

“Girls giving birth to babies”. A pedagogical perspective for the self-determination and existential planning of young mothers

“Bambine che danno alla luce bambini”. Uno sguardo pedagogico rivolto all'autodeterminazione e alla progettualità esistenziale delle giovani madri

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the results of an empirical mixed methods research carried out in Latin America and the Caribbean, this paper aims to explore the phenomenon of early marriage and pregnancy. Specifically, as mentioned by the UN 2030 Agenda, although significant progress has been made in relation to gender equality globally, there are still a few “developed countries” in regard to gender rights and hundreds of millions of girls and young women continue to experience serious violence and structural discrimination. This essay aims to shed light on these conditions of vulnerability and disadvantage, emphasising the urgent need for new global educational solutions aimed at supporting the self-determination and personal planning of young mothers.

KEYWORDS

Early marriage and pregnancy, women's rights, female empowerment, existential planning, sustainable development.
Matrimoni e gravidanze precoci, diritti delle donne, empowerment femminile, progettualità esistenziale, sviluppo sostenibile.

Partendo dai risultati di una ricerca empirica a metodi misti condotta in America Latina e nei Caraibi, il saggio intende approfondire il fenomeno dei matrimoni e delle gravidanze precoci. In particolare, come sostenuto dall'Agenda ONU 2030, sebbene siano stati compiuti notevoli progressi in relazione all'uguaglianza di genere a livello globale, nel mondo delle donne esistono ancora oggi pochi “paesi sviluppati” e centinaia di milioni di bambine e ragazze continuano a subire gravi violenze e discriminazioni strutturali. Il presente contributo intende far luce su queste condizioni di vulnerabilità e svantaggio, sottolineando l'urgente necessità di nuove soluzioni educative globali volte a sostenere l'autodeterminazione e la progettualità personale delle giovani madri.

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1. Introduction

In 2023, amid multi-layered and compounding crises, progress has set back, especially for millions of women and girls around the world. Despite advancements on many fronts over the years, there are still a few “developed countries” in regard to gender rights (Seager, 2020) and hundreds of millions of girls and young women who continue to suffer structural violence. The latest available data on SDG 5 of the UN Agenda shows that the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. Across countries, many women and girls continue to experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that leave them behind. In everyday life, violence, discrimination and gender stereotypes still persist in every corner of the planet affecting the entire lives of many girls from childhood onwards, violating their rights, limiting their aspirations and their future opportunities.

2. On the side of girls and young women for a future of equal opportunities

Birth, marriage and death are three major events in most people’s lives. However only one of these, marriage, is determined by choice, or at least it should be (Ricker, Earn, Das, Greene, 2023). In fact, too many girls and boys today are still forced into marriage without being able to exercise their right to choose. Globally, an estimated 640 million girls alive today were married in childhood, before the age of 18: “nearly half of these young brides live in South Asia (45%) with the next largest share in sub-Saharan Africa (20%), followed by East Asia and the Pacific (15%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (9%)” (UNICEF, 2023, p. 5). Usually, marriage is conceived as the most beautiful part of a union and as a significant moment in adult life to be celebrated. However, the practice of Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU) offer no reason to celebrate because it is:

a violation, abuse or impairment of human rights and a harmful practice that prevents individuals from living their lives free from all forms of violence, and that it has wide-ranging and adverse consequences for the enjoyment of human rights, such as the right to education and the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including sexual and reproductive health (UN Human Rights Council, 2015, p. 3).

