I AM NOT OLD ENOUGH

Early marriage in Rome's slums
BACKGROUND
Every year, in the world, 15 million girls marry before reaching the age of majority. 37,000 every day. One every 2.5 seconds. The countries most effected are Niger, Central African Republic, Mali. Currently in Italy, there are no statistics available to quantify this phenomenon, howsoever considered residual, generally analyzed through a culturalist point of view and attributed exclusively to minority groups, such as Roma communities and/or families of recent immigration.

RESEARCH
On an international scale, the precocity of marriage is attributable to the younger age of one or both of the betrothed. However the concept of ‘minor age’ is a controversial issue, where the universal approach to human rights clashes with the principles of cultural relativism. From a human rights perspective, the point of reference is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – which defines a minor as anyone below the age of 18 or who has not reached the age of majority established by national legislation which applies to the individual.

I am not old enough intent was to raise questions regarding the issue of early marriages in Rome’s slums. First, trying to quantify the phenomenon of early marriages among families resident in the Roman slums and, then, secondly, understanding the nature of this kind of unions and provide interpretive insights. Particularly, focus has been placed on the influence of the inhabited space of the slum in view of the recurrence and the preservation of this phenomenon.
METHOD

The research has seen a first phase of reconnaissance – during which quantitative data were collected on marriages in slums through privileged informers – and a second phase of interpretation of the data – during this phase, six focus groups were organized with resident teens and preteens in the Roman slums. For each single marriage, the age was traced of both spouses, the number of pregnancies that ensued, and the nature of the marriage (voluntary or wanted by others). Following, a percentage of early marriages was calculated and, among these, the percentage of marriages that occurred prior to the age of 16 and those prior to the age of 14, the percentage of voluntary marriages, the minimum, maximum and average age of the boys and girls when they got married and the average of the age difference between spouses.

Focus groups were conducted with youth from both genres. The views of the parents of the “matrimony” children were also interviewed as well as privileged observers with a long field experience and having solid and dated relationships with families residing in the slums.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The data on marriages were collected from the last two years (2014-2016) at 8 different residential realities and therefore on a total population of 3003 people. A total of 71 marriages were reported.

Out of a total of 142 individuals who married:
- Nearly 50% married before they were 18 years old.
- 72% were spouses between the ages of 16 and 17.
- 28% of the cases, the betrothed were between the ages of 12 and 15.

Gender has a strong influence on early marriages:
- 72% of the marriages were of girls aged 16 and 17 and one out of five was married between the ages of 13 and 15.
- Among the boys, the percentage drops, respectively, to 15% and 7%.

Average age difference between men and women: 3 years.
Maximum age difference between men and women: 11 years.

It is important to emphasize the great discrepancy in other contexts, such as those of Asian countries or sub-Saharan Africa, where early marriages also concern couples characterized by a large age difference, girls under the age of 10 and adult men over 30.

Lastly, the rate of early marriages observed in residents in slums, calculated on the unit of analysis of the unions, is 77%. It should be noted this percentages exceeds (almost by very little) the negative world record recorded by Niger (76%), surpasses (almost; very little). Among the states of the Council of Europe, the highest rate of early marriages is 17% and refers to Georgia, followed by Turkey (14%).
QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Unanimously, the privileged observers interviewed recognize that the precocity of marriages is strongly influenced by the value that is attributed to virginity, socially and individually. In fact, marriage is considered as the appropriate space for defiling a young girl, as well as the legitimate context in which women should experience their first sexual experience.

Virginity is defined by the interviewed youth in slums as «a dowry», «a good thing», «something that makes you feel clean». From what the participants of the focus groups expressed, it emerges that virginity has an intrinsic and substantial value, not only externally imposed, but also acknowledged and deeply felt by the girls who are somehow bearers.

The value of virginity seems to be immutable among generations, especially among the families interviewed. While the adolescents express ideas that are in discontinuity with their parents concerning the age of marriage (hence they wish to marry later than their parents did and wish that their daughters marry later than they should or they did), their views about virginity are similar to those of their parents.

