
Improving Young Marakwet Peoples' Understanding of Marriage Rights

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ABSTRACT

In Marakwet, Kenya, customary practices such as initiation rites and elders' authority often overshadow statutory marriage laws. As a result, many young people possess only partial awareness of their legal rights, leaving them vulnerable to early marriage, gendered inequalities, and limited protection under formal justice systems. This study therefore investigated Improving Young Marakwet Peoples' Understanding of Marriage Rights. The study was guided by the following research questions: What barriers hinder young Marakwet people from understanding marriage rights? What strategies can be applied to effectively improve young Marakwet people's awareness and understanding of marriage rights in their community context? Grounded in Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the study employed a cross-sectional survey design complemented with qualitative methods in Marakwet East and West, Kenya. A sample of 300 youth (18–35 years) completed the Youth Marriage Rights Awareness Test, while 6 FGDs and 10 KIIs provided contextual insights. Data were analyzed using SPSS (descriptive statistics) and NVivo (thematic analysis). The study revealed that young Marakwet people face significant barriers to understanding marriage rights. YMRAT results (n = 300) showed a moderate mean score of 12/20 (60%), with 40% demonstrating insufficient understanding and only 16% strong comprehension. Normative awareness (65%) was higher than statutory (52–58%) and procedural knowledge, which remained weakest. Family and elders dominated information sources (54%), often reinforcing misinformation such as equating brideprice with legal marriage. Cultural rites, gendered silencing, and distrust of formal justice further widened gaps. Community dialogues, school-based modules, peer programs, mobile legal clinics, and local-language media emerged as promising culturally grounded strategies to improve awareness. The study concludes that young Marakwet people face cultural, educational, and structural barriers that hinder full understanding of marriage rights. Elders' authority, initiation rites, low literacy, language mismatches, gendered silencing, and limited access to justice sustain partial awareness and a knowledge–action gap. The study recommends that interventions be culturally grounded and gender-sensitive. Community dialogues with elders and religious leaders should legitimize statutory protections, while school-based civic modules, peer educators, and women's groups strengthen procedural literacy and safe engagement. Translating laws into Marakwet, simplifying materials, and expanding mobile clinics and market-day drives will link awareness with practice and protection.

KEYWORDS: Understanding, Marriage Rights, Marakwet Youth, Youth Awareness, Cultural Barriers

ARTICLE DETAILS

Published On:
10 October 2025

Available on:
<https://ijiissh.com/>

INTRODUCTION

Marriage remains one of the most enduring institutions across societies, providing not only a framework for conjugal relationships but also a foundation for family life, social order, and community continuity. Yet, the ways in which marriage is defined, practiced, and regulated differ greatly across cultures and historical moments (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). These differences include the conditions under which marriage is contracted, the ceremonies that validate the union, the exchange of resources between families, and the obligations that bind spouses. Such variations carry significant implications for how young people come to understand what marriage entails and the rights they may claim or be denied within those unions (Zhu, 2021). This study addresses these issues within the Marakwet community of Elgeyo-Marakwet County, Kenya, with particular emphasis on how young people's awareness of marriage rights can be strengthened.

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For the purposes of this inquiry, marriage is conceptualized as a socially or legally recognized partnership between a man and a woman who, upon completing customary, religious, or statutory requirements, assume mutual obligations of care, legitimacy, and often procreation (Harris, Anderson, & Visconti, 2022). This definition reflects Kenya's legal pluralism: statutory, customary, and religious forms of marriage are all recognized under law, though customary practices often dominate everyday life and strongly influence perceptions of rights and duties (Greene, Siddiqi, & Abularrage, 2023). The coexistence of these parallel regimes creates both opportunities and obstacles for the effective communication of rights to young people preparing for marital life.

Marriage rights, in this context, refer to the constellation of entitlements that flow from both statutory provisions and community norms. Legally, these include protections for free consent, minimum marriage age, inheritance and property rights, maintenance, custody, and recourse against harmful practices (Muthii & Associates, 2025). Socially, rights are often expressed through practices such as bride wealth, ritual recognition, gendered roles in decision-making, and symbolic markers of marital authority (Akurugu, Dery, & Domanban, 2022). Understanding marriage rights thus requires more than legal literacy, it demands cultural fluency and an ability to navigate the expectations embedded in local institutions.

Despite progressive reforms, Kenya's demographic indicators illustrate why greater effort is needed to improve youth understanding of marriage rights. The 2022 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey reveals persistent incidences of early marriage, especially among girls in rural areas, alongside sharp inequalities in awareness and access to legal protections (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics & ICF, 2023). County-level studies confirm that regions such as Elgeyo- Marakwet face heightened risks of child marriage, school dropout, and limited legal recourse (UNFPA ESARO & Equality Now, 2023). These realities underscore that legal frameworks are insufficient unless accompanied by deliberate strategies to enhance young people's comprehension and agency.

