies are utilized throughout this research report.

Early Marriage: Marriage that occurs before a person is legally (age 18 years) able to consent or at least finish high school or a diploma program.

Forced Marriage: Marriage that occurs without the expressed consent of either one or both of the parties. The party whose consent is usually not sought is the girl.

1.5 Generation: 1.5 Generation refers to youth born outside the United States, arriving to the U.S. as teenagers.

Administration for Children Services (ACS): ACS is a government agency in New York City that is charged with protecting New York City's children from abuse and neglect.

Traditional Marriage: This term is used to refer to those marital ceremonies conducted according to cultural beliefs that may or may not have a basis in religion. These are often marriages that are recognized by family and community but are often not legally recognized.

Religious Marriage: Marriage that is sanctioned by the religion practiced by a family. These marriages are often recognized legally and may be held in conjunction with traditional marriages.

Cohabitation: The sharing of a residence by a couple without based on the consensus of both parties.

REGIONAL DESIGNATIONS

Eastern Africa includes the British Indian Ocean Territory, Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Europa Island, Glorioso Islands, Juan de Nova Island, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mayotte, Mozambique, Reunion Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, Tanzania, Tromelin Island, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Middle Africa includes Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, and Sao Tome & Principe.

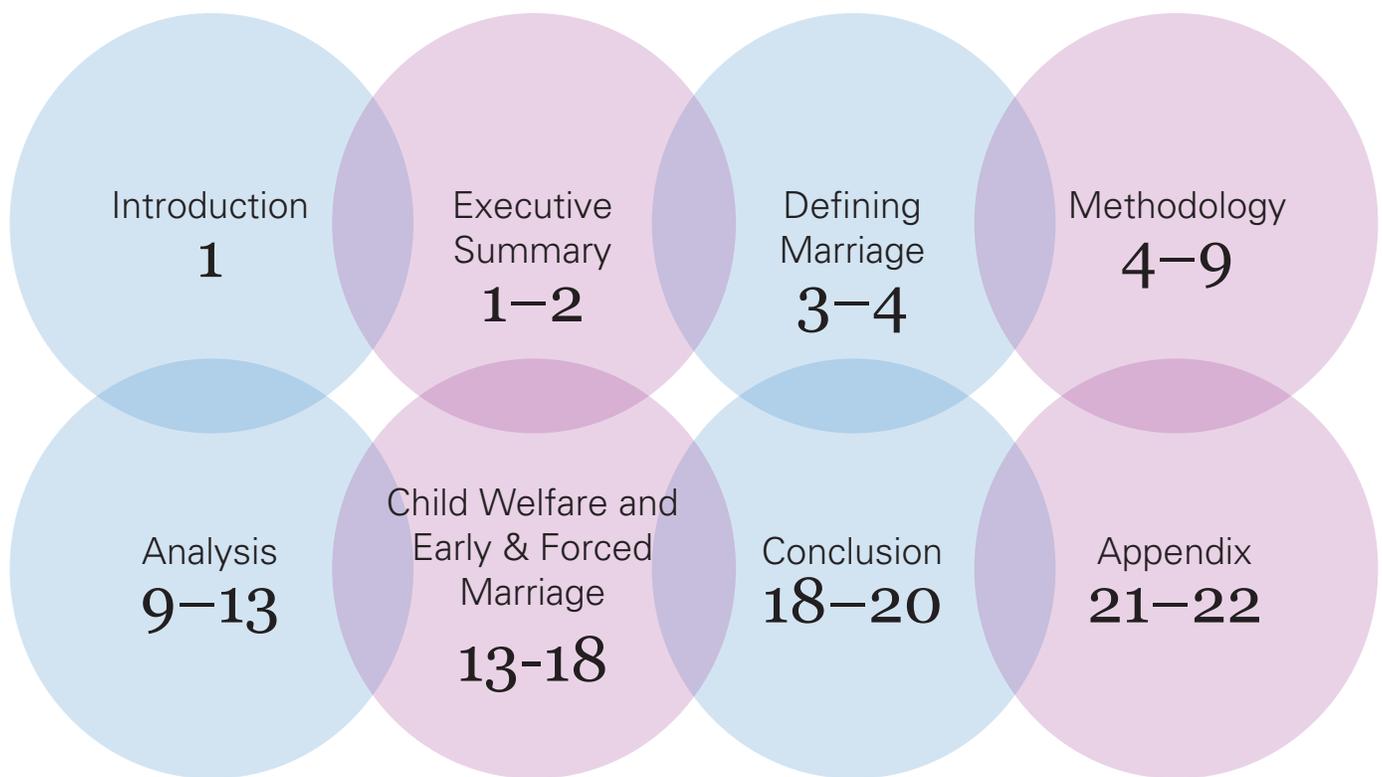
Northern Africa includes Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, South Sudan, Tunisia, and Western Sahara.

Southern Africa includes Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Swaziland.

Western Africa includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, St. Helena, and Togo.

Regions are defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.

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A Closer Look at Forced and Early Marriage in African Immigrant Communities in New York City

INTRODUCTION

It has been gratifying to see an increased emphasis on looking at the practice of early and force marriage internationally and among advocacy groups in the United States. While these conversations are still in the initial phases, national efforts to understand how such practices manifest across a variety of communities and to understand the work of practitioners bode well for their outcome. In this report, we contribute a closer look into the practice of forced and early marriage from our perspective as a community-based organization in the Bronx serving and working with African immigrant communities, with a particular focus on gender and youth. Our youth program, the Girls Educational & Leadership Initiative, has for the past six years supported girls attempting to balance their conflicting expectations and hopes for their own lives. This report is the culmination of the insights we have gained, the dilemmas faced, and the questions that still remain about practice and policy.

We utilized qualitative methodologies to focus on the experiences of the young women at the center of this issue. We offer recommendations for policy and practice aimed at preventing early and forced marriage as well as providing adequate supports for young women facing this expectation. In the Appendix, we share a screening protocol that we found helpful to begin conversations with girls about how marriage fits into their present and future lives. Our hope is that this report will in no way be the

definitive depiction of early and forced marriage in African immigrant communities but only the start of a dialogue across a variety of stakeholders that will guide future explorations not only into our own communities but also in other communities elsewhere where this practice is prevalent.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Globally, international and humanitarian organizations as well as some governments have recognized the dangers that forced and early marriage present to the lives of girls under the age of 18. Early marriage increases social isolation and launches girls into a cycle of poverty, gender inequities, and higher risk of dying from complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Early marriage forces young girls to assume responsibilities and handle situations for which they are often physically and psychologically unprepared. Furthermore, schooling—a critical pathway to a prosperous life—is often cut short by early marriage.

