

# CHILD MARRIAGE AND ITS ADVERSE CONSEQUENCES AGAINST WELLNESS PROMOTION IN NIGERIA

*Asuquo I. Enyim,*

*College of Health Technology, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, ubohoeye@gmail.com*

## **Abstract**

*This paper x-rayed child marriage and its adverse consequences. Child marriage perpetuates as cultural and traditional means of protecting the girl-child against the fear of rape, pre-marital sex and unwanted pregnancies. Unwholesome traditions, culture, religion, gender discrimination, poverty and weak legislative framework contribute to child marriage despite its numerous social, economic and adverse health consequences against wellness promotion. Child marriage is widely practiced in Nigeria most especially in the Northern states. But the practice is against the Child's Right Act. Its health consequences include mental disorders as post-delivery depression and puerperal psychosis; women's disempowerment, adverse pregnancies/child birth complications like perennial lacerations and vesico vaginal fistula, high rate of sexually transmitted infections as well as lack of marital satisfaction. Therefore, total eradication of this harmful practice is highly desirable.*

**Key words:** *Child marriage, Social/developmental problems, Prospect for eradication, Adverse consequences against wellness promotion.*

## **Introduction**

Child Marriage refers to any marital union between two people (male and female), in which one of the partners (usually the female partner in majority of cases) is younger than 18 years of age. Marriage is universally defined as a social and legal union between a man and woman; a stable sexual relationship that is usually allowed and legitimized by the larger kin group to determine rules about property rights for one's children (Nwosu & Oyakhiromen, 2014). Therefore, the term "child marriage" encompasses both formal and informal union in which one of the parties, usually the female (girl-child), is below 18 years of age.

The International Conference on Population and Development (2006) defined child marriage as any marriage that involves a girl-child below the age of 18, before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and child-bearing. Child marriage exists when one or both spouses are children and may take place with or without formal marriage celebration or without formal registration under civil, religious or customary laws.

Molokwu (2000) described child marriage as any marriage of an under-age girl to a more matured man or *vice versa* and this happens before puberty,

when the individual is not yet up to the age of maturity, nor being capable to make personal independent decision. He further explained that “marriage age” among the most enlightened nations and people of the world is at minimum of 18 years and above, when the individual is physically, socially, academically and emotionally mature to meet or cope with the challenges and responsibilities of marriage. Similarly, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2010) recommended that children should not be separated from their parents before the age of 18, unless such is considered necessary or demanded by some uncontrollable circumstances.

The Convention on the Eliminations of all forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW) made a declaration, a most comprehensive/ International Bill of Rights for women in the year 1981, which stated (among many other things) that marriage of the girl-child (below the age of 18) should not be allowed in any nation, since such marriage is against the right and development of the girl-child as well as that of the community. CEDAW recommended a minimum age of 18 years for both male and female, the age when they are expected to have attained full maturity to have adequate capacity to act and behave well.

### **Historical Perspective of Child Marriage**

According to Kyari and Ayodele (2014), the origin of child marriage in Nigeria can be traced to pre-independence era, when formal education was first introduced in Northern Nigeria. The Colonial Government through the Native Authority at that time was forcing parents to send their girl-children to school for formal education. At that time, the Native Authority funded the girl’s education and the girls were conscripted to various schools that were located outside their provinces. But despite such efforts at that time, the socio-cultural and religious practices in most Northern states of Nigeria did not permit girls’ education. These same cultural and religious practices have continued to oppose girls’ education in the country up till these present days.

The practice of child marriage was prominent in the North Western and North Eastern States of the country during the colonial era. Majority of girls from these states who were already forced to go to school in those days (during the colonial era) were made to discontinue, without completing their educational programmes. Most of the girls that failed to attend school and those that dropped out from schools at that time entered into child marriages. This harmful trado-religious practice has continued to perpetuate in these states even to these days despite all its adverse consequences (Bayesenji, 2012).

In ancient times, child marriages were also driven by poverty, payment of bride price, cultural traditions and laws that gave rooms to such unwholesome practices. Religious and social pressures, customs, fear of remaining single or

unmarried and perceived inability of women to work for money also contributed to the practice of child marriage. Child marriages were also common in history due to a variety of other reasons, including insecurity as well as political and financial reasons. It was fairly widespread in developing countries, such as South Asia, Central African countries and the sub-Saharan African countries.

In the medieval societies, it was common for girls to be betrothed at ages before puberty (Kraema, 1998). Early marriage and girl motherhood below 18 years was encouraged in ancient Greece; and even the boys over there were expected to marry at the end of their teens since life expectancy in Greece was between 40 to 45 years at that time. Thus, early marriages and teenage motherhood was typically expected and practised in Greece in the ancient times (Demanded, 1994). Child marriages was also common in Imperial China and was regarded as normal, as most older people were fond of marrying younger girls even before the age of the 15, before the beginning of puberty (Zhao, 1997).