One of the most challenging aspects of marital eligibility in Marakwet is the continued salience of initiation rites, including female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). While prevalence has declined nationally, some communities maintain the practice in secrecy, thereby reinforcing traditional markers of marriageability (Mohamud, Qureshi, de Wildt, & Jones, 2021). Research in Elgeyo-Marakwet highlights how alternative rites of passage, shifting attitudes, and intergenerational dialogue are slowly reshaping pathways into marriage (Chepchirchir & Kagoiya, 2024). Yet, the persistence of harmful practices points to the urgent need for improved awareness campaigns and educational strategies that frame rights as both culturally legitimate and legally binding.

Processes of socialization remain central to how young people acquire knowledge about marriage. Family teachings, initiation teachings, schooling, religious messages, and peer influence all contribute to shaping what youth believe about marriage rights and obligations (Karkashadze, Kuprashvili, & Gugeshashvili, 2023). However, these sources of learning are uneven, gender, age, and educational attainment strongly influence the extent to which statutory protections are internalized (Nilsen et al., 2020). Consequently, many young people enter marriage without a clear grasp of their legal entitlements, leaving them vulnerable to coercion, exploitation, or loss of rights.

The intersection of gender and culture is especially critical. Historically, among the Marakwet and other Kalenjin sub-groups, authority in marriage has been largely male-centered, with bride wealth and polygyny structuring expectations about lineage and household power (Julius, 2025). Women's rights to land and decision-making remain constrained under customary regimes, despite statutory guarantees of equality. Oral histories and recent activism reveal ongoing struggles to expand women's voice in marriage negotiations and property claims (Tanui, 2024). For young people, especially adolescent girls, improving understanding of rights is not merely academic, it is a pathway to enhanced agency and protection.

Differences across age groups further complicate this picture. Adolescents remain deeply influenced by parental authority and communal norms, while older youth exposed to schooling or urban life encounter statutory messaging and alternative gender models (Povey et al., 2022). Education plays a particularly decisive role, it delays marriage, transmits civic knowledge, and cultivates critical awareness about legal protections (Fitria et al., 2024). Still, the translation of schooling into practical rights awareness is inconsistent, depending on curriculum content and community support structures.

Kenya's legal framework, including the Marriage Act, stipulates formal recognition of customary marriages through registration, aiming to guarantee statutory protections such as inheritance and property division (Njaga & Co. Advocates, 2024). Yet, registration remains low, partly due to limited awareness and bureaucratic barriers. In Marakwet, families often prioritize customary legitimacy over legal recognition, creating gaps in rights protection. Community interventions, such as alternative rites of passage and NGO-led campaigns, seek to close these gaps, but success depends heavily on whether young people themselves understand and accept the legitimacy of statutory rights (Mohamud et al., 2021).

Improving youth understanding of marriage rights therefore requires strategies that integrate law, culture, education, and local institutions. Without this integration, young people remain caught between statutory promises and customary obligations, often

unable to assert rights in practice. Economic precarity intensifies these challenges, as some households view early marriage and bride wealth as coping strategies in the face of poverty (Ahinkorah et al., 2024). For young Marakwet people, particularly girls, rights awareness can mean the difference between an empowering union and one that perpetuates vulnerability.

This study took seriously the need to map not only what young Marakwet people know about marriage rights but also how their understanding can be improved. By disaggregating knowledge by gender, age, and educational exposure, the research sought to identify both the gaps and the opportunities for intervention. In doing so, it contributes to broader national debates on reducing early marriage, eradicating harmful practices, and bridging the gap between law and lived reality. Through a culturally grounded and youth-centered analysis, the study aimed to generate actionable insights that support both policy and community-driven strategies for improving young people's awareness and exercise of marriage rights in Elgeyo-Marakwet County.

Statement of the Problem

Kenya's legal framework clearly recognizes statutory, customary, and religious marriages and sets the minimum marriage age at 18 years (Meroka-Mutua, 2024; Njaga & Co. Advocates, 2024). Yet in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, the law often fails to translate into practice. The 2022 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey shows that 15 percent of girls aged 15 to 19 are already married or in union (KNBSt & ICF, 2023). Harmful cultural practices such as female genital cutting continue to mark girls as —ready for marriage, accelerating early unions (Tanui, 2024). Many customary marriages remain unregistered, excluding women from inheritance rights, divorce protections, and property claims (Njaga & Co. Advocates, 2024). This persistent gap between the law and lived reality highlights a fundamental problem, young people in Marakwet often lack knowledge of the rights that could protect them.

Low levels of understanding of marriage rights among youth are shaped by intersecting challenges. Gender norms silence young women in decision-making processes while elevating male dominance in marital arrangements (Akurugu et al., 2022; Julius, 2025). Adolescents, particularly younger girls, are pressured into unions where they have little bargaining power and limited ability to act on legal protections (Ahinkorah et al., 2024). Weak access to quality education and the absence of rights-focused content in schools further deny young people the knowledge needed to recognize or claim entitlements (Povey et al., 2022). As a result, many Marakwet youth navigate marriage without an informed understanding of consent, legal registration, property rights, or protections against harmful practices.