The United States is lagging far behind other industrialized countries in their efforts to prevent early and forced marriage as well as establish protocols to support victims. There is an emerging community of advocates beginning to understand how this practice evolves, adapts, and is re-purposed as girls and young women migrate with or without their families to join their marital families. Paradoxically, decisions about marriage are often made transnationally while adapting to the new imperatives of the immigrant family and to the socio-cultural

and economic contexts of the United States. Thus, advocacy efforts have justifiably focused on those most egregious of cases involving the youngest girls from immigrant communities perceived as the most repressive for women and girls. As such, the disproportional focus on these stories masks the scope and breadth of forced marriage in the United States.

Community-based organizations like Sauti Yetu Center for African Women and Families support immigrant and refugee girls from countries with higher rates of forced and early marriage such as Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, and Niger. In fact, eighteen of the twenty countries with the highest rates of child marriage are in Africa. In Mali, 65 percent of women aged 20–24 were married by the age of 18, and 25 percent were married by the age of 15. In Niger, over 70 percent are married by 18, and 36 percent are married before age 15.

Sauti Yetu works with girls whose situations are less easily resolved either because they have reached the age of legal consent in their jurisdictions, the coercion is subtle, or the girls themselves are ambivalent about the options available to them—issues that are compounded by the girl’s migration status in the U.S. In this report, we draw upon research conducted over the course of a year on how girls from West Africa make decisions about their futures. This report offers specific policy and practice recommendations to prevent early and forced marriage as well as outlines services needed to expand the avenues to success available to immigrant girls and young women.

Summary of Key Findings

Girls seeking to escape forced or early marriage want to postpone the prospect of marriage

without losing their relationship and support system with their families, communities, and cultures.

- For girls over 17 years of age, decisions of whether or not to consent to marriage depend largely on the prospects young women see for their futures. Educational and economic opportunities are closely linked to decisions about whether or not to marry—both on the part of parents and of girls.
- The absence of real protections (legal, housing, etc.) for both documented and undocumented young women and girls weigh heavily on their decisions, if a decision is an option.

Summary of Key Recommendations

- Engaging the diverse immigrant and refugee communities in dialogue about the changing nature of gender expectations in migrating communities is vital to postponing marriage for immigrant girls.
- Resources (human and financial) must be committed to community-based organizations to facilitate this crucial work. Housing, counseling, and health care access must be afforded to girls and young women seeking to prevent early and forced marriage.
- Educational and economic opportunities in the form of schooling and vocational training are important deterrents to forced and early marriage.
- Both state child welfare agencies and the movement to end violence against women and girls must take ownership of the prevention of early and forced marriage and the provision of services to girls and young women impacted by the practice.



DEFINING MARRIAGE

Box 1. Reflections on Our First Group

By Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Program Director, Girls' Educational & Leadership Initiative (GELI), Sauti Yetu Center for African Women and Families, Inc

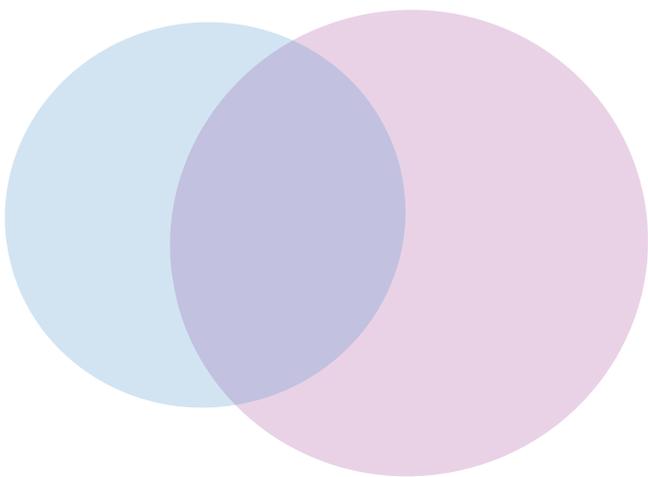
Sauti Yetu's inaugural girls' leadership group, the Girls' Educational & Leadership Initiative (GELI), had 10 participants ages 14-19 for its first eight-week session. After the facilitating the group, I would walk with the girls to the subway. I would often hear snippets of their conversations with each other about their home lives. They would talk about their families, their friends at school, and occasionally their husbands. Individual follow-up conversations with each girl confirmed that 9 out of the 10 in that first group were married. I couldn't imagine how these giggly high school girls could possibly transition to be someone's wife once they left the playful space of our girls' group. After further conversations, we learned that marriage meant something different to each of these participants. Some were actually engaged but without any word in their native languages for the concept of engagement. Some were married but living with their parents until after high school, and others were maintaining what is more widely understood as a newlywed home. Many would not have married if they felt like they had another choice. These "marriages" varied depending on where they were from, their age, how long their families had been in the States, whether they were in the U.S. as unaccompanied minors, and a host of other questions. Only one of the married participants in this research study had been married at City Hall and could pinpoint where her marriage certificate was located. Clergy in their homes or community mosques performed most of the marriages. None of the girls' school teachers or counselors knew of their marriages.

Early and forced marriage necessitates a closer examination of both the social and cultural symbolism of the institution of marriage, as well as legal and ethical parental rights, age of consent, and Child Welfare systems including child welfare policies and procedures to protect and prevent child abuse. The anecdote

offered in Box 1 (above, *Reflections on Our First Group*) highlights the complexity of early and forced marriage and the ways it is practiced in diverse immigrant communities. Like most societies, the institution of marriage in Africa has always played a central role in shaping the immediate and extended family

relations, strengthen alliances which among certain New York City's African Immigrant Communities, provides basis of mutual support and social resources sharing. Marriages within the immigrant communities in New York City assume diverse forms. It could range from legal marriage, which is a union that conforms to the US's legal requirements, and could be civil, religious, customary, or a combination of these; a common-law marriage or consensual union or cohabitation which may not meet legal requirements but nonetheless are counted as marriages within the family and community.

Thus the social norms and customs that underpin the decision to marry a child, and the pressures that weigh upon the family and child, should be taken seriously whether or not the marriage is legally recognized. For example, the distinction between customary marriage and legal marriage can present challenges if the marriage is dissolved, in the determination of child custody, the division of marital property and made even more complex in cases of domestic violence. This perspective also presents a challenge to advocates attempting to prevent early and forced marriage in both the social services and legal advocacy context. Thus if, as advocates, we focus solely on the legal dimensions of marriage we miss an opportunity to protect the girls' who attended that first girls group regardless of how they are expected to marry.



METHODOLOGY

Utilizing qualitative research methods, we drew data from three sources over the course of a year:

- **Ethnography:** The first method was an ethnographic study conducted in 2010 on the educational experiences of African immigrant and refugee girls with prior interrupted or non-existing formal schooling in New York City. Marriage emerged as one of the most prevalent issues the participants contended with as they pursued their educational goals.
- **Participatory Action Research:** Sauti Yetu conducted a participatory action research study (PAR) with African young women ages 16-21 who were married either early, forced or both. Young women led focus groups seeking to answer the question of what support they wished had been made available to them prior to their marriage.
- **Textual Analysis:** Sauti Yetu analyzed staff progress notes, looking at the help-seeking behavior of youth attempting to avoid an early and/or forced marriage.

