

Early pregnancies as cause for school dropouts for girls in the Loiborsoit area

By Marah Seremak, Aglaë Caperan, and Suus Hulsen

Interpreter: Sarah Lengai

Introduction and methods

For our internship with Enkaina-e-Retoto in Loiborsoit, we conducted research on reasons why girls drop out of school. Since 2005, Enkaina has sponsored girls' education and has encountered issues with the continuation of their education between primary and secondary school. The main reason for young Maasai girls to drop out of school are early pregnancies. We therefore specifically aimed to find out the causes and consequences of early pregnancies, in order to ensure that girls remain in school and continue their education in the future.

In order to map out the problem, we conducted focus group discussions with students from the Loiborsoit "A" primary school. We used the problem tree analysis tool which involves drawing a tree where the trunk represents the problem, the roots the causes and the branches the consequences. This tool is commonly used for project planning among development agencies to map out a problem in a structured yet highly interactive and playful way.

We held four problem tree sessions in total. We started the session with an introduction round, allowing the children to introduce themselves in a playful way by passing around a tennis ball. We then asked them to brainstorm with us on causes for school dropouts. After they mentioned early pregnancy we moved smoothly into introducing that as the main problem and drawing the tree out on the board. We predicted boys and girls would identify different causes and consequences, so we interviewed them separately. After creating the tree together we entered into a discussion, asking students to highlight main points and digging deeper into interesting causes. We rounded off all sessions with a discussion on possible solutions, based on identified causes. We divided the groups as follows:

Session 1	Friday 15 July	20 girls aged 12-15	Standard 7
Session 2	Monday 18 July	25 girls aged 12-14	Mostly standard 7 and some standard 6
Session 3	Tuesday 19 July	20 boys aged 12-17	Standard 7
Session 4	Wednesday 20 July	26 boys aged 12-17	Mostly standard 7 and some standard 6

After interviewing the children we held two sessions of semi-structured interviews with teachers, one group from Loiborsoit "A" primary school and one from Emboret secondary school. We went with some guiding questions, asking them about the situation of early pregnancies in the community, the

school's response to an early pregnancy and what main causes and consequences they could identify. We also asked them about what kind of sexual (health) education children receive at the school. The primary school teachers mentioned most pregnancies happen between primary and secondary school, which is why we decided to interview secondary school teachers as well.

In the end we were able to identify differences between girls and boys, between kids and teachers, and between teachers of primary and secondary schools. Also, with each group we brainstormed about possible solutions and specific concerns. Together, these results can help to design a project to prevent early pregnancies.

Results

Girls' responses

In figure 1, the results of the two discussions with the girls are summarised. Important causes were poverty, gender roles, tradition (*esoto*), and religion. Main consequences were lack of education, poverty (lack of food), family quarrels, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or HIV/AIDS, and birth complications and death.