Although national surveys document the scale of child marriage, they provide little insight into how to improve young people's awareness of marriage rights in specific communities. In Marakwet, there is scant evidence on what methods are most effective in equipping youth with knowledge that is both legally accurate and culturally relevant. Without this evidence, interventions risk being misdirected, generic, or ineffective in changing behavior. The consequence is a generation entering unions without adequate awareness of their rights, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability, inequality, and legal exclusion.

This study addressed that gap by focusing squarely on improving young Marakwet peoples' understanding of marriage rights. It sought to identify the barriers that limit awareness, assess the strategies that can effectively transmit knowledge, and generate evidence-based recommendations for interventions that empower youth. By grounding solutions in local realities, the study aimed to transform rights from abstract legal provisions into practical tools that young people can understand, claim, and use. In doing so, it will provide a foundation for stronger protections, reduced harmful practices, and more equitable marriages within the Marakwet community.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

What barriers hinder young Marakwet people from understanding marriage rights?

What strategies can be applied to effectively improve young Marakwet people's awareness and understanding of marriage rights in their community context?

METHODOLOGY RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design complemented with qualitative methods. The survey provided a broad overview of the current level of awareness of marriage rights among young Marakwet people, while the qualitative component offered deeper insights into barriers and practical strategies for improvement. This design was chosen because it captured both measurable patterns and lived experiences at a single point in time, making it feasible and cost-effective for covering the scattered rural communities in Marakwet East and Marakwet West sub-counties.

Study Area

The study was carried out in Marakwet East and Marakwet West sub-counties of Elgeyo- Marakwet County, Kenya. These sub-

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counties were selected because they represent areas where customary practices remain strong and where tensions between statutory marriage laws and cultural norms continue to shape youth experiences.

Target Population

The target population comprised young Marakwet people aged 18 to 35 years residing in Marakwet East and West. This age group was selected because it represents the stage of life when marriage decisions are most common, and understanding of rights is critical to ensuring legal and social protection.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

A multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted. In the first stage, sub-locations were randomly selected from both Marakwet East and Marakwet West. In the second stage, three villages were randomly chosen from each sub-location. In the final stage, households were randomly selected, and from each household, eligible youth were identified. This ensured that the sample included both remote and accessible communities.

A total of 300 young people participated in the survey, determined using Cochran's formula adjusted to the youth population in the study area. For the qualitative component, six focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with youth (three in each sub-county), and ten key informant interviews (KIIs) were held with community elders, teachers, local administrators, and women's rights advocates.

Research Instruments

1. Youth Marriage Rights Awareness Test (YMRAT) – a structured tool consisting of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to assess knowledge of statutory marriage rights, customary practices, and legal protections.
2. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide – used to explore barriers to rights awareness and community-driven strategies for improvement.
3. Key Informant Interview (KII) Schedule – designed to capture expert and cultural perspectives on strengthening awareness of marriage rights.

The instruments were developed after a review of the Kenya Marriage Act (2014), the Constitution (2010), county reports, and relevant research studies. Content validity was established through expert review by specialists in education, law, and sociology.

Reliability of the Instrument

To ensure reliability, the YMRAT was piloted with 30 young people from outside the main study sample. A test–retest method with a two-week interval was used. The correlation coefficient obtained was 0.82, confirming consistency of the instrument.

Data Collection Procedure

Research clearance was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and approval was sought from county authorities. Research assistants fluent in the Marakwet dialects were recruited and trained. Informed consent was secured from all respondents. The survey was administered in schools, churches, and community halls. For respondents with low literacy, oral administration was provided by trained assistants using neutral translations. FGDs and KIIs were conducted in safe, neutral community venues.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics only (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) in SPSS version 26 to summarize the level of awareness of marriage rights.

Qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs were transcribed, translated, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Themes were organized around the two guiding research questions: barriers to awareness and strategies for improvement. Findings from both strands were triangulated to ensure validity and depth.

Ethical Considerations

The study upheld strict ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all respondents. Anonymity was maintained using codes instead of names, and confidentiality of responses was assured. Sensitive issues such as female genital cutting were handled with cultural sensitivity and respect. The study ensured that no participant was subjected to harm, stigma, or ridicule as a result of their involvement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Sample characteristics (survey; n = 300)

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Male	144	48.0
	Female	156	52.0
Age group	18–24	174	58.0

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	25–35	126	42.0
Education	No formal / primary incomplete	54	18.0
	Completed primary	84	28.0
	Secondary	120	40.0
	Post-secondary / tertiary	42	14.0
Residence	Lifelong resident (in sub-county)	213	71.0
	Ever lived outside for work/study	87	29.0