We selected these methods because they offered the best potential to gather an explanation of the forms that early and forced marriage takes in African immigrant communities, as well as the needs of girls subjected to the practice. Together, these methods enabled a close analysis of the daily lives of the participants, attention to the meaning they made of their experiences, and what happens when they encountered mainstream institutions. These methods also ensured that we were able to capture the evolution of the participants' perceptions and decisions over time.

Research Participants

To protect the anonymity of each of the research participants, all names have been changed to pseudonyms. Each of the 30 young women defined themselves as African, among other identities. The participants represented the following countries: Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. However, each of the young women described living in another West African country for at least six months, often to complete the process of obtaining a U.S. travel visa. All of the participants lived in New York City representing four of the five boroughs, excluding Staten Island. The table below lists each of the research study participants. Each participant self-identified as African. Demographic data were collected for each of the participants and each was asked about her marital status.

Pseudonym	Age*	Borough	Country of Origin	Marital Status
Mariama	15	Brooklyn	Guinea	Unmarried
Jolie	17	Bronx	Mali	Unmarried
Hawa	19	Brooklyn	Sierra Leone	Unmarried
Fanta	18	Brooklyn	Guinea	Unmarried
Memuna	17	Bronx	Guinea	Unmarried -> Married
Binta	16	Brooklyn	Guinea	Unmarried
Nimata	19	Bronx	Ivory Coast	Married
Rugiatu	19	Manhattan	Mali	Married
Saran	20	Brooklyn	Guinea	Married
Djenebou	18	Bronx	Mali	Unmarried
Kadi	20	Bronx	Unknown	Married
Ami	16	Bronx	Burkina Faso	Married
Titi	19	Bronx	Guinea	Married
Fatina	15	Bronx	Guinea	Unmarried
Bintou	20	Manhattan	Mali	Unmarried
Hadja	16	Brooklyn	Sierra Leone/Guinea	Unmarried
Ramotulaye	18	Bronx	Mauritania	Married
Safinatou	18	Bronx	Ivory Coast	Unmarried
Fati	16	Bronx	Burkina Faso	Unmarried
Sarata	17	Bronx	Burkina Faso	Unmarried
Mari	19	Brooklyn	Mali	Married
Amina	16	Bronx	Guinea	Unmarried
Kalaytu	20	Bronx	Gambia	Married
Tolu	21	Bronx	Mali	Married
Regina	18	Bronx	Mali	Married
Fatoumata	16	Bronx	Gambia	Married
Laoura	17	Brooklyn	Guinea	Married
Mati	18	Bronx	Mali	Separated
Ahoua	16	Bronx	Gambia	Unmarried
Nika	15	Brooklyn	Ghana	Unmarried

*at the time of data collection

Ethnographic Study

Data Collection

Semi-structured Interviews. The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions focused on how the young girls perceived their life options, where they felt powerful in making decisions about their lives, and where they felt powerless especially with regards to education and family planning. We interviewed 14 participants two or three times, with each interview lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Each interview was informed by the previous responses of the participants, allowing for increasingly intimate insights into their experiences.¹ The semi-structured interviews were conducted between June 2010 to December 2011.

Participant Diaries. Participant diaries were another way for the researcher to enter into conversation with and across participants, using questions and prompts that invited them to express how they saw themselves in their own words and the medium of their own choosing and to offer further triangulation of data.² I asked youth participants to choose from a list of questions that centered around how they were positioned in different places in their lives, how others saw them, and how they saw their futures. I selected those diaries that focused on marriage specifically.

Focus Groups

Participatory Action Research (PAR) Focus Groups. Youth-led focus groups were designed to provide a space where young women who were recently married or expecting to soon be married could talk candidly with one another

about the challenges they faced in making decisions or fending off family pressures; about what they wish they would have known in advance; and about what they would tell their younger sister about marriage. This focus group was led by a young woman who had been married under the age of 18, was from a Fulani community, and spoke French, a common language for the focus group participants. Each of the two focus groups lasted two hours, and the conversations were recorded and transcribed by the facilitator.

Textual Analysis: Sauti Yetu Clients

Sauti Yetu is located in the South Bronx, which is home to large and culturally rich and diverse immigrant communities. While immigrants from Latin America, particularly Puerto Ricans (24%) and Dominicans (10%) predominate, the Bronx over the last several decades has increasingly become the home of many immigrants from Africa, making up approximately 34,000 of the borough's population,³ 3.4% in New York State,⁴ and 4.4% nationally.⁵

Our youth population is made up primarily of adolescents from West African countries. They are of the 1.5 generation, meaning that they arrived to the United States as adolescents, with their schooling experiences split transnationally.⁶ We primarily serve girls and young women and their families. About 40% of our youth population is married or engaged/promised, with the remaining identifying as being single. While early and forced marriage is not the norm in all African immigrant communities, we have seen an over-representation of such marriages in

¹ Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. M., & Vulliamy, G. (1997). *Qualitative Educational Research in Developing Countries: Current Perspectives*. New York, NY: Routledge.

² Crossley M., & Vulliamy, G. (1997). *Qualitative Educational Research in Developing Countries: Current Perspectives*. New York, NY: Routledge.

³ From the American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau (2011)

⁴ Capps, R., McCabe, K., & Fix, M. (2011). *New Streams: Black African Migration to the United States*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

⁵ Capps, R., McCabe, K., & Fix, M. (2011). *New Streams: Black African Migration to the United States*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

⁶ Alitolppa-Nittamo, A. (2002). The Generation In-between: Somali Youth and Schooling in Metropolitan Helsinki. *Intercultural Education*, 13(3), 275-316.

our work with youth. Finally, many of the youth we serve defy either the high education rates or the refugee and war experience of African immigrant rates in the United States and have likely attended little to no formal schooling prior to their arrival in the United States.⁷

Given Sauti Yetu's extensive experience working with youth who are being forced to marry and adult women who married very young and against their will, our programs hold a wealth of information about the consequences of forced and early marriage as well as the challenges for youth seeking to prevent early and forced marriages. Therefore, Sauti Yetu's youth-serving staff reviewed progress notes over the program's five years of working in the community. The case notes included anonymous information

about the nature of early and/or forced marriage, the services and resources available to the girls, and the outcomes of the case.

Analysis of Data

Interview and focus group transcripts, participant journals, and case studies were coded line-by-line to look for themes related to marriage and family planning. Each code was reorganized into emergent themes. With each data collection encounter, I kept detailed notes and conducted line-by-line coding of all transcripts, looking for themes as they arose and those pertinent to the research questions. The vast majority of the data of this study included audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Box 2. Mariama: Making the Case

Mariama is a 15-year-old from Guinea. After being told by her father and stepmother that she would be visiting Angola during the summer to meet her husband, she reached out to her Brooklyn high school's vice principal for help. Mariama had received a new cell phone from her father that he explained was to be used to talk to her "fiancé." Despite the money she received every week from the "fiancé," he complained to her father that Mariama only answered with one-word answers to his attempts to get to know her. Her stepmother encouraged her to talk more. Mariama answered that the man was too old, being in his mid-thirties, so she had nothing in common with him. Further, his business relationship with her father made it hard for her to trust him.