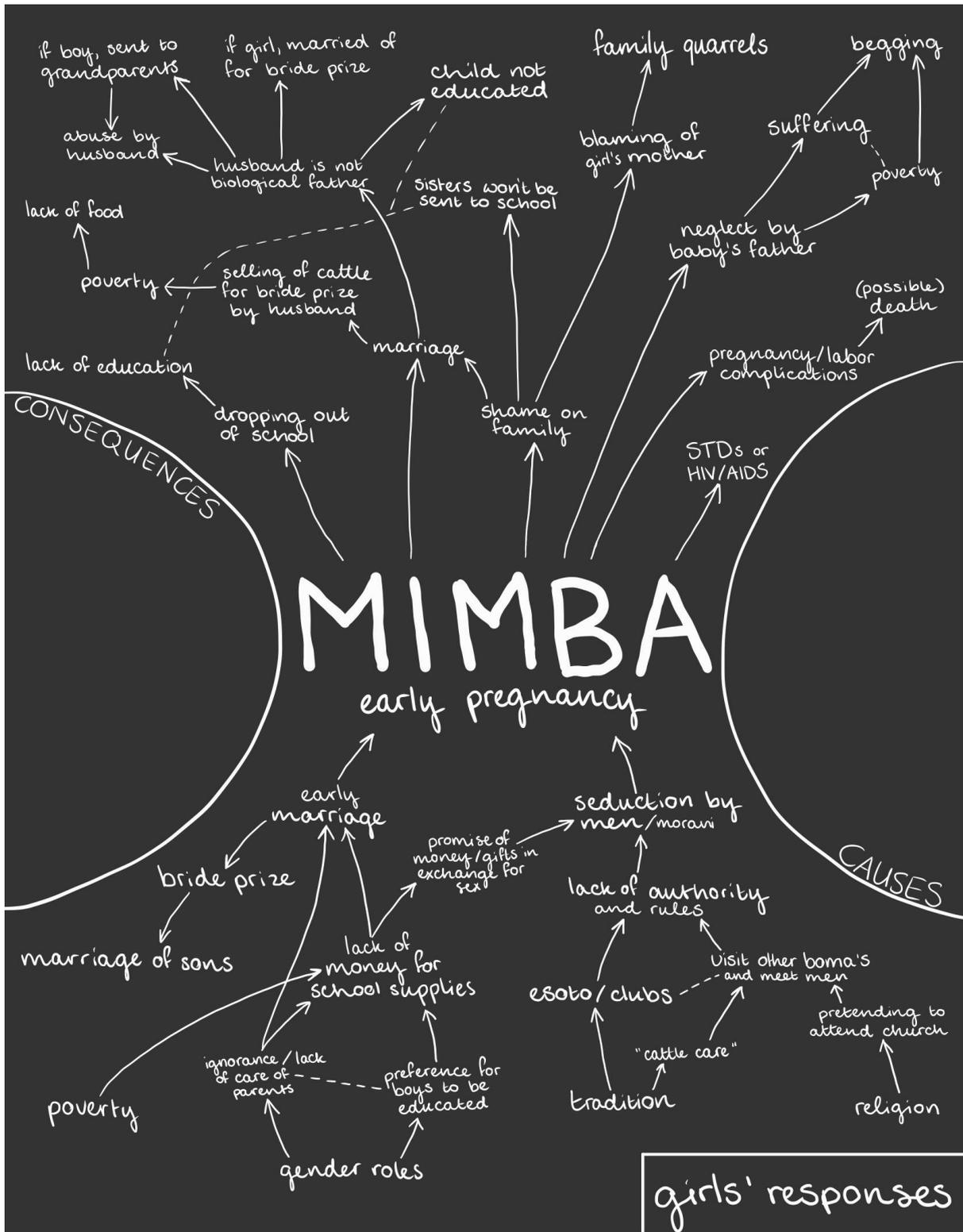


Figure 1. Summarised problem tree of sessions 1 and 2, the girls' responses.

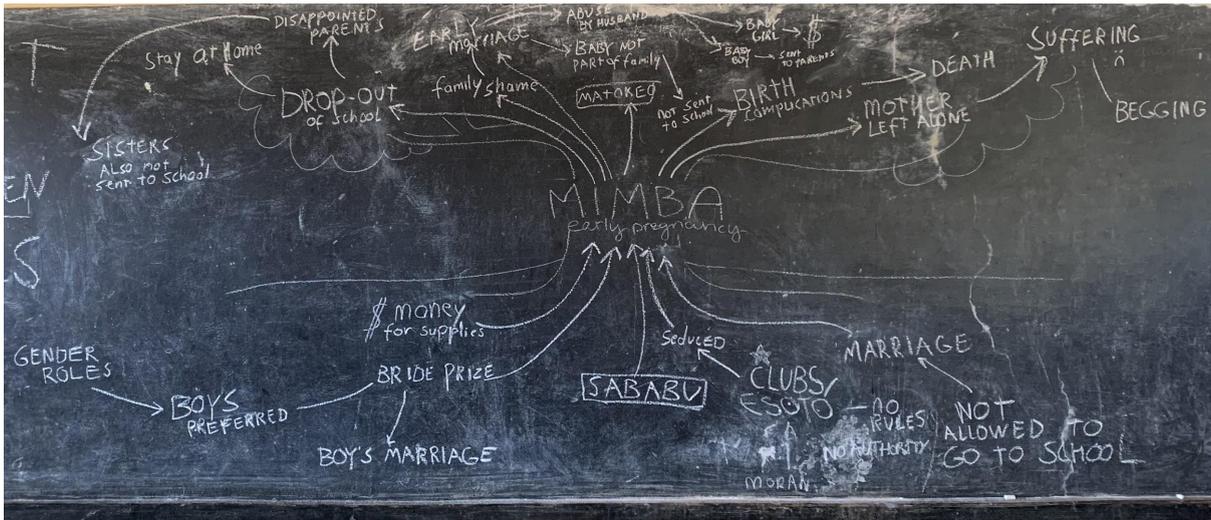


Figure 2. Session 1 problem tree.