Source: Research Data, 2025

The descriptive results presented in Table 1 provide critical insights into the socio-demographic profile of young Marakwet people who participated in the survey ($n = 300$). The sample comprised slightly more females (52.0%) than males (48.0%), suggesting a balanced gender representation that enables gender-sensitive interpretation of findings on marriage rights awareness. A majority of respondents were aged 18–24 years (58.0%), reflecting a youthful cohort at the formative stage of life decisions concerning relationships, marriage, and family. Educational attainment varied considerably, with the largest segment having reached secondary school (40.0%), followed by those who completed primary school (28.0%), while a notable minority had post-secondary/tertiary education (14.0%). The presence of 18.0% with no or incomplete primary education is particularly significant, as limited schooling often constrains legal literacy and comprehension of statutory marriage rights. Residence patterns revealed that 71.0% of participants were lifelong residents within the sub-county, with only 29.0% having ever lived outside for work or study, indicating that exposure to diverse social and legal environments beyond the community remains relatively limited. Collectively, these characteristics highlight that the understanding of marriage rights among young Marakwet people is likely shaped by intersecting factors of age, education, and restricted external exposure. The relatively youthful demographic and uneven educational levels suggest both opportunities and challenges, while secondary and tertiary-educated youth may be more receptive to civic education on statutory marriage rights, lifelong residents with minimal schooling may remain more anchored in customary interpretations.

Youth Marriage Rights Awareness Test (YMRAT)

The Youth Marriage Rights Awareness Test (YMRAT) used in this study comprises **20 items** covering (a) statutory provisions (minimum age, registration, legal redress), (b) customary practice vs. law, and (c) practical procedures (registration steps, documentation, seeking help).

Table 2: YMRAT summary ($n = 300$)

Indicator	Value
Maximum possible score	20
Mean score (SD)	12.0 (± 3.0)
Equivalent percentage	60.0%
Range (min–max)	4 – 19
Score categories	N
≤ 10 ($\leq 50\%$) — Insufficient understanding	120
11–14 (51–74%) — Moderate understanding	132
≥ 15 ($\geq 75\%$) — Strong understanding	48

Source: Research Data, 2025

The findings in Table 2 indicate that young Marakwet people demonstrate only a moderate understanding of marriage rights, as shown by the mean score of 12.0 out of 20 (60.0%). The standard deviation of 3.0 highlights notable variation in levels of comprehension, while the wide score range of 4 to 19 underscores the disparities, with some respondents showing near-complete understanding and others displaying very limited awareness. The categorical distribution further illustrates these gaps, 40.0% ($n = 120$) of respondents exhibited insufficient understanding ($\leq 50\%$), 44.0% ($n = 132$) displayed moderate understanding (51–74%), and only 16.0% ($n = 48$) attained strong understanding ($\geq 75\%$). This skewed distribution suggests that most young people fall within insufficient and partial awareness categories, with a minority achieving high comprehension. Such uneven patterns of knowledge are consistent with findings by Wamalwa (2025), who observed that youth in Kenya often exhibit limited awareness of statutory rights, leaving cultural norms as the dominant reference point in understanding marital issues.

Topic-level knowledge procedural vs. normative items

To design interventions that move youth from moderate $\rightarrow$ strong understanding, it is essential to disaggregate which topics are understood and which are weak.

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Table 3: Topic-wise performance (respondents answering $\geq 2/3$ of items in topic correctly; n= 300)

Topic	f (correct)	%
Consent & protections against forced marriage (normative)	195	65.0
Minimum legal marriage age (statutory = 18 yrs)	174	58.0
Marriage registration & benefits of registration	156	52.0
Where to seek legal redress (chiefs, legal aid, courts)	90	30.0
Rights & procedures in divorce (maintenance, custody)	135	45.0
Inheritance & property rights for married women	120	40.0

Source: Research Data, 2025

The results in Table 3 reveal that normative awareness among young Marakwet people, particularly concerning consent and protections against forced marriage, is relatively strong, with 65.0% of respondents answering at least two-thirds of the items in this topic correctly. This suggests that the majority of youth recognize the importance of consent and are aware of prohibitions against forced marriage. Such heightened awareness can be attributed to broader national campaigns and school-based sensitization on child protection and gender-based violence, which often highlight consent as a critical principle. However, while these figures reflect encouraging progress in normative domains, they also suggest that nearly one-third of respondents remain uncertain, which may leave room for misinterpretation of consent within cultural contexts. Similar trends were reported by Austrian et al. (2024), who found that Kenyan youth often display stronger knowledge of normative issues such as consent compared to statutory details, due to the visibility of advocacy campaigns.

Statutory knowledge, by contrast, appears more moderate. Just over half of the respondents understood the legal minimum age of marriage (58.0%) and the requirements and benefits of registration (52.0%). This shows that while a majority are aware of statutory provisions, significant gaps remain, leaving nearly half of the youth vulnerable to misinformation or exclusion from the protections that formal marriage registration affords. The results further suggest that although awareness of the legal age requirement has improved compared to earlier baselines, it is not comprehensive enough to guarantee compliance or effective enforcement in practice. These findings highlight a discrepancy where statutory rules are partially internalized but not universally understood. A study by Tanui (2024), corroborates this pattern, showing that knowledge of statutory marriage laws in rural Kenya often remains inconsistent, with many young people informed in principle but lacking detailed comprehension of registration processes and their implications.