Mariama's vice principal reached out to Sauti Yetu for help and staff members made a visit to the school to hear directly from Mariama and to discuss her options with her. After the conversation, Mariama worried about "getting her family in trouble" and feared that she might be responsible for sending her father to jail. She was considering running away. We took her to the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) Children's Center to open a case with the agency. We were told that they could not accept her into the Children's Center without an open ACS case. We were instructed to call the New York State Central Registry to open a case. However, when we called, we were told that Mariama was not "in immediate danger"

Continues on next page



⁷ Capps, R., McCabe, K., & Fix, M. (2011). *New Streams: Black African Migration to the United States*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

Mariama continued

so a case could not be opened. Mariama informed us that if she were forced to return home, that she would run away. We were eventually able to place her in a shelter for youth. ACS followed up with Mariama at the shelter, but after interviewing the family and receiving her father's assurances that no wedding was in process, Mariama was convinced to return home. She insisted that her family respect that she did not want to be married, nor did she want her family to bring any additional men to marry her, and she wanted the right to choose whom she would eventually marry. The family agreed to the conditions.

While waiting for Mariama to pack her things at the shelter, Mariama's brother spoke on the phone to the "fiancé" in Fulani who called him to talk about "the marriage." Her brother explained that he told the "fiancé" he would tell him what the decision was once Mariama "stopped going back and forth" and had made up her mind. We explained to him that she had made up her mind, that Mariama did not want to get married, and that if he was interested in fulfilling her wishes, he needed to explain that to the "fiancé." He said he understood this and would support her. To date, Mariama remains unmarried.

Lessons Learned from Mariama

Mariama is a very brave girl. When faced with pressures from her family to marry, she felt strong enough to insist that she be able to choose when and whom she would marry. Fortunately, Mariama was able to find support in the form of her school vice principal and Sauti Yetu. However, these agencies and individuals were only able to help her because she expressed little ambivalence about what she wanted, unlike many girls facing the consequences of such defiance. Mariama's case highlights the challenges of determining whether a child is at risk for forced marriage when the family members are not forthcoming about their plans. In these cases, the responsibility is placed squarely on the shoulders of youth like Mariama to prove that she is being forced into a marriage and to be strong enough to insist that her rights be protected. The lack of a working protocol

on the part of child protective agencies to investigate allegations of a forced child marriage left the resolution of this family's case to case workers who were experiencing pressure to close cases rather than work to resolve them.

In Mariama's case, the signs of an early marriage might be the exchange of a dowry, the insistence that a child be in communication with the intended spouse, a travel date that has been set, and the family's tradition of arranged marriages for very young girls. For example, Mariama's family was a polygamous one and the woman that Mariama called her stepmother was actually her father's latest wife. The stepmother was barely out of her teens. While this information may not be conclusive, such cultural patterns can inform investigative practices that prove or disprove allegations of forced child marriage.

ANALYSIS: A CLOSER LOOK AT EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE

Early marriage is a foregone conclusion for many if not all of the young women in this study. Of the 30 participants (14 interviewees, 16 focus group participants), all but two faced pressures to marry or were already married before the age of 18. Of the 28, only six outwardly resisted early marriage and two said they fully consented. The voices presented below reflect what is often left unsaid by young African women facing the question of marriage before they are ready or able to legally consent. In this section, we look to the data to answer questions of why African girls and young women believe they are pressured to marry, what they want for their futures, and where they seek support. These findings are important because they should inform any policy or intervention intended to delay marriage and offer African immigrant girls better options for their educational and family lives.

Why (Not) Get Married?

The pressure to marry for the young women in this study is immense. Most of the research participants faced expectations from their parents and guardians, friends, and extended families in New York around the United States and abroad—even from themselves. Some responded by agreeing to marry, others resigned to the demands, and still others resisted the marriage. Their feelings towards the expectation of marriage evolved over the course of their participation in this study, along with their sense of their own future prospects and their resolve to resist the expectations placed on them.

To understand the intensity of the pressure these young women faced, we asked them to offer their understanding of why their families and communities felt they needed to get married. The most common response was “cultural tradition.” For example, Jolie from Mali (age 17) answered the first question asked about her future with “African girls get married, Miss. We have to get married when we’re young.” Hawa (age 19), a Fulani young woman from Sierra Leone, also agreed: “Most Africans or Fulanis, the parents don’t let the girls go to school. They have to get married. They think marriage is like the only place for women.” While there is no indication that all or even most African immigrant communities in the United States engage in forced or early marriage, the perception that these socio-cultural norms cannot change was pervasive and added to the hopelessness many young women felt when resisting the pressures and coercion to marry. Many of the young women expressed skepticism that they could change the expectations their communities have for their lives. Hawa (age 19) put it this way: “I’m gonna be 20 soon and I have to get married. It’s the tradition. You can’t change that.”

An important element of the “cultural tradition” that the participants spoke of was the role of marriage as a rite of passage. After passing through the rite of marriage, many of the participants discussed the privileges they hoped to acquire, such as increased freedom of movement, enhanced standing among their peers and in their communities, and less crowded living circumstances. Fanta (age 18) hoped to go to college the following school year. She had already made a deal with her parents that she would marry the summer after she finished high school. However, she still debated whether she would go through with the agreement: “It

[getting married] might be better because I'll be able to make more decisions for myself." Conversely, the consequences of refusing to marry not only meant rejection but also increased restrictions on a young woman's movements or intensified the pressure to marry. For many, marriage was the only acceptable way to transition out of the family home and live on her own. Memuna (age 17) said, "They [Parents] want you to go to college in your husband's house, not in their house. They like, 'Get married and then go to school.'" She explained that her culture demands that a girl transition from her father's home to her husband's home. For Memuna, permission to attend college and live on campus was contingent upon her getting married. She married in summer 2011 to ensure that she could maintain a relationship with her parents and siblings.

As it did for Memuna, the expectation to marry sooner rather than later conflicted with the hopes that the participants had for their lives. The following section further explores those hopes and the connection between education and marriage.

What Do the Girls Want?