In session 1 (figure 2), the girls named lack of school fees, seduction by men, and early pregnancies as reasons for school drop-outs. The girls mentioned that *esoto* as a cause is decreasing due to the increased influence of Christianity on the community. Moreover, they mentioned that traditionally, parents do not stop their kids from going to *esoto*. As possible solutions, they indicated that education about early pregnancies and puberty should be given in schools. Already, the schools teach sex education as a subject in school with a focus on changes in the body, according to the girls.

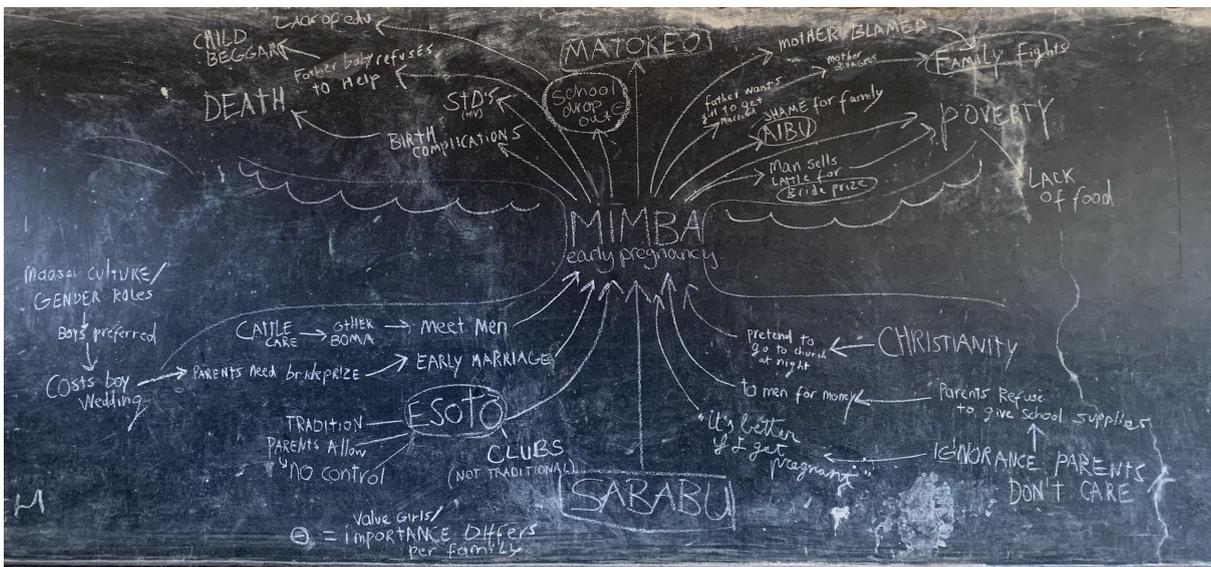


Figure 3. Session 2 problem tree.

In session 2 (figure 3), seduction by men for money, lack of school fees, early marriage for the bride prize, and educated girls not bringing wealth to their own family were named as causes for school drop-outs. The last reason is due to the fact that educated girls will marry into another family and thus the wealth generated by their higher education will not benefit her own family as much as her husband's. As a main cause for *mimba*, they indicated *esoto* and as main consequences school drop-outs, shame on the family, poverty and bride prizes, and family fights. Importantly, girls mentioned that the value and importance of girls differs between families, so the importance of school drop-outs differs between families as well. Similarly to session 1, the girls said that the prevalence of

esoto has decreased due to religion, as the church aims to restrict girls from going to these locations. However, christianity was also named as a cause, because sometimes girls pretend to go to church or bible study at night but instead sneak off to meet men. The solutions identified were education to all members of the community about womanhood to avoid gender bias, as well as education of parents about early marriages and STDs so that parents can in turn educate their kids about these topics. In addition, they mentioned school fees sponsorship, banning *esoto*, and increasing supervision of children by parents as solutions.

Boys' responses

In figure 4, the results of the two discussions with the boys are summarised. The main causes were copying bad behaviour from older girls, tradition (*esoto*), girls' desire for sex and nice things, family poverty, and early marriage. Important consequences were early marriage, school drop-out, birth complications and death, and shame on the family.