The value of virginity is such that combined marriages can be a useful solution when there is a strong fear of parents that their children may live in the intimacy of couples outside the nuptial context, and thus constitutes an answer to the urgency of circumscribing the sexuality of their children by marriage. In this sense, forced marriage is, among other things, a parental strategy to ensure that their daughters’ virginity will be lost in a safe and socially acceptable circumstance. For the same reason, there are cases of parents who prefer that their children, when they enter puberty, no longer attend schools, fearing that in the school context (perceived probably as an area of a majority society and uncontrollable) their children could have pre-marital sexual experiences.

Some persons interviewed report that such a vision of sexuality could somehow explain the tendency of adolescents to marry at a very young age, regardless of their parents’ wishes, and at times in open contrast to their parents’ will. As previously mentioned, marriage seems to be the circumstance where the physical relationship between man and woman is allowed and where sexual experience is not associated with feelings of shame or social condemnation. Choosing early marriage would therefore seem to be a functional strategy to the desire to legitimately live their emotional and sexual motives, in line with the mechanisms of reported strong external conditioning.

«The boys and girls fall in love here and do not think what is going to happen after, they like each other, they love each other and so they get married»
“If my daughter lost her virginity, I would feel bad, very bad.”
THE ROLE OF THE LIVING SPACE

It is important to emphasize how the dynamics that have emerged, such as the value of virginity and the forms of control over it, the virilocality, the custom of the shotgun marriage, etc., are transversal to the different human groups and belonging to contexts far distant from those of the Roman slums. The transversality of the propagation of early marriage (and all that precedes and follows it) is a testimony and proof of how the issue depends on the socio-economic conditions of the families, rather than the cultural specificities of the individual groups.

It is no coincidence that early marriages have a double rate in rural areas compared to urban areas, and that a girl with an elementary education is doubly exposed to early marriage over a girl with a higher title of schooling. In this sense, the use of such marital practices, partly due to traditions, is exasperated and amplified by socio-economic conditions. In particular, in the case of Roman slum residents, during the focus group, it emerged that the housing context had a major impact on early marriages when referring to various dimensions, listed below.

Most of the literature and the reports that address the theme of early marriages indicate the interruption of schooling as the most important loss due to marriage at a young age. If this is true in cases of forced or combined marriages, in the case of voluntary early marriages and chosen by the spouses themselves (49% of the sample analyzed in this research), the opposite is also quite true: it is the failure of the school experience that contributes and orients youth towards the choice of early marriage.

As analyzed in previous research, the scholastic experience for young people from slums can become an experience of deep suffering, frustration, and perceived as a useless functional investment in reference to their ambitions and possibilities. Given the difficulty in focusing resources on an educational and formative path, marriage represents an opportunity, a conduit, as well as a way to invest their energies, their time, their skills outside the educational and formative context, not for the construction of their own career plans but of their own family.
This reflection is in line with the **theory of family production**, according to which demographic behaviors, such as marriage and fertility, can be included within the rules of microeconomics. In the microeconomic perspective, the individual tends to make choices aimed at maximizing utility (satisfaction) in relation to several factors, namely: tastes (influenced also by external conditioning), relative prices (in this case, the cost of maintaining children), cost-opportunity (what one renounces to in order to have children), budget constraints (the income ceiling that allows to have a certain number of children) and time constraints (time available to devote to children, domestic activities or labor market, etc.). Of all the aforementioned factors, a major role belongs to the concept of cost-opportunity, that is the relationship between how much one earns and how much one loses when choosing to employ one’s resources in one manner or another. Specifically, in referring to the resource of time, thus, for example, if a woman increases her possibilities of earnings following a career upgrade, the “cost” of children increases proportionally: that is, the alternative use of their time in childcare activities rather than work define an economic disadvantage (hence a cost) which increases in proportion to the increase in income if one were not to choose to allocate that portion of time to the care of one’s children.