Although transformative trends in recent years have led to a sharp decline in marriage and the rise of new liquid forms of romantic relationships or unions (Abela, Vella, Piscopo, 2020), such violations continue to dominate in various realities and countries. These harmful socio-cultural practices represent a very complex phenomenon that has immediate and lifelong consequences and implications, hindering the personal autonomy and integration into the community, producing physical and emotional damage in the girl or young woman. CEFMU are a multifactorial and multi-causal problem influenced by patriarchal patterns and by the interaction of a range of factors including legal, social and cultural elements, rooted in the intersection between two conditions (femininity and minority). They were practised all over the world for generations affecting millions and millions of girls and young women. UNICEF data show that boys are also forced to marry while still children, but, compared to them, girls are disproportionately affected. Although nearly 80 million early marriages have been prevented globally over the past 25 years, a combination of factors is fuelling these phenomena again including conflicts, climate crisis and COVID-19. We cannot underestimate the effects and profound changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought in younger everyday lives: disruption to daily life through prolonged closure of schools and ECEC services, the pressures of economic uncertainty, illnesses and even mortality among parents has created a higher-risk environment for girls, exposing them to these kinds of harmful traditional practices. Moreover, girls living in areas affected by wars and conflicts face an elevated risk. The situation experienced by millions of parents and families living such precarious condition of vulnerability and fragility, may push them to feel and live “a heightened sense of insecurity, fear of sexual violence and threats to family honour, as well as financial hardship and infrastructure failures including interruptions to girls’ schooling” (UNICEF, 2023, p. 19). As is the case in pandemics and wars, extreme weather phenomena associated with climate change can also lead to conflict, violence and displacement conditions that increase the vulnerability of girls. Extreme weather events like hurricanes, floods, landslides or drought can disrupt sources of income, exacerbate food insecurity and incur costs for rebuilding and recovery (Prisco, 2022). In the face of these natural disasters, families may choose early marriage for their daughters as a way of protecting them or to relieve the financial burden. Large families in precarious economic conditions are sometimes practically forced to “sell” their daughters. Extreme weather events can also disrupt education and health systems, making it difficult for girls to access the resources and support they need. These events and phenomena are destroying their hopes and dreams, increasing the exposure to violence, reducing the access to essential services and information and the ability to realise and protect their rights.

Starting from these promptings, this paper presents some pedagogical reflections emerged from a multi and mixed-method research carried out in the summer/autumn 2022 by the writer in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) aimed to investigate the dimension of education for sustainable development. The analytical

focus of the paper is therefore not the conceptual categories obtained during this research (Prisco, 2023), rather a case that emerged from the comparison with two local key informants. The face-to-face interviews collected are around 30 minutes in length and all the conversations were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder, transcribed verbatim (Glaser, Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). The approach used aimed at identifying, in an inductive way, local problems and current social emergencies. In fact, during the first qualitative sequential exploratory phase in the Dominican Republic, surfaced a problematic scourge that is still strongly affecting the LAC region. In this article, data gathered offers us the opportunity to shed light on a phenomenon that is still widespread and to reflect on its educational impact and consequences.

3. Denied rights: the scourge of CEFMU and teenage pregnancies in LAC region

CEFMU are a reality for adolescent girls especially in LAC region, where, most often, takes the form of an informal union, rather than a formal marriage. These kinds of relationships are difficult to report as they are not officially registered by civil registration systems and expose young girls to a disadvantaged and vulnerable condition, without any legal protection. According to the ECLAC report, one in every four women in the region entered into a marriage or union for the first time before the age of 18. No progress has been made in the region for the last 25 years and, at the moment, without action and investment, by 2030 LAC region is expected to become second to sub-Saharan Africa in terms of prevalence (ECLAC, 2022). CEFMU are also almost always accompanied by early and therefore dangerous teenage pregnancies and childbirth, increasing the risk of likelihood of death, premature birth, complications during birth or low birth weight of the baby. It is estimated that early pregnancies cause about 70,000 deaths among girls aged 15 to 19 each year and that, in turn, a child born to an underage mother possesses a 60 percent greater chance of dying in infancy or developing a growth deficit than a child born to an adult woman.

Sixty-two per cent of the births that take place during the year here at the Hospital Maternidad Nuestra Señora de La Altagracia in Santo Domingo, the main mother and child hospital, are carried out by girls under the age of 18. The country is full of girls giving birth to babies. Here in Latin America and the Caribbean we are facing this dramatic situation. And the fathers of those children are also children themselves, young boys unemployed, uneducated. We talk about parental responsibility... but what kind of responsibility can a girl have when she is 14 years old and giving birth? (Local key informant n. 1).