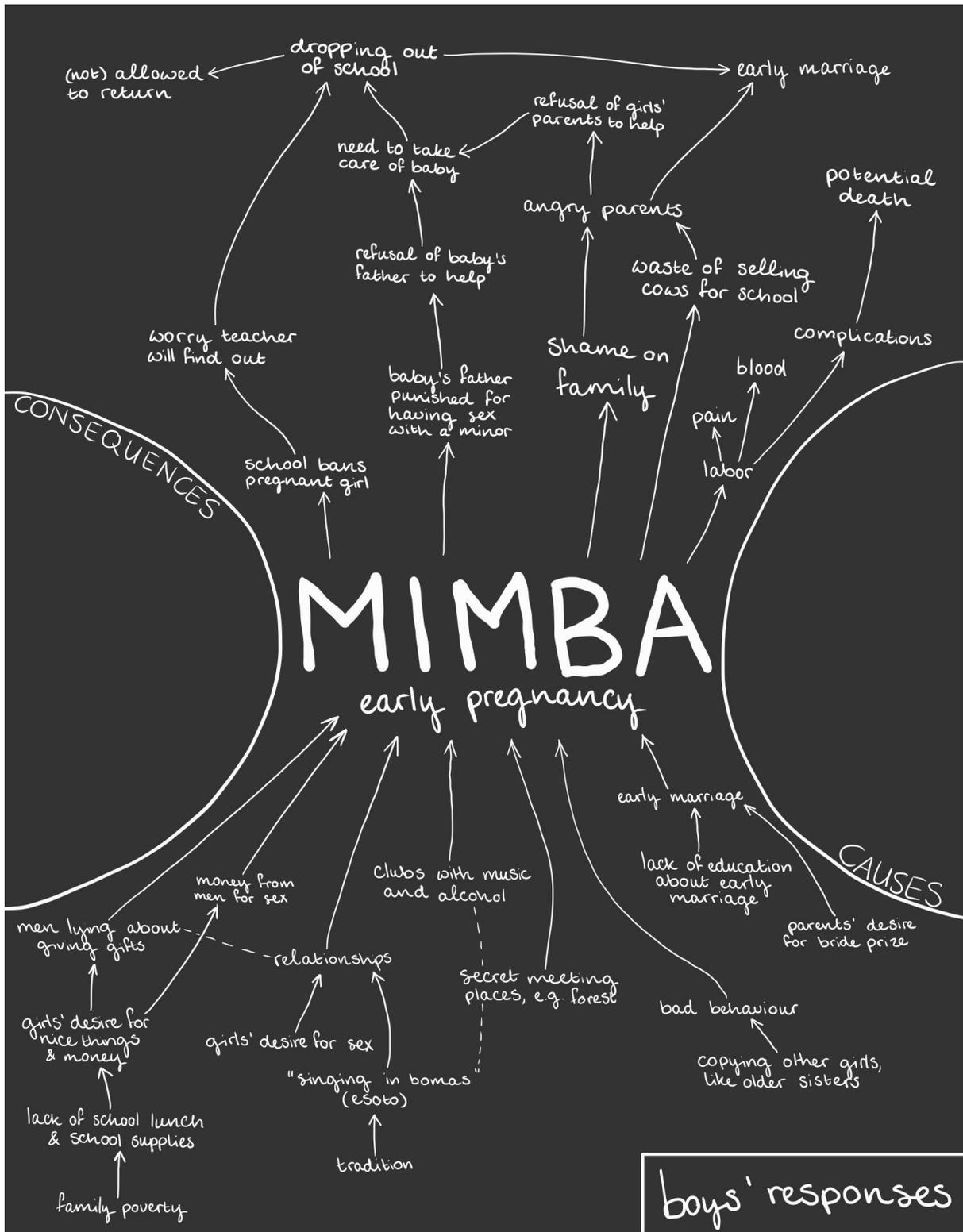


Figure 4. Summarised problem tree of sessions 3 and 4, the boys' responses.