The young women participating in this study identified three "wants" for their lives. The most commonly stated desire was that of an education. The second "want" was a postponed marriage where they could be positioned with some financial independence. Finally, many of the participants expressed a desire to maintain good standing in their families and their communities. In her first interview, Memuna (age 17) explained, "I don't wanna get married until I finish a masters. Cuz I feel like if I get married then that will be it for education." Binta (age 16) went on say, "First of all, I want to go to college. You know how getting married is

important in my culture? I want to get away of hearing that word first. And going away—that will happen by me going away for college." The desire to obtain an education tied in very closely to the hopes that the participants have for their lives as new immigrants. They are acutely aware of the opportunity that their migration to the United States affords them. For the vast majority of the participants, accessing education meant that they would need to postpone marriage because they believed that marriage would make it more difficult for them to go further in their studies. In fact, the majority of the participants said that their parents did not have any outright objection to their continued educations, but instead thought whether or not to continue their education would be a decision to work out with their future husbands.

For some participants, marriage was even described as a way to gain some of the freedoms that would allow them to go to school. In fact, the promise of a spouse who would allow them to complete school often convinced the young women to go forward with the marriage. For some young women, their families intended for them to quit schooling in order to marry and assured them that they would be able to continue school once they got married. However, during the focus group with young women who were already married under the age of 18, Nimata (age 19) warned girls, "Don't listen to that! You're gonna get married and they gonna start telling you to get pregnant and then you can't go to school no more." Nimata was married in a traditional marriage ceremony the day after her 16th birthday and is now the mother of a three-year-old son. Nimata's husband originally promised to allow her to continue high school, but after her first miscarriage, family pressure increased for her to get pregnant again right

away. She subsequently dropped out of high school.

Very few of the participants rejected the ideal of marriage. They simply wanted to postpone marriage until they had the capacity to be more financially independent. Memuna argued, “I think that if you get married with nothing... like I think it’s better to get married when you’re independent and then if you get married, you know you have something to depend on... like your education and everything. It’s better so the man you marry will have some respect for you. Because they’re gonna be dependent.” One option for the young women who did not want the consequences of resisting marriage altogether was to be more active in the selection of their potential spouse to the extent their families allowed them to be. Rugiatu (age 19), a participant in the focus group, had married six months before participating in the focus group. Rather than resist the marriage itself, she resisted the spouse her family had chosen for her—another man who agreed to postpone the marriage until after she finished high school and allow her to go to college. Rugiatu, like many of the young women, wanted to get married but expressed the desire to seek a future spouse on her own terms and timeframe.

The benefit of conducting the ethnographic portion of the study over the course of an entire year was to have the opportunity to see the participants evolve in their desires for their lives in relation to marriage. These changes occurred as life circumstances changed. At times, the young women became more amenable to marriage as they saw their education prospects diminish. For the case of Jolie (age 17), she became less interested in marriage as her schooling prospects improved. At the start of the study, Jolie had ongoing conflict with her

parents and seemed to look to marriage as a way to get out of her parents’ home and to find “some peace.” Because of a speech disability, Jolie worried that she would not be able to graduate from high school, let alone go to college. She said, “My hope is to maybe to finish high school and have a job and be married and have childrens [sic]. And—and that’s it.” By her third interview, Jolie had received considerable help for her speech disability, and although she was still having trouble with her family and under considerable pressure to marry, she had changed her mind about her future in the next five years.

Jolie: *I’m gonna be in my own house and stuff. And I’m gonna be a nurse. And I’m gonna drive and stuff. I’ll be in school again.*

RB: *You’ll be in school?*

Jolie: *Yeah. I’ll have a job outside of the school.*

RB: *You’ll have a job out of the school?*

Jolie: *Yeah and that’s it.*

RB: *How does having a family fit into that plan?*

Jolie: *Not not yet. After I’m a nurse, then I can have a family.*

For others, getting married was sought after and willingly entered into, and they were happy with their decision. One such participant, Saran (age 20), felt that getting married was the best way to ensure good standing in her community, a link to her culture, and a father for her future children. Saran put it this way, “People like in America, they felt like to get married young it’s not good. But like one thing that I would say, like, if you know what you’re doing, if you know what you—you want for your life, I think it’s good thing to do it. Because when you get married you’ll have children,

it's not like a boyfriend. You have children together, they can leave you. So, I decide for myself to get married early." For Saran, the choice to marry and become a mother while a high school student did not prevent her from continuing her education. As of the close of this study, Saran had completed her second year of college in a pre-nursing program. However, most of the married young women found it very difficult to balance the demands of marriage and motherhood with their studies and many described putting their educations on hold to look for jobs.

Although Saran's experience was not common among the study's participants, she shared with the group the hope that they would not have to choose between their families, communities, and aspirations. Those participants who were resigned to marry hoped for a life outcome like Saran's, where they could maintain good standing in their families and communities regardless of their decisions to marry young.

Where Do the Girls Go for Help?

In addition to cultural expectations, many of the participants feared what might happen if they resisted the social expectation to marry. Like Memuna who married reluctantly, the participants either married because they felt it was the only way they could remain in their family's good graces or because they feared physical reprisals or being disowned and not having anywhere else to go. As described in Box 3 (page 14), Djenebou's (age 18) constant arguments with her father about marrying forced her out of her home. As she described it, "When I go to my auntie's house to escape my father, they tell me that I should just get married to keep peace in the family." The question of where young women might go when they are unwilling to acquiesce to the demands of their

families was one that the participants found difficult to answer. The stories on pages 8 and 14 of both Maimouna and Djenebou offer examples of how child welfare and the shelter systems that are unfamiliar with the dynamics of early and forced marriage failed to support these girls when they did seek help.

Like Jolie, the participants who felt more equipped to resist the pressures to marry tended to be those who felt they had educational options to fight for. However, those who raised the issue to teachers, service providers and/or youth workers were often turned off from seeking help because the only available response seemed to be separation from their families and support networks. Several participants had the incorrect belief that if they sought help to prevent an early or forced marriage, their parents could get in trouble or that it would bring "problems" on their family. Kadi, now age 20, was 15 when she married. She arrived to the United States not long before she married a man who was significantly older. She, "I didn't know nothing when I came here. They told me to marry my husband and I did. They told me to tell everyone at school that he was my uncle or we would go to jail." Kadi described how her husband would go to school and represent himself as her uncle and guardian. While she suspected that the school staff knew, no one ever approached her about it.

Those participants who were able to successfully postpone marriage were able to find an ally in their family or extended family to advocate for them to postpone the marriage. This ally tended to be privy to plans that were in the works and were able to alert the young woman before plans were solidified. If the ally was a parent, they often could act as a buffer against potential suitors or other family members who expected

the marriage. For example, Hawa’s mother acted as the buffer between Hawa and family elders while she was in high school. As Hawa said, “I’m lucky to have my mom. She’s not giving me too much headache. But I’m in college, she thinks I should get married. When I was in high school, I have to graduate first and she didn’t let them [the suitors] bother me too much.”

Despite the limited resources and supports available to young women who face pressure to marry before they are ready, the participants still indicated that they wanted to be able to talk with teachers and other school staff. In fact, many saw their teachers and guidance counselors as people they could trust when seeking help generally. By having a deeper understanding of the pressures young women face and what they hope for in their futures, teachers and service providers can be better equipped to provide these young women with the resources they need. In the following section, the participants share their insights into what would be most helpful in preventing early and forced marriage and what services should be made available to them.