Such practices undermine the identity construction process of girls, in a stage of their lives where each adolescent needs to find their being in the world according to their own aspirations and desires. A young girl, although endowed with the capacity of understanding appropriate to her age, cannot be in a position to fully understand the consequences of the commitment she is making, nor of the daily reality that will confront her. “A physical, psychological, social and cognitive preparedness is essential for a woman in the transition to motherhood which is lacking in teenage girls. As this transition occurs simultaneously with developmental changes of adolescence, teenage motherhood becomes unmanageable” (Dutta, Naskar, Das, Banerjee, 2022, p. 7273). Confined to the domestic sphere, deprived of the exploration of the world, forced to take on tasks and roles unsuitable for their age, girls are obliged to suspend all those activities that normally provide meaning, sense, structure and rhythm to an adolescent life and that are fundamental for a correct and positive emotional, cognitive and social development. Forced to grow up in limiting conditions, they are removed from their family circle, their network of friends and their protective environment at an early age, with serious consequences to their wellbeing and their emotional, social and cultural spheres. These practices are deeply embedded in the social norms of many realities, especially those with inadequate living conditions, affected by lack of opportunity and other environmental influences (MESECVI, Inter-American Commission of Women, 2022, p. 11). In some contexts, marriage and motherhood are conceived as the only life aspirations available to girls: gender norms and stereotypes lead them to assume their role as housewives and mothers as the only available identity horizon (Ulivieri, Biemmi, 2011). “Although girls may sometimes exercise their own autonomy in deciding to enter a union, structural, cultural, social and economic factors shape the conditions under which girls make these highly constrained choices. Girls bear a range of disadvantages imposed by biased gender norms, limited education, and constrained livelihood opportunities” (Greene, 2019, p. 17). In many contexts, models of subjugation and patriarchal patterns are still predominant and women’s personal planning is predetermined by others, so that many young women find themselves unable to self-determine from an early age (Deluigi, 2019, pp. 303-304). There are also widespread locally shared cultural meanings in the region that affect the precariousness of the situation driving other manifestations of gender inequality: for example to have children after one’s thirties means to become parents when already old or that children are supposed to be “remunerative”, in the sense that having a baby will allow to mothers “to pretend” from fathers an economic support to raise their children (Binazzi Daniel, 2011). These are just a few examples of gender stereotypes prevalent in the region that make us realise how ‘normalised’ the problem is, making it almost ‘invisible’, creating a dangerous

vicious circle of inequality. A vicious circle that forces girls into adulthood, exposing them to violence, to an early and unconscious motherhood, to an excess burden of care work, not allowing them to take an informed decision about their future, about a life partner, to have the opportunity and the chance to choose who, when or whether to marry/unite, whether have a baby, to attend school or to interrupt their studies to pursue a career. Such practices undermine what has been defined as the “age of potential”: the time of possibilities, the stage of identity and existential horizons, the space of experience, experimentation and innovation (Barone, 2009, pp. 107-108). A stage of life where you can:

[...] have fun, ride a bike, play, study, socialise, dream... not have sex and give birth. Sometimes without even knowing who the father is. A girl is a girl, we can't forget about this, about her rights. A girl studies, plays, dances, has fun, even falls in love, but does not give birth at fourteen. This is a denial of rights. These conditions of life, of material destitution, lead to a culture of poverty in which life has no meaning and that's why studying, taking drugs or having sex at fourteen doesn't make any difference for the teenagers. Because they don't see any meaning in life. So what awaits these girls who have just given birth? A vicious circle that doesn't close, that doesn't stop (Local key informant n. 2).

As emerges from these testimonies, we can perceive that the impact of these practices goes beyond girls themselves, perpetuating the transmission of a culture of hopelessness that affects the development of families, communities, societies and the entire nation at large. Faced with this harsh reality, to intervene in these scenarios by breaking the circuit of disadvantage, the first intervention to be implemented will concern the educational sphere (Elamè, 2014). Not all girls face the same risk, even within countries: one of the discriminating factors is certainly the educational opportunities to which these girls have access. In many countries, schooling and marriage are viewed as incompatible activities and girls are often forced to interrupt their studies limiting their opportunities for personal growth.