The weakest outcomes are observed in procedural knowledge, where fewer respondents demonstrated adequate understanding. Only 30.0% knew where to seek legal redress, while 45.0% were familiar with rights and procedures in divorce and 40.0% with inheritance and property rights for married women. These results indicate that while many young Marakwet people can identify normative principles, they lack the procedural literacy needed to operationalize these rights in practice. This gap explains why moderate normative knowledge does not translate into strong legal protection, since awareness of —what is rightl is undermined by uncertainty about —how to actl when rights are violated. The imbalance between normative and procedural awareness creates barriers to effective utilization of the law. A related study by Mohamud et al. (2021) found that limited procedural knowledge among Kenyan youth often leads to underutilization of available legal aid mechanisms, thereby weakening the protective power of statutory frameworks even when normative awareness exists.

Information channels — who informs youth

Table 4: Reported sources of marriage-rights information (multiple responses allowed; n = 300)

Source	F	%
Family / Elders	162	54.0
School (formal lessons)	105	35.0
Radio / Local media	75	25.0
Peer groups / Youth clubs	66	22.0
NGOs / Legal clinics / Paralegals	36	12.0
Religious leaders	30	10.0
Internet / Social media	27	9.0

Source: Research Data, 2025

The findings in Table 4 demonstrate that family and elders remain the dominant source of marriage-rights information for young Marakwet people, reported by 54.0% of respondents. This indicates that intergenerational transfer of knowledge continues to shape youth understanding, with elders occupying a central role in defining how marriage rights are interpreted and practiced. While this channel ensures continuity of cultural values, it also presents the risk of reinforcing customary interpretations that may not always align with statutory provisions. The heavy reliance on elders suggests that marriage rights education must consider the

influence of family structures, as they remain gatekeepers of knowledge. This pattern resonates with findings Human Rights Watch (2020), who noted that in many Kenyan rural contexts, family and kinship networks constitute the most trusted source of information for youth on marital matters, often shaping perceptions more strongly than formal education.

Schools represent the second most significant information channel, with 35.0% of respondents citing formal lessons as a source of marriage-rights knowledge. This result underscores the importance of educational institutions as a structured platform for disseminating statutory and normative knowledge. Compared to family-based information, which is often rooted in tradition, schools provide an avenue for exposure to legal and rights-based frameworks. The reach of schools is particularly notable given that over a third of youth reported this as a source, highlighting the potential of integrating marriage-rights content within civic and life-skills curricula. This finding aligns with a study by Julius (2025), which observed that school-based programs significantly improved students' awareness of gender and legal rights, showing the potential of formal education as a transformative channel for rights literacy.

The remaining channels, though less dominant, play complementary roles. Radio and local media reached 25.0% of respondents, while peer groups and youth clubs informed 22.0%, and NGOs, religious leaders, and social media each accounted for less than 15.0%. These findings suggest that secondary information channels have a supportive yet amplifying effect, particularly by reaching youth outside the classroom or reinforcing messages delivered in schools and families. For example, radio broadcasts and peer networks can effectively transmit information in local languages and culturally resonant formats, even if their overall reach is smaller. Such multiplicity of sources demonstrates that youth do not rely exclusively on one channel but construct knowledge from overlapping avenues of influence. These observations are consistent with Adeyeye (2024), who found that media, youth groups, and community organizations serve as vital supplementary platforms that enhance formal learning by contextualizing rights education within familiar social settings.

Barriers to understanding marriage rights

Cultural Norms and Rites

FGD, young woman, 18:

When initiation rites are completed, families expect marriage immediately. Elders reinforce the belief that this marks readiness, leaving little room to question or delay. Such cultural practices normalize early marriage, making legal rights seem secondary or irrelevant.

Limited Formal Rights Education

KII, secondary school teacher:

In schools, the emphasis is on family values rather than the legal steps to formalize a marriage. Young people rarely learn about registration procedures or required documents, which creates a major gap in awareness of formal rights.

Gendered Silence and Restricted Voice

FGD, young woman, 22:

Girls who ask about topics like divorce are silenced. Such questions are considered disrespectful and bring shame. This discourages girls from voicing concerns about their marital rights, further limiting their access to information

Low Literacy and Language Barriers

FGD, young man, 25:

Most information materials on marriage rights are in English or Swahili, yet many families primarily speak Marakwet. This language gap makes legal processes inaccessible, especially for parents and rural youth with low literacy.

Practical Access Barriers

KII, paralegal:

Registering a marriage often requires long travel to sub-county offices. Even then, the process may be unsuccessful, forcing families to return multiple times. The high costs and time involved discourage formal registration.