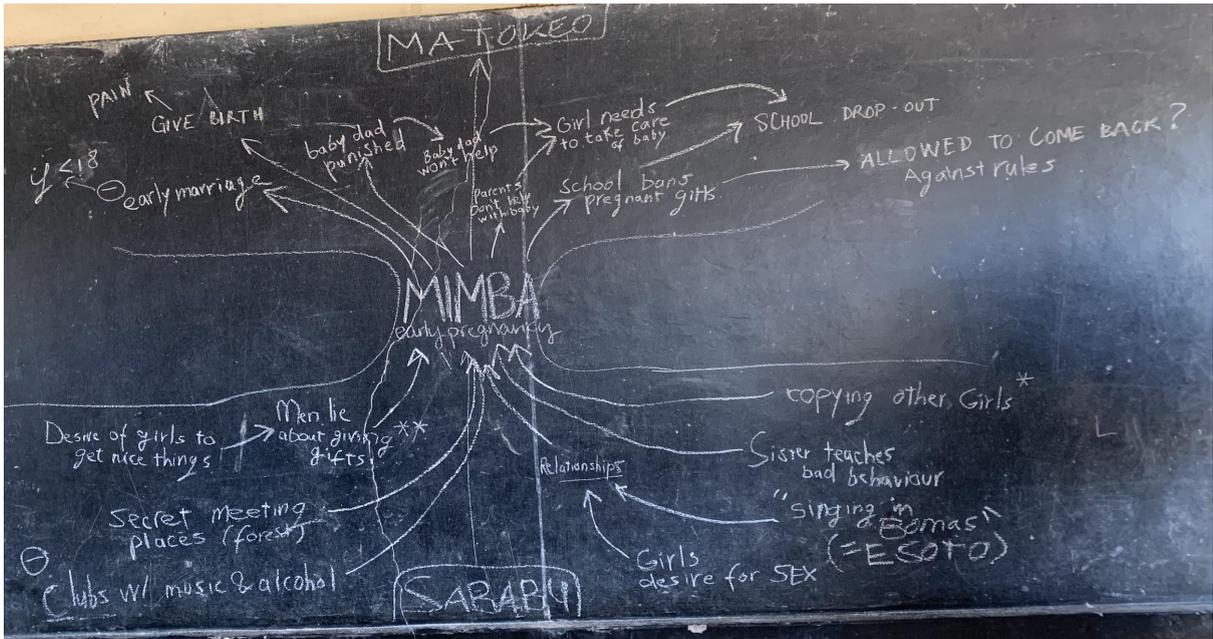


Figure 5. Session 3 problem tree.

In session 3 (figure 5), the boys named early marriage, drug abuse, seduction by men, bad behaviour by children, and early pregnancy as causes for school drop-outs. The most important causes for early pregnancy were men lying about giving gifts in exchange for sex and copying of other girls. Clubs with music and alcohol and early marriage were indicated as negative. About *esoto*, they said both boys and girls between 12 and 15 years old attend to get into relationships. Also, as government laws forbid impregnating a minor, the father of the baby will refuse to help for fear of getting caught by police. Importantly, all boys but one did not see early pregnancy as a negative thing. They said it was okay because it allows the community to grow. Only one boy said early pregnancy was negative, because it causes school dropouts and deprives girls of a future. Moreover, the boys said early marriage is bad but marriage for over 18 year olds is good. As solutions for early pregnancy, they mentioned education for parents and children about early pregnancies, as well as education for girls to refuse men and say no.

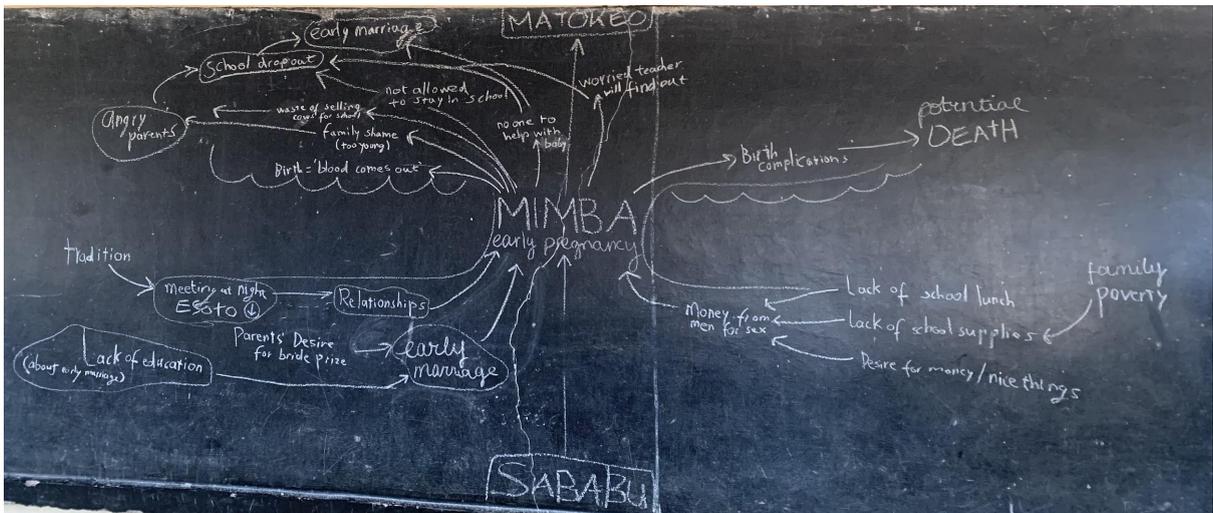


Figure 6. Session 4 problem tree.