EARLY/FORCED MARRIAGE AND CHILD WELFARE

Under New York Penal law, a person is guilty of endangering the welfare of a child when the person knowingly acts in a manner likely to be injurious to the physical, mental or moral welfare of a child less than 17 years old.⁸

The person charged with endangering the welfare of the child need not be the child’s parent or guardian.⁹ To establish the violation, it must be shown that the person knowingly acted in a way that would likely be injurious to the physical, mental or moral welfare of the child.¹⁰ In most cases of endangering the welfare of a child, courts have found a person guilty of the crime through conduct that directly endangers the child, such as inflicting excessive corporal punishment, supplying children with alcohol or drugs, involving a child in sexual activity or failing to provide a child with required medical treatment.¹¹ Exposure to acts such as domestic violence that occurs in the presence of but not directed at the child may also constitute endangering the welfare of a child.¹²

In the context of early/forced marriage, parents may be found criminally responsible for endangering the welfare of their child by arranging the minor’s marriage. In a New York case of first impression, *People v. Benu*, the court found that a father’s activities in connection to arranging the marriage of his 13-year-old daughter to a 17-year-old spouse amounted to endangering his child’s physical, mental, and moral welfare.¹³ In *Benu*, the father made his apartment available for the marriage ceremony, procured a person to solemnize the marriage and provided his daughter money to leave New York with her husband.¹⁴ The court found that the father’s active participation in the marriage illustrated that he knowingly played an active role in the ceremony, thus endangering the welfare of his minor child.¹⁵

⁸ N.Y. PENAL LAW § 260.10 (McKinney 2010).

⁹ *People v. Stanley*, 522 N.Y.S.2d 309 (1987).

¹⁰ N.Y. PENAL LAW § 260.10 (endangering the welfare of a child is a Class A misdemeanor with a maximum of one year in jail if convicted).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² See, e.g., *People v. Johnson*, 95 N.Y.2d 368 (2000) (emphasizing the adverse effects of domestic violence on children).

¹³ *People v. Benu*, 385 N.Y.S.2d 222 (Crim. Ct. 1976).

¹⁴ *Id.* at 144.

¹⁵ *Id.*

Box 3. Djenebou: No Where to Go

While Mariama's (see page 8) case is challenging it is more straightforward than situations where girls are older, undocumented, or when the impending marriage is not forced but when the girl is coerced by threats of homelessness, expulsion from the family or when the financial well-being of family members in the United States or in their country of origin is threatened. Djenebou offers insight into just such a situation.



Djenebou is an expressive 18-year-old from Mali. She and her mother came to the United States to join her father. When they arrived, they learned that her father had taken another wife. Her father and the new wife and their two children live in a two-bedroom apartment in the Bronx. Djenebou shared a room with her mother in the crowded apartment. Tensions were high in the household.

Djenebou's father, now a U.S. citizen, sent for her and her mother two years ago when Djenebou was 16 years old. Djenebou was immediately placed in the 9th grade. Despite the significant gaps in her schooling, she described her grades as strong and she hoped to be an engineer. School work provided a good excuse to avoid the conflict in her home. Djenebou's home life had become unbearable and she tried to stay away as much as possible.

In the late winter, her relationship with her family deteriorated to the point that Djenebou left home and stayed with friends for two weeks. When the friend's family asked her to leave, she spent one week sleeping on the subway. Her father eventually insisted that she return home with promises that the relationship would improve. Upon her return, her mother told her that her father was planning a marriage for her within the next six months. Her mother was to keep the marriage secret, but told her because, according to Djenebou, her mother knew her to have a fiery temper and that any surprise would not go well for the family. Djenebou said that she knew the plans were underway because her father made such comments as,

"If you were married, we wouldn't be going through this right now.' And then sometimes they say, 'Girls your age in Mali already have four kids. If you were there, you'd already be having your third child right now.'"

The impending marriage was weighing heavily on Djenebou. She did not feel that she had anyone to talk to about not wanting to get married. Despite all of these challenges, Djenebou had some of the best attendance of any of the students at her school. She rarely missed a day and wanted to attend a four-year university. Although her father had no issue with her desire to go to college, he would rather she marry first.

Continues on next page

Djenebou continued

Djenebou explained,

“They don’t want me to go to college in their house. That way if anything happens then, it’s not their problem” (Djenebou, interview March 11, 2011).

She showed several signs of depression including not sleeping and difficulty concentrating. She did reach out to a few of her teachers, but they seemed unsure of what to do and Djenebou worried that they would call the police on her father and that he would no longer provide for her mother. Djenebou also felt sure that she would eventually be financially responsible for her mother.

By the end of the school year, Djenebou braided hair on weekends for extra money and is still looking for a job that will enable her to rent a room for her and her mother. She knows that once her father decides it is time for her to get married, she will eventually have to leave his home. She considered dropping out of school to get her GED because of the flexibility in the class schedule; however, her school guidance counselor told her that due to her previous gaps in schooling it might take her more time to finish the GED than it would to get her high school diploma.

Lessons Learned from Djenebou

Relative to Mariama’s situation, Djenebou’s case may seem a less egregious example because she is 18 years of age. However, the family dynamics of control and coercion are equally if not more powerful for Djenebou. Djenebou’s compliance or defiance has implications of homelessness and educational disenfranchisement for her but may also endanger her mother’s immigration and housing situation. Her mother is not her father’s wife on record in the United States, and thus cannot obtain legal residency status from Djenebou’s father. Both she and her mother have overstayed their visas and are now undocumented. Like Mariama, Djenebou reached out to her school for support

and feared that seeking help might have negative legal consequences for her family members. However, Djenebou found no support from school staff possibly due to her age but also because of the limited options available to her both in addressing her residency status but also because of they are ineligible for housing programs due to their lack of legal residency. Despite Djenebou’s concerns about her family members, she seemed willing to take advantage of interventions that would help to resolve her situation. For example, if she and her mother might be able to find housing assistance, might relieve Djenebou of the pressure to marry.