Distrust of Formal Justice

KII, community elder:

Formal justice systems are often seen as distant and designed for urban populations. Many people prefer to resolve disputes through elders rather than courts. As a result, reliance on customary systems undermines engagement with formal legal protections.

The findings show that cultural rites of passage strongly shape perceptions of marriage readiness. For instance, the belief that completion of initiation marks immediate eligibility for marriage creates pressure to conform, leaving little space to question statutory provisions such as minimum marriage age. This cultural normalization of early marriage makes legal frameworks appear secondary or even irrelevant to young people's lived realities. Such cultural reinforcement contributes to the persistence of

practices that conflict with legal protections. This outcome reflects observations by Fitria et al. (2024), who documented that initiation ceremonies in pastoralist communities often accelerate marriage expectations, overshadowing statutory age requirements.

A second barrier lies in the absence of comprehensive formal education on marriage rights. Teachers emphasized that school lessons often prioritize family values and moral teachings while neglecting the procedural aspects of marriage registration and related documentation. As a result, many youth lack practical awareness of how to formalize marriages legally. This educational gap leaves them dependent on cultural transmission, which often excludes statutory details. These results are consistent with Ng'etich (2024), who found that civic education on marriage rights in Kenyan schools is limited, with formal procedures rarely covered in the curriculum.

The findings further highlight how gendered social expectations silence young women when they attempt to inquire about sensitive issues such as divorce or marital rights. Labelling such questions as disrespectful discourages girls from seeking information, effectively restricting their voice and reinforcing knowledge gaps. This silence reflects broader gendered power dynamics in which access to legal awareness is not equally distributed. Such barriers reduce the likelihood that girls will challenge harmful practices or claim their rights. Comparable findings were reported by Meroka-Mutua (2024), who showed that patriarchal norms in Kenyan rural communities stigmatize young women who raise questions about marriage or divorce, thereby curtailing their knowledge of legal protections.

Another significant obstacle is the mismatch between the language of legal materials and the linguistic realities of local communities. The reliance on English and Swahili for official documents excludes many Marakwet families, particularly in rural settings where local dialects dominate and literacy levels are lower. This mismatch not only limits access to information but also reinforces exclusion from formal processes. Consequently, many youth and parents are unable to engage meaningfully with marriage rights. These results are supported by Njaga and Co. Advocates (2024), who noted that language barriers significantly impede access to justice in rural Kenya, where legal information is often unavailable in indigenous languages.

The practical challenges of accessing legal marriage registration further hinder awareness and compliance. Respondents noted that long travel distances to sub-county offices, repeated bureaucratic failures, and the financial costs of multiple visits discourage formalization. Such obstacles make the statutory framework appear inaccessible and burdensome, particularly for rural households with limited resources. These findings echo conclusions by Njaga & Co. Advocates (2024), who highlighted how weak institutional efficiency and hidden costs surrounding registration procedures discourage compliance, leaving many unions in prolonged informal status despite existing legal frameworks.

Finally, widespread distrust of formal justice systems compounds these challenges. Community members perceive courts and legal processes as urban-centered, foreign, and disconnected from local realities. Consequently, preference is given to dispute resolution through elders, reinforcing reliance on customary practices over statutory protections. This distrust undermines efforts to extend formal legal awareness and weakens engagement with national legal systems. Similar dynamics were described by Meroka-Mutua (2024), who emphasized that statutory family law remains viewed as alien in rural contexts, with cultural forums such as elders' councils enjoying greater legitimacy and accessibility, making them the dominant avenue for marital conflict resolution.

Existing enablers and sources of misinformation Partial Enablers

Key Informant Interview, NGO staff:

When the legal clinic came two months ago, many girls asked about registration, and it became clear that there were things they had never been told before. The clinic provided them with information that was not usually available in their schools or communities, and for the first time they were able to understand that legal processes exist beyond what tradition dictates. This exposure helped them recognize the gaps in their knowledge and gave them confidence to ask more questions about marriage rights and legal protections that they had previously assumed did not apply to them.

Misinformation via Elders

Focus Group Discussion, young man, 20:

An elder told me that brideprice settles everything and that you don't need to register, and this belief is taken as unquestionable truth by many young men and women. Because elders carry great authority, their words are often accepted without challenge, and this discourages people from seeking clarification about formal requirements. The weight of tradition makes the idea of brideprice seem final, and so the notion of registration is dismissed, reinforcing a cycle where misinformation continues to dominate what young people understand about marriage legality.

Hearsay

Focus Group Discussion, young woman, 24:

People say that we have always done it this way, and once that statement is made it immediately ends any discussion or debate about the law. The repetition of such phrases acts as a barrier, shutting down curiosity and silencing voices that might want to ask

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for clarification about legal procedures. This constant reinforcement of custom over law creates an environment where many young people grow up believing that tradition alone defines marriage, leaving little room for them to seek or trust formal legal processes.