In session 4, early pregnancies, drug abuse, poverty and lack of school supplies, and being fined for missing a day of school were named as reasons for school drop-outs. The causes that were marked as important were meeting up at night (*esoto*), relationships, lack of education (about early marriage), and early marriages. The most important consequences were angry parents, school drop-outs, and early marriages. The boys said that *esoto* is decreasing in importance as a cause. About *esoto* they also mentioned that since it is a cultural tradition, parents will not forbid their children to go there. Similarly to session 3, the boys said that parents of the girl will try to catch the man who impregnated her because it is illegal to have sex with minors. Moreover, they said that since parents put faith and money into their daughter's education, they are disappointed when she becomes pregnant. This session, the boys did agree that early pregnancies are bad, as it brings shame to the family and potentially complications for young girls. They indicated that education about early marriages in school is wanted and that educated children would be able to spread awareness in their community. Moreover, they said education about early marriages is necessary for both boys, girls, and the community in general.

Primary school teachers

From the interview with the primary school teachers it became clear that there have been no cases of early pregnancy in this primary school. The teachers confirmed that it mostly happens after class seven, especially in the period of four months in which the children wait for their results at home. The teachers indicated a lack of limitations at home and more time to meet with people as reasons for early pregnancy to happen in this period. Also, they said that girls see other girls of their age get married in their community and are inspired to do the same. As the regulations have changed recently, the teachers were not aware of the exact government regulations about girls being able to return to school after giving birth.

As the main causes, the primary school teachers identified several: seduction by different (older) age sets, seduction in the village using gifts and money as bribery, and pressure to have sex to prove to peers that she's a woman. Also, one teacher mentioned poverty leads to early marriage, which can lead to school dropouts. She said parents need the bride prize from the girls' marriage to pay for their son's marriage. Another teacher identified too much freedom given by parents as a cause, as they allow girls to dance in ceremonies during the day and stay until late at night. In these situations, the girls might be seduced to have intercourse.

Important consequences were school drop-out, marriage, and complications due to their young age and refusal to go to the hospital, possibly leading to death. Although abortion is illegal, sometimes a doctor can be bribed or home abortions are attempted, which includes risks for the girl's health. Even suicide was identified as a consequence if the father of the baby runs away and the family refuses to help the girl, especially since the girls have nowhere to go and cannot run from home. These factors could also lead to the girl resorting to begging. Sometimes, the mother of the girl adopts the baby as if it is her own. Finally, since African and Maasai beliefs say that good girls are their father's daughter and bad girls are their mother's daughter, a pregnant daughter leads to fights between parents.

For possible solutions, the primary school teachers indicated government campaigns about early marriages and the consequences of sex, similar to governmental HIV and COVID-19 campaigns. Since children learn about sex outside of school through their phones and have sex and go to *esoto* in their communities, education in schools was seen as important to prevent early pregnancies. The teachers advised to make posters for girls about what (not) to do regarding early marriage and sex. They were willing to work together to make posters and said they could put them up in the classroom

and hand them out during community gatherings. Another idea was to make videos about the consequences of early marriage and pregnancy. An important goal according to the teachers was to educate mothers that their daughters are not a product that can be sold off, since mothers decide whether their daughter will go to school or get married.

Secondary school teachers

Since primary school teachers indicated that there were no cases of early pregnancies in their school, we decided to interview secondary school teachers to get their insights. The teachers said that early pregnancies are a rare occurrence at their school. Very few students fall pregnant, so they encounter little issues. When a student becomes pregnant, they are not allowed to continue her studies according to Tanzanian law. The teachers call their parents and the executive office to report the case of early pregnancy and to report the person who got the girl pregnant to the authorities. In discussions with the girl and her parents, the teachers ask what happened and how she fell pregnant. What happens afterwards is up to the authorities, the teachers said, and they have no control over it. Though, often, the case does not reach high court and the men win the cases, possibly due to issues of corruption.