Box 4. Ami: What's Done is Done

On the first day of school, we learned that Ami had gotten married. We could tell by the residual amber tint on her fingers from the henna. We asked her about it and she confessed that she had indeed married this summer. She pulled the large photo album from her backpack and shared photographs of the various ceremonies, including pictures of many of the girls in our afterschool program who acted as her attendants. Ami is 16 years old and is very excited about her new life. However, she is receiving pressure from her family to have a child immediately. Ami is in the tenth grade and although she wants children soon, she would like to wait until she graduates from high school and is in college. Ami has made two visits to the adolescent health center to learn about birth control, but both times left without the birth control information she was seeking. When asked why she was not getting what she needed, she answered, "Miss, I don't know. They keep telling me about condoms." We suspected there may have been a language barrier. Although Ami's spoken English was good, she may not have mastered the vocabulary to understand sexual and reproductive health issues. A Sauti Yetu staff member decided to accompany Ami to her next doctor's appointment to get a better understanding of what was going on. After introducing ourselves to the attending physician, Ami asked that we be allowed to stay during her consultation. Observing the consultation, Ami did not disclose her marital status. Many of the questions asked of her were directed at youth who were sexually active and for whom pregnancy was not expectation. Further, many of the conclusions drawn from Ami's answers were based on assumptions that are made from mainstream American youth who are by definition unmarried. For example, questions about the number of times one had unprotected sex in the last month can yield different conclusions for a married girl and a non-married girl. When the physician stepped out of the room, the Sauti Yetu staff member asked Ami why she did not want to share her marital status. She explained that she feared she would get her family in trouble. I assured her that she would not and that it would be a good idea for her to share her marital status to find the best birth control options for her. When the physician returned, Ami decided not to tell her about her marital status and informed her that she decided to take the Depo Provera shot for birth control. When the physician ordered a pregnancy test before administering the injection, she learned that Ami was already very early in her pregnancy.



Lessons Learned from Ami

Although health care providers cannot be held responsible for what a patient does not disclose, providing complete and quality care is often determined not only by the care provided but also by the

types of questions asked. Ami may have been willing to be more forthcoming if the questions asked were more closely related to her reality.

In discussing child welfare issues in the context of early marriage, an important factor is the child's age at the time of the marriage. Under the Domestic Relations Law, by fixing the age to which minors may not marry without parental consent, the legislature of New York voiced public policy against marriage of minors.¹⁶ Thus, for early marriages of children under 14 years of age, a finding of endangering the

welfare of the child is more likely because of the negative effects of early marriage on the child, particularly for the child-bride. Even if the child consented to the marriage, it is not a defense to prosecution of endangering the child's welfare.¹⁷ There are concerns about premature introduction to sexual activities, early childbearing, and interference with the child's schooling. The connection here, then,

Box 5. No One Even Knows She's Here

Reflections of our first year working in child welfare through preventive services
By Katrina Schermerhorn, Program Director, Children and Family Service Program,
Sauti Yetu Center for African Women

Our first year working in preventive services was a learning experience. We are practicing child welfare outside of our usual scope of services. We are often forced to practice blindly because few policies and procedures are in place for the young ladies who come to us for help and support. Naima was 14 years old when she came to the U.S. She was sent here with the promise of "work" and school while assisting a family friend who recently gave birth in Pennsylvania. She was never placed in school and within a year sent to another family who had also recently had a child in New York City. She was not paid for any of her work nor was she placed in school. It was there that she met a man 40 years older whom she married within six months. She was nearly 17 when she gave birth to her son. She disclosed to hospital staff that she was married and how old her husband was. The case was called in to the New York state central registry and was flagged for sexual abuse because her husband became her caretaker when she moved in with him. They have no marriage certificate. The marriage was conducted in Guinea. Although her husband says that he had her family's permission to marry Naima, there is little proof (both of Naima's parents are now deceased).

The case was assigned to our agency to provide services to the family. However, several questions arose as we talked with Naima. How can it be that a case is indicated for sexual abuse, yet the child is still left in the care of the perpetrator? What can be done to assist this young lady who was trafficked here, had her rights violated, and saw marriage as an escape from the other indignities she experienced since she arrived? While we work very closely with our partners in the field offices, no current policies or procedures are in place to address these issues. Even as we address more traditional child abuse or neglect cases, case planners are constantly faced with early and forced marriages. Without set policies or little training for front line staff, these issues often go unaddressed.



is that even though a parent and the child may consent to the early marriage, child welfare laws may still find the parent guilty of endangering the welfare of the child by taking an active role in the marriage of the child and limiting her prospects to a more fulfilling future.

Consent and Sexual Offenses

Consent is also a factor in the context of sexual relations in a forced or early marriage. When one spouse is under the age of legal consent, the adult spouse may be subject to criminal prosecution under New York's statutory rape and sexual offense laws. Under New York Penal Law, anyone age 21 or over who has sexual intercourse with someone under the age of 17 years old may be charged with 3rd degree rape; anyone age 18 or over who engages in sexual intercourse with someone under the age of 15 years old may be charged with 2nd degree rape; and, finally, anyone who has sexual intercourse with someone who is less than 11 years old or less than 13 years old if the actor is 18 or older is charged with 1st degree rape.¹⁸

As an affirmative defense to a victim's lack of consent based on her inability to consent because she was less than 17 years old, a defendant may argue that he was married to the victim at the time of the sexual contact and therefore the consent was implied through the marriage contract. Although this defense, the so-called "marital exemption for rape" is codified in New York's Penal Code, it has practically been abolished by judicial decisions in New York.¹⁹ In the most presiding case on the issue, *People v. Liberta*, the New York Court of Appeals declared the marital exemption for rape in the New York statute to be unconstitutional on

the grounds that the exemption was *unreasonable and had no rational basis* for the difference in treatment between marital rape and unmarital rape.²⁰ Ultimately, the courts have held that any person has the right to refuse compelled sexual intercourse regardless marital status. Therefore, the affirmative defense of marriage to the minor spouse will not likely be a successful argument in sexual offense cases.

CONCLUSION

Beyond Parent Parental Rights: A Legal and Moral Framework

While the practice of early and forced marriage is problematic, it may present an opportunity for children's and women's rights advocates to address the contradictions between U.S. Child welfare laws that support parental rights and what is internationally understood to be in the best interest of children. As advocates and policymakers set forth a legal framework to prevent early and forced marriage, there is also an opportunity to expand the conversation from simply what is legally permissible to what is in the best interest of young women within their families and communities.

Laws and institutional practices not only reflect what we hold to be permissible, but also mirror the values and ideals that support the best welfare of the society. These values and ideals are reflected internationally in treaties and conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With regard to marriage, U.S. states have attempted to balance the statutory requirements to not impede on a minor's ability to get married and the state's

¹⁶ *Id.* ("The public policy of this State is to discourage early marriage, or at best, to demand that the parents of certain underage children consent to their assuming the responsibilities of matrimony... [T]here can be little doubt that children of 13 lack the emotional maturity recognized as a critical factor in successful marriage."). See N.Y. DOM. REL. LAW § 15 (McKinney 2003).

¹⁷ *Id.* at 145. ("The People concede that even if Fatima participated in the rites in the defendant's home and did not object to the proceedings. However, even if she were not obviously slow-witted and emotionally underdeveloped, her consent would be irrelevant. Consent is not a defense to prosecution under section 206.10 of the Penal Law."). (citations omitted).

¹⁸ N.Y. PENAL LAW §130.25, §130.30, §130.35 (McKinney 2001).

¹⁹ N.Y. PENAL LAW §130.10(4) (McKinney 2001).