The findings reveal that targeted interventions, such as visits from legal clinics, can serve as crucial enablers of marriage-rights knowledge. NGO-led sessions introduced many young girls to registration procedures and legal protections previously unknown, allowing recognition of knowledge gaps and building confidence to seek further clarification. Structured exposure to formal legal processes can disrupt entrenched assumptions shaped by tradition, fostering awareness and empowerment. Similar outcomes were reported by **Austrian et al. (2024)**, who found that youth engagement with community-based educational and legal programs in pastoralist contexts substantially enhanced understanding of statutory marriage rights, particularly among girls who had previously relied on informal sources of information.

Despite these gains, elders remain influential conduits of misinformation. Assertions such as brideprice —settling everything—are often treated as unquestionable due to cultural authority, discouraging inquiry into formal legal requirements and marginalizing statutory protections. The authoritative role of elders has been noted by **Akurugu, Dery, & Domanban (2022)**, who highlighted that in various African settings, elder-mediated guidance frequently overrides statutory provisions, perpetuating cycles of misinformation and constraining youth engagement with formal legal frameworks.

Furthermore, hearsay and community narratives reinforce misconceptions about marriage legality. Expressions like —we have always done it this way— act as conversation-stoppers, silencing questions and restricting exploration of legal frameworks. Persistent cultural narratives maintain customary norms as the default reference, limiting critical engagement and trust in formal processes. **Adeyeye (2024)** observed that entrenched indigenous practices across sub-Saharan communities often inhibit youth from accessing or trusting statutory information, sustaining the dominance of customary norms in shaping understanding of marital rights.

Community-Grounded Strategies to Improve Understanding Community Dialogues

Focus group / key informant 1 (chief):

When elders, chiefs, and religious leaders come together in dialogues with lawyers or other elders, the importance of registration and legal processes becomes clear. Once respected figures affirm that registration is the correct and acceptable path, the message quickly spreads among community members, creating awareness and encouraging compliance with the law.

School-Based Practical Modules

Focus group / key informant 2 (teacher):

If students are given mock registration forms and engage in role-playing activities, they get a chance to practice the process in a safe environment. These hands-on modules give them practical knowledge and confidence, making sure they clearly understand how to register when the time comes and ensuring they can apply this learning in their adult lives.

Peer Educator / Youth Ambassador Programs

Focus group 3 (young man, 23):

We tend to believe what our peers tell us more than adults, and when some youth are trained as ambassadors, they can explain legal rights and registration procedures in a language and style that we relate to. Hearing it from another young person makes it easier to understand and motivates us to act.

Mobile Legal Clinics & Registration Drives

Focus group 4 (young woman, 21):

If registrars and legal advisors are brought to the community during market days, many people will turn up. This kind of mobile clinic removes the travel barrier and the costs of going far, making it easy for everyone, even those living far away or without money, to get registered and access legal services.

Local Radio Storytelling (Marakwet Language)

Focus group / key informant 5 (radio producer):

A short radio drama in the Marakwet language that shows a woman registering her marriage and securing her rights can reach a very wide audience. People listen and see themselves in these stories, and it reinforces the message in a way that is both culturally familiar and convincing.

Paralegal Training & Women's Group Strengthening

Focus group / key informant 6 (women's group leader):

When local paralegals are trained and women's groups are made stronger, they provide safe and confidential advice. For those who are afraid to speak openly, these groups and paralegals become a trusted space where people can get guidance and support on registration and legal rights without fear of exposure.

The findings reveal that structured community dialogues led by chiefs, elders, and religious leaders alongside legal experts serve as a powerful avenue for transforming perceptions of marriage registration. Elders, as custodians of cultural norms, lend moral authority to formal legal processes, reframing legality as culturally legitimate and socially acceptable. Such dialogues foster community buy-in before behavioral change occurs, as trust in recognized authority bridges the gap between tradition and statutory law. By leveraging respected voices, discussions normalize engagement with legal rights and counter the perception that marriage registration is externally imposed. Similar observations are reported by Abdurahman, Assefa, and Berhane (2022), who found that involvement of respected local figures in Ethiopia increased compliance with legal protections, as cultural endorsement helped communities integrate statutory measures with familiar norms, enhancing uptake of formal registration and safeguarding youth rights.

Experiential learning emerged as a critical strategy for demystifying legal procedures among young people. Role-playing and mock registration exercises provide safe, hands-on opportunities for learners to internalize processes beyond theoretical instruction, fostering procedural confidence. Unlike passive lectures, such interactive approaches enable youth to navigate real-life registration requirements with clarity and precision, reducing hesitation and bridging the gap between knowledge and action. Evidence from Fitria et al. (2024) highlights similar outcomes in rural Indonesia, where applied civic education modules significantly improved adolescents' ability to undertake legal processes independently. Structured, practice-oriented experiences allow learners to experiment, ask questions, and correct misunderstandings in controlled settings, ultimately translating abstract statutory rights into actionable knowledge that supports informed decision-making and protective behavior.