As analyzed in previous research, the reality of slums is characterized by a strong absence of external incentives, offering very few opportunities and generally there is a high rate of unemployment - especially for women. Therefore it becomes a context in which time constraints are relatively flexible, thus, on one hand, the space that can be dedicated to the care of the family and children appears to be copious; on the other hand, this is time that mothers generally do not take away from their already initiated working career and that spouses - if in school age - do not take away from particularly rewarding and self-satisfying activities – such as studying in the light of their professional future. In this regard, the cost-opportunity of having children is also favorable. «There’s nothing to do here at the camp. You always remain the same until you get married and finally have some family responsibilities. You wake up in the morning and you know you have a responsibility: your family». Demographic studies that analyze income constraints have indicated that families with low incomes tend to have a high number of children (quantity) maintaining for each of them a low average expenditure (quality), while families with a high income tend to have a low number of children (quantity), with a view to an high average expenditure (quality). Average expenditure should be considered in terms of investment in education, sports activities, development of competences such as language, music, etc. Among the people interviewed in the Roman slums, great importance is given to the size of the families as well as a profound value to the age-related proximity-age between parents and children: the respondents all agree with the importance of becoming parents prior to the age of 25 to ensure that they have sufficient energy to take care of their children, «to grow with them», to avoid «looking like a grandmother when they take them to the playground” and “to be too old when their grandchildren arrive».
An aspect highlighted by the girls interviewed is the social pressure and conditioning of the group presumably with reference to the choice of marriage: «When I was 12 I compared myself to the others who were getting married and I thought, 'What about me?!' I was afraid of remaining alone, to feel different». Likewise, dating your boyfriend for a long time before deciding to marry exposes one to criticism, because «if you break up, everyone will speak ill of you, even if you did not have sex - they will say that you are rude, weird, that you are not able to be with someone and that you are selfish». «If you date a boy for too long before you marry him then people will speak ill of you, they will say you are no longer a virgin». «People have a negative attitude towards those who have a boyfriend and do not marry him. Everyone knows he has to marry her».

What emerges is that the collective dimension has an extremely strong influence on individual choices and their own reputation (and perhaps their self-esteem) is determined by aspects of their private life - such as nuptiality, fertility, virginity - rather than aspects that refer to the public sphere of life - degree of education obtained, work position, etc. The positive aspect of marriage most reported by the interviewees is identified in its relational and social dimension, in its outward projection, «It’s nice to get married so you can make others see that you’re beautiful, that you’re good, that you are loved, desired».

The social prestige associated with marriage is such that, in some cases, if a young man cannot find a partner for himself, his parents can intervene by means of an arranged marriage.

The symbolic value of marriage not only affects the sphere of prestige of the spouses’ parents, but also refers to the desire for adulthood and personal growth. An interviewee affirmed, «Once I got married, I finally felt like a woman», indicating how marriage constitutes the threshold and the transition to adulthood.

The conditioning of the group, presumably of one’s origin, becomes binding in the choral context of life in a slum, which are characterized by a high concentration of people in socio-economic disadvantage who share a generally limited and densely populated area. A family man relates, «If we lived in a house I would let my daughters wear jeans. If they do it here, they would be called ‘whores’, so I don't allow them to wear jeans. My wife today wears a skirt out of respect for my parents, but if we lived alone, she would be free to dress as she likes. Let's say that many of the things we do are because we're in a community, the others look at us, they talk, they comment. If we were in a home it would not be this way, my daughters would live with greater freedom». The space of a slum is a space that allows and encourages the perpetuation of some traditions.
As some research suggests, the contexts of strong precariousness and economic insecurity would favor the propagation of early marriages, as these would help to address uncertainty by strengthening social networks and giving their daughters a form of sustenance from the family of her husband. In such contexts, combined or forced marriage is perceived as a way of assuring (themselves or their children) a maintenance relationship - especially where institutional support is lacking. In some contexts, forcing a daughter to enter under the jurisdiction of an adult man may be an act of protection towards the minor, who is given, even if by means of an imposition, the opportunity to improve her living conditions and to be somewhat protected by her husband. However, such protection may be a risk with a high cost as it can easily transform into forms of domestic slavery, sexual, economic, psychological violence, and restriction of freedom of movement.
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Associazione 21 luglio is a non-profit organization that supports groups and individuals in a state of extreme segregation and discrimination, protecting their rights and promoting the wellbeing of children.

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