²⁰ *People v. Liberta*, 64 N.Y.2d.152, 164 (1984). (emphasis added).

interest to protect the welfare of minors, and to ensure that healthy and stable marital unions are created. However, these statutory requirements contradict the widespread understanding, both internationally and nationally, that a young person should be 18 years old before getting married. This standard has been adopted because it is believed that young people are better served when they are able to obtain an education, develop socially and emotionally, and plan for their futures unencumbered by the demands of marriage and parenthood.

While this report aims to affect policy in New York State with regard to forced and early marriage, we also seek to foster dialogue within and across African immigrant communities about parental responsibility and the limits of parental authority over their children. As communities migrate, they undergo a process of change that reflects the social, cultural, and economic conditions of their adopted homes. In these dialogues, young people must be empowered to share what they want for their lives and should be encouraged to delay marriage until they are 18 years old, regardless of whether they or their parents consent.

Based on the findings in this report, focus group conversations with research participants, and Sauti Yetu's five years of work with adolescent girls who are dealing with pressures to marry early, we present the following recommendations for continued work.

1) Community Dialogue & Mediation

Engaging the diverse immigrant and refugee communities in dialogue about the changing nature of gender expectations in migrating communities is vital to postponing marriage for immigrant girls. As Adama (age 16) put it, "I have my culture and I can't forget it. But, we have more opportunity here to be somebody great." When asked what a young woman who

does not want to marry should do, many of the young women suggested that they speak to their families and explain to them why they want to wait to marry. The challenge is that many admitting feeling alone in expressing their wishes. However, they all said it is helpful to have someone to help them in their discussions with family members to mediate the various interests in their families. Community-based family mediation strategies would enable young women to negotiate their best interests without the endangering the welfare of their families.

2) Culturally-specific Coordinated Interventions

As Binta (age 16) considered whether to marry, she did not consult any of the teachers or service providers she could access because she felt, "They don't know my culture. They think I can just say no and it's that easy." Given the sensitive nature of parenting and marriage in these families, service providers must understand questions of how marriage is arranged in the communities where they work, who is responsible for decision-making, what indicates that a young woman is ready to marry, and what have families and communities decided about the role of schooling in their daughters' lives. Armed with this information, service providers will be able to develop interventions that can best support and protect young women (see page 21 for a sample screening protocol).

3) Targeted Resources and Opportunities

The current movement to address early and forced marriage in the United States tends to be focused more on youth that are under the age of consent in their jurisdiction, placing the issue squarely within the realm of the child welfare system. However, the coercion and power dynamics of early and forced marriage are also similar to those of domestic violence or other forms of violence against women and girls.

Thus, resources (human and financial) must be committed to community-based organizations to facilitate this crucial work. Housing, counseling, and health care access must be afforded to girls and young women seeking to prevent early and forced marriage. Further, resources must be afforded to ensure that young women have the skills to be able to build financial independence so that they are not forced into marriages due to financial necessity. Both state child welfare agencies and the movement to end violence against women and girls must take ownership of the prevention of early and forced marriage and the provision of services to girls and young women impacted by the practice.

4) Community-specific Data Collection

This report is not intended to be the definitive voice for the issue of early and forced marriage. Instead, we aim to raise questions that might inform community-specific research on the prevalence, nature, and consequences of early and forced marriage across a variety of communities. In order for policies to protect young women from this practice, these policies must be tailored to the ways that marriage occurs across a variety of communities. Additional research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed.



Appendix: Early and Forced Marriage Screening Checklist

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

- How old are you?
- Where do you live?
- Who do you live with?
- What is your religion?
- Are you in school?
- Where do you go to school?
- What grade are you in?

IMMIGRATION QUESTIONS

- Where were you born?
- Do you have any immigration papers?
- Did you ever see a lawyer for immigration?
- What happened?
- When did you first arrive to the U.S.?
Did anyone accompany you?
- How long have you been in the U.S.?
- Why did you come to the U.S.?

RELATIONSHIP QUESTIONS

- Are you in a relationship?
- Are you engaged?
 - When/Age
- Are you married?
 - When/Age
- Who have you told about your relationship?
- Who do you confide in when you have problems in your relationship?
- Do you know if any of your family members want you to get married in the next couple of years?
- Do you have any children?
 - Age
- Do you want to have children? If so, when?
And, how many? If not, why not?
- Do you feel pressured to have children?
If so, by whom?
- If you have children, do they live with you or someone else?

MARRIAGE QUESTIONS

Pre-marriage

- Do you want to get married?
If yes, why? If no, why not?
- How will/did you meet your spouse?
- How old is your fiancé?
- Will your spouse be married to anyone else?
Do you expect your spouse to be married to anyone else while married to you?
- When will you start to live with your spouse?
- Where will you be married?
 - Home
 - Mosque
 - Church
 - City Hall
 - US or Abroad? Which country?
- Will you have a marriage ceremony?
- Who will perform your marriage ceremony?
- Who will be present at your marriage ceremony?
- Who will you confide in when you have problems in your relationship?
- How will you be married?
 - Married with a U.S. marriage certificate
 - Married in a mosque or church
 - Traditional marriage
 - Married in country of origin
 - Married with co-wives
 - Living with someone but not married
- Who makes most of the decisions about whom and how you will marry?
- Do any other family members know that you are to be married?
- Who have you told about your marriage?
- How much time will there be between when you found out you were getting married and when you had your marriage ceremony?
- How long did you know your spouse before you got married?
- Has any money or gifts been exchanged by your families for the marriage?

- Do you feel pressure to get married? If so, from whom?

Post-marriage

- Did you want to get married? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- How did you and your spouse meet?
- How old is your spouse?
- Was your spouse married to anyone else while married to you?
- Do you live with your spouse?
- Where were you married?
 - Home
 - Mosque
 - Church
 - City Hall
 - US or Abroad? Which country?
- Did you have a marriage ceremony?
- Who performed the marriage ceremony?
- Who was present at your marriage ceremony?
- Who do you confide in when you have problems in your relationship?
- How were you married?
 - Married with a U.S. marriage certificate
 - Married in a mosque or church
 - Traditional marriage
 - Married in country of origin
 - Married with co-wives
 - Living with someone but not married
- Does your mom/dad know about your spouse?
- Do any other family members know that you are married?
- Who have you told about your marriage?
- How much time was there between when you found out you were getting married and when you had your marriage ceremony?
- How long did you know your spouse before you got married?
- Were any money or gifts exchanged by your families for the marriage?

- Were you pressured to marry? If so, from whom?

MARRIAGE DOCUMENTATION QUESTIONS

- Do you have any documentation of the marriage?
- Did you go to the city clerk to get a marriage license?
- What happened when you applied for a marriage license?
- Did you show the clerk any paperwork to prove your age?



Sauti Yetu
CENTER FOR AFRICAN WOMEN AND FAMILIES

Giving Voice To Our Potential