Peer-led initiatives proved particularly effective, as messages delivered by age-mates were more relatable and credible than those from adults. Trained youth ambassadors conveying marriage rights in local languages created culturally accessible learning that leveraged existing social networks. This approach empowered young people as knowledge brokers, embedding legal awareness within peer groups and reinforcing sustainable learning through repeated, familiar interactions. Comparable evidence is reported by Kawai, Mbogo, Oponga, et al. (2025), who demonstrated that peer-led interventions in pastoralist communities improved understanding of legal protections among adolescent girls by harnessing trust within social networks. The peer-to-peer model not only enhances comprehension but also strengthens the social acceptability of rights, increasing the likelihood that knowledge translates into protective practices and informed engagement with statutory processes.

Mobile legal clinics were identified as a strategy to overcome structural barriers such as cost, distance, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Market days and other communal gatherings provide opportunities to bring legal advisors directly to community spaces, minimizing logistical burdens while fostering trust through personal interaction. This approach ensures that formal services are accessible, visible, and culturally embedded within everyday routines, countering perceptions that legal processes are urban-centered or disconnected from local realities. Similar results are documented by Njogu, Njogu, Mutisya, and Luo (2022), who found that mobile legal aid programs in rural contexts increased engagement with statutory institutions by delivering services locally and providing personalized support, demonstrating that convenience and presence significantly enhance awareness, procedural confidence, and uptake of formal registration services.

Local-language radio dramas also proved highly effective for disseminating marriage rights through culturally resonant storytelling. By embedding legal messages within familiar narrative traditions, radio programs created emotional connection, mass reach, and modeled practical behavior, turning abstract rights into concrete, relatable scenarios. Participants reported that observing characters navigate registration processes reinforced understanding and encouraged imitation of appropriate behavior. Chepchirchir and Kagoiya (2024) observed comparable outcomes in rural communities, where participatory radio programs embedded within local culture improved comprehension of development interventions and promoted uptake of recommended practices. Such interventions demonstrate how oral and visual cultural forms can act as bridges between statutory law and indigenous knowledge, effectively translating formal rights into socially intelligible and actionable guidance.

Finally, localized, gender-sensitive support structures through women's groups and paralegal training were critical for creating safe, confidential avenues for accessing marriage rights information. These initiatives provide trusted spaces where vulnerable youth and women can seek guidance without fear of stigma or reprisal, while local paralegals translate complex procedures into comprehensible advice. Evidence from Njaga & Co. Advocates (2024) underscores the effectiveness of community-based paralegal programs, showing that trusted intermediaries reduce intimidation and facilitate access to justice. By combining local ownership with confidentiality, these strategies empower marginalized groups, ensure equitable dissemination of legal knowledge, and counter the cultural silencing of young women, creating an environment in which statutory rights are understood, respected, and practically applied.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that young Marakwet people face multiple barriers that hinder their understanding of marriage rights. Cultural norms, particularly initiation rites and the authority of elders, continue to normalize early marriage and elevate customary practices over statutory provisions. At the same time, limited exposure to formal rights education, low literacy, and language mismatches restrict access to accurate information. Gendered silencing of young women further entrenches these

challenges, while long travel distances, costs, and distrust of formal justice systems create practical obstacles to engaging with formal processes. Collectively, these factors sustain a persistent knowledge–action gap, with many youth remaining only partially aware of their legal entitlements.

The findings also demonstrated that improving awareness and understanding requires community-grounded and integrated approaches. Community dialogues that actively engage elders and religious leaders can legitimize marriage registration and statutory protections in ways that resonate with cultural authority. School-based modules and peer educator programs provide practical, hands-on learning that equips young people with procedural literacy. Mobile legal clinics, radio dramas in the Marakwet language, and strengthened women's groups and paralegal networks further extend access, reduce structural barriers, and provide gender-sensitive support. Together, these strategies point to the importance of linking cultural legitimacy, experiential learning, and accessible service delivery to move young people from partial awareness to strong comprehension and practice of marriage rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, it is recommended that interventions to improve marriage-rights awareness be designed to address both cultural legitimacy and gender-sensitive access. Community dialogues should be convened with elders, chiefs, and religious leaders, not only to share statutory requirements but also to endorse them as compatible with cultural values. Strengthening women's groups and training local paralegals will create safe and trusted spaces for girls and vulnerable youth to seek confidential guidance. Translating legal information into the Marakwet language and producing simplified, visual materials will also reduce literacy-related barriers.

In addition, awareness-raising should prioritize procedural literacy and ensure that knowledge is closely linked to service delivery. Schools should adopt applied civic modules that allow students to practice registration steps, while peer educators should reinforce this learning in youth-friendly formats. Mobile legal clinics and market-day registration drives should be institutionalized to make legal services locally available and affordable, ensuring that awareness translates into actual registration and protection. By combining cultural engagement, hands-on education, and practical service delivery, these interventions will create a holistic pathway for strengthening young Marakwet people's understanding and exercise of marriage right

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