They confirmed that the period between primary and secondary school, as well as long holidays, are periods in which early marriage and early pregnancy mostly occur. According to them, the rules and regulations at school do not allow (sexual) relations and children are busy so they have no time to engage with each other in this way. However, at home, they engage with each other and their community. They encounter people who do not value or understand the meaning of education and they are seduced with gifts. The long holiday period was indicated as a problem, especially because children's home situation may be very bad. One teacher stated that parents do not care where the children are, what they discuss with one another, or what they go through. Especially at night, the parents are not aware what happens with the children. Poverty worsens these situations, as parents are not able to take care of their children.

Apart from these periods in which children are more vulnerable, the main causes for early pregnancy as seen by the secondary school teachers were the mindset of caretakers and the community, as well as Maasai customs and traditions. The teachers said: "in Maasailand, parents abide by customs and traditions," and he gave *esoto* as an example and an important cause for early pregnancy. Moreover, the separation of Maasai children and parents in houses or rooms allowed boys or men to pass and enter the girl's sleeping area without the parents knowing. There was a discussion between the teachers and our translator about whether this is a Maasai tradition or a crime - is it rape or not? One teacher said: "When we ask [girls] why [sleeping with boys who enter their house] happens, they say *once a boy comes in, we are not even allowed to shout.*" Another teacher said it is a Maasai custom, simply because it does not happen outside Maasailand. Some members of the discussion disagreed with this and considered these events as separate from the culture.

Another Maasai tradition mentioned as a cause for early pregnancies is early marriage. Parents might receive a bride prize while their daughter is still in school and promise her to someone. During her holiday, she will meet her suitor and potentially engage in sexual affairs. As she has to obey her parents, she is not allowed to refuse her suitor or abstain from marrying him. As for the mindset of caretakers, they mentioned the Tanzanian belief that fathers/men are not responsible for discussing issues of sexual affairs with girls and this might even be seen as shameful. Instead, it is a responsibility of the mother. This leads to family quarrels between parents if a girl does fall pregnant. Moreover, when children are living only with a father there is no one to discuss these issues with them.

The secondary school already hosts seminars to teach about the impact of early pregnancy and the negative effects of sex at an early age, about complications in particular. For this, one teacher indicated the need for teaching materials, such as a projector. The teachers reported that the girls know how to protect themselves against pregnancies. Specific teachers provide guidance and counselling to students. Moreover, in parent-teacher meetings, the teachers try to convince parents that they need to work together to help the girl achieve their goals. Parents are sometimes seen as an obstacle for teachers, as they fail to guide and take care of their children. During seminars, the teachers discuss the aforementioned traditions with the parents. Also, Maasai children encounter other cultures by going to school with children from other regions (Moshi, Arusha) in school and as such they learn by exposure that their traditions are not universal.

Teachers mentioned possibilities for improvement concern the punishment system for the man who impregnated the young girl. Girls and their parents often lie when asked about how the girl got pregnant, in order to protect themselves or people they know. If parents are forced to cooperate with the police officers and teachers to tell the truth, corporal punishment could be assured and used as an example for the community. A teacher said: "If one person is sentenced to jail for thirty years, no one else would do this anymore". Additionally, there should be education on the impact of early pregnancy, to increase the knowledge of parents. It could be stressed that the value of a girl increases the longer she stays in school. Leaving a girl in school to be educated is profitable for her parents, as they can get more cows as a bride prize in later years (in Maasai communities cows are highly valuable). Parents should also be educated on the importance of education, using examples of people in their community who have become wealthier by sending their children to school. As for the long holiday period, the teachers pointed to the Kenyan system in which poor children are allowed to stay in school during the holidays as this is sometimes safer than home.

Discussion

Differences between groups

Throughout this study, we discovered several differences in beliefs and opinions amongst the groups we worked with. We chose to separate the participants according to their genders in order for both girls and boys to have space and feel completely free to express their opinions. Indeed, there were major differences in the girls and boys' discourses about early pregnancy. Firstly, girls were more aware, enthusiastic and showed more active participation than boys. They were more certain about the fact that early pregnancy was a negative phenomenon and they actively sought solutions and help, in contradiction to the boys. In the boys' focus group discussions (especially session 3), most participants seemed unaware that early pregnancies could cause complications for the girl personally outside of the community's dynamics. There was even a general consensus on the idea that early pregnancies were not a negative phenomenon in the first group of boys.