4. On the road to the 2030 Agenda: pedagogical reflections of the global path ahead to support the existential planning of younger generations

Ending CEFMU and early pregnancies is an ambitious target and global progress is not fast enough: continuing from this step, the world will take at least three hundred years. To eradicate it by 2030, progress would have to be at least 17 times faster than in the last decade (UN Women, 2022). Through its inclusion in SDG target 5.3 of the global development agenda, the international community promises to put an end to barriers that prevent women and girls from realising their full potential (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). There is no time to lose: urgent measures should be taken to secure girls' agency and autonomy around the world. However significant challenges lie ahead: the numerous difficulties experienced by large segments of the population in the world can only be eliminated when the conditions of vulnerability and disadvantage are given serious political and educational consideration and reflection. There is no magic formula, yet progress is possible if we focus on the adolescents' life plans and projects. In this regard, it becomes crucial to promote preventive, participative, dynamic and reflexive educational pathways to support the girls' personal planning, to offer them the necessary tools to be generative, to cultivate an amplified sense of self, to invest their existence of meaning. For this reason, it is crucial that every child, girl and young woman has greater decision-making power and the opportunity to grow and fulfil herself as a person, according to her own expectations, aspirations, dreams and desires. Educating in the direction of existential planning means support and safeguard their “intellectual freedom” to re-signify their personal life, offering them the possibility of reaching out beyond the cultural, social, psychological conditioning by which they are pressurised in their reality (Tolomelli, 2021, pp. 12-13). This requires focus on the best interests of the child, redoubling our efforts to guarantee equal educational opportunities to all and expanding them to reach the most marginalised girls, including those who are already married and/or mothers. When a girl marries or has a child, her childhood usually comes to an end, losing the opportunity to be empowered and develop social networks and confidence that will help her stand up for her own interests. CEFMU and teenage pregnancies abruptly interrupt girls' childhood and adolescence, depriving them of personal freedom and denying them fair opportunities to fully develop themselves. Today more than ever, efforts must be intensified to prevent and eradicate CEFMU and early pregnancy through holistic, comprehensive and coordinated actions that can act in those realities where the phenomenon is still widespread, in those areas made more vulnerable by poverty, wars, conflict, insecurity and humanitarian emergencies, in those contexts where girls run the risk of dropping out of school, experience social isolation and have limited job opportunities and prospects (Deluigi, 2020, p. 140). Given their multicausal nature, CEFMU and teenage pregnancies require multi-sectoral, multi-institutional and multilevel approaches and coordinated effort by the States, international organizations, civil society organizations, communities and families to implement synergistic, joint action campaigns and educational initiatives at promoting greater knowledge and awareness of the

complexity of the phenomenon. These harmful practices undermine the autonomy of girls, their right to live a life free from violence and coercion and their right to education so this is why we must insist on the design and implementation of initiatives to promote change in perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. We all know that eradicating a stereotype, changing a mentality, promoting a renewed cultural approach is an arduous, sometimes impossible, task (Silva, Zaninelli, Deluigi, 2022; Fiorucci, Pinto Minerva, Portera, 2017). It is particularly difficult because, as Elena Gianini Belotti reminded us, these beliefs are deeply rooted in our custom: human insecurity needs certainty and they provide it. Their astonishing strength lies precisely in the fact that they are transmitted as unquestionable truths from childhood and are never disavowed thereafter. And so, they are internalised by victimising both the one who formulates them and keeps them alive against the other and the one who is affected and branded by them (Gianini Belotti, 1973, p. 14). Fighting this type of process represents a challenge that cannot be ignored (Ulivieri, 2023): we must strive to ensure that the rights of young girls are not trampled upon, by committing ourselves to combat the violence that still pervades our societies. CEFMU and teenage pregnancies expose girls and young women to a situation of vulnerability and to a condition of “human fragility that entails a fragility of rights” (Milani, 2020, p. 447). For this reason, in the name of future generations, we are called to manifest a “pedagogy of indignation” (Freire, 2022, p. 51) against the structural injustices that characterise our time: we need to reflect on the urgency of conceiving, designing and creating a more hospitable future by guaranteeing them the right to freedom of expression, thought and conscience, to preserve their identity, to have a living environment appropriate to its physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, to be protected from all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse, including from harmful traditional practices.

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