The notion of blame was also very different from one gender to another. Comparing Figure 5 and Figure 3 for instance, we noticed that the blame in the girls focus group discussion was spread amongst various factors such as the community, tradition, parenting and gender roles/men. They mostly emphasised the key role of *esoto* and the presence of older men in these places. However, the male participants mostly blamed women (the girl herself, her girlfriends, sisters or mother) and their stage of development as the main reason for early pregnancy. As we can see in Figure 5, they also emphasised shame as the most important consequence of early pregnancies. We can thus conclude that gender roles in Maasai communities and the levels of awareness and narratives that boys and girls

receive separately shape the way they perceive each other and consequently early pregnancy as a negative or neutral/positive phenomenon.

Furthermore, the teachers were able to offer a different perspective as adults and caretakers. It is important to note that the group of primary school primary school teachers was only made up of women, some of which were Maasai. The group of secondary school teachers was mixed and predominantly not Maasai. The secondary school group included men and a majority of non-Maasai. The teachers, especially in secondary school, had greater insight than the children into the importance of the community dynamics, mentioning the economic status of the family and cultural traditions. Lastly, our discussion with teachers from secondary school confirmed that the key issue in early pregnancies is the holiday gap between primary and secondary school. As they were more confronted with this issue, the secondary school had more solutions in place such as pregnancy tests or seminars with the parents. A potential improvement would be more cohesion between primary and secondary schools.

Limitations of the study

Throughout our study, we noticed some complications through self-reflection and feedback from the teachers. Firstly, the teachers pointed out that it would be important for all students in all grades to participate in this type of workshop. They all agreed that there is a lack of awareness and education about this topic amongst students in primary school. They recommended that we prioritise students who have already reached adolescence (e.g. already have their periods). A limitation of our study was thus the lack capacity to conduct focus group discussions across all classes at the primary and secondary school.

Secondly, we encountered cultural issues regarding the use of contraception during our first workshop especially. At the end of this session, we engaged in a discussion with the students about contraceptives and answered their questions about our personal situations very openly, which put the students in a vulnerable position as they regarded our knowledge as Westerners highly and potentially more than their parents or teachers. One improvement could be to be more culturally informed, sensitive and aware prior to the start of the study. Reproduction and sex education are sensitive issues treated completely differently in all cultures and the teachers reminded us that the use of contraception should not happen before the age of 18 in Maasai/Tanzanian culture. In addition, this issue relates to the importance of dynamics and communication between children in African schools and Western volunteers who both have different knowledge and approaches. Something to keep in mind in order to bridge this gap, is the presence of a local person such as Sarah who was there as a professional, a mitigator and an interpreter in both Swahili and Maasai languages.

Potential solutions and concerns

In terms of follow-up work, all groups of students as well as teachers raised education and awareness as the main solution to reduce the occurrence of early pregnancies and avoid school dropouts. Many solutions about awareness involve better education for the parents who are often unaware of the severe consequences of early marriage and unsafe sex on the education and lives of their children. This would include more education about the impacts of *esoto* or the lack of restrictions outside school hours, as well as the importance of girls' education and girls' worth. Children could also receive adequate sex education so they understand the consequences of unsafe sex and how to prevent pregnancy. Since the break between primary and secondary school was indicated as a key period in which early pregnancies start, it is important to start sex ed in primary school already. This could be done in cooperation with secondary schools, for example by collaborating with the same organisation

that teaches the seminars. In order to go further with this solution, the group of teachers from primary school proposed that Enkaina work together with them on creating posters about early pregnancy to hang up in classrooms in order to have a visual awareness tool.

The times when students are not in school were highlighted by all teachers as times in which early pregnancies are caused. The lack of authority and abundance of time the students get, allows them to engage with each other or with older men. Therefore, if a project or activity aimed at adolescents might be created, this period could be a productive time to host it. This can make students more aware during this key period, as well as keep students busy and engaged during holiday months. Education programs about early marriage and the importance of girls' education for parents might also take place in this period, as early marriages also occur during this time.

An important concern regarding intervention projects is the cultural sensitivity that it requires. We noticed during the discussion with secondary teachers that their attitude towards certain parts of Maasai culture was somewhat negative, which also resulted in a disagreement between them and our translator. It is of course crucial to be aware of the importance of Maasai traditions in their culture and an intervention should not aim to eradicate or forbid certain parts, but instead focus on offering more positive alternatives and educating members of the community.