### **The Custom/Practice of Child Marriage**

Most child marriages are arranged based on the consent of the parents and such often failed to ensure the best interest and wishes of the girl-child. Thus, child marriage in most cases also includes some elements of enforcement from the parents against the girl-child's will. According to Adedekun, Tochukwu & Adeleji (2012), child marriage are often arranged in two distinct ways, within a context of force and coercion, either by parents or other persons in positions of authority in the family who arranged their young daughter's marriage to an adult who in most cases are much older than the girl-child.

It is a common occurrence that girls of 7 years and a little above to be already married and arranged to stay in the families of the husbands. It is worthy to explain here also that such prospective husbands are selected based on their social, religious and financial factors whereby age is not considered as an important factor. Such husbands may be of an average age of over 20 to 29 years or a little more above that of their respective girl brides in the child marriage's union.

The practice of child marriage has received global condemnation and has been identified to have contributed greatly to the slow pace or non-achievement of the *Millennium Development Goals* in many developing countries of the world. It is therefore pertinent that all hands should be on deck to fight this dreadful, undeveloped cultural practice of child marriage in Nigeria, most especially the Northern parts of the country where this harmful practice has continued till date.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the right to "free and full" consent to marriage. The truth remains that consent cannot be free and full when one of the individuals involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner. Never-the less, in many low and middle

income countries, (particularly in the poorer rural areas) girls are often committed to an arranged marriage without their knowledge or consent. Such an evil arrangement can occur as early as at infancy or before the age of ten in most instances (Kyari & Ayodele, 2014).

Child marriage has over the years remained as a common traditional, cultural, religious and conventional practice that has been allowed to subsist within the country by the Muslims. Therefore, the practice of child marriage in Nigeria is common in Northern parts of the country because of Islam (Okafor, 2014). Although the Nigerian Federal laws and the Constitution prohibit the marriage of persons that are below eighteen (18) years in the country, states that implement the Sharia law permit the unwholesome cultural practices. That is why there has been continued existence of this harmful practice against the girl-child till date in Nigeria.

It has remained a common knowledge that “autonomy and consent” are the two key elements that are necessary before one enters into marriage with any other person of opposite sex. These key elements are always lacking in situations where girl-children are forced into marriage with people that are much older than them and who may sometimes be of same age or close to the age of their parents. Such marriages are arranged by parents who would not even give their girl-children the chance or choice to say yes or no (Okafor, 2014). When such children are given an opportunity to say yes or no, they are not capable (by their age) to give such consent because the provision everywhere in the world, including the Nigerian constitution, states that each party that enters into marriage must be up to 18 years and above.

The practice of child marriage is against the United Nations Children’s Fund’s Policy that has recommended and endorsed the implementation of the Right of the Child among the United Nation’s member states, which include the right to free and full consent to marriage. This is also recognized in the Universal Declarations of Human Rights with regard to education, empowerment and health determination (UNICEF 2010). Most of the member states of the United Nations including Nigeria, have domesticated this agreement and enacted Acts that further enhanced the Rights of the Child. The implementation of this developmental Acts and policies in Northern Nigeria have been very controversial in some of the states that are operating with *Sharia* Islamic laws that permit and encourage the girl-child marriage.

### **Reasons for Child Marriages**

According to Enulkar and Bello (2007), child marriage has been claimed to preserve the value of virginity so as to reduce the promiscuity of the girl-child from pre-marital sexual activity. But there are numerous health and economic effects of this dreadful practice on the girl-child as well as the community and the

nation; ranging from school dropout, total inability to complete their educational programmes with success, or failure to learn any meaningful trade or acquire any vocational training that would be able to empower them economically to make them self-reliant; in addition to several health complications such as vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF) and psycho-social frustration in such marriages.

Another major reason for this harmful cultural practice is that most of such parents see marriage as a cultural rite that protects their daughters from sexual assault. They therefore believe that the child marriage arrangement is offering the girl-child to the care of a male guardian to protect her among several other reasons. Such parents therefore wish to give their young daughters to child marriage to avoid being sexually abused by other people (males) before their husbands.

Poverty or lack of economic livelihood is another reason for child marriage in the developing countries, including Nigeria. Forward (2008) observed that child marriage is predominantly practised in the rural and poor communities where the young girls are seen as economic burden to their families. Therefore, such families prefer giving the girl-child out quickly to any marriage suitor to alleviate the household expenses, thereby protecting the wellbeing of the remaining family members. It is a known fact that continuing economic hardship in many developing countries encourages and perpetuates the practice of child marriage; even among the populations that do-not practice it as their culture.

Child marriages also persist as sincere parental attempt to ease the girl-child from the burden of discrimination among the male children of the family in the distribution of the lean family resources. The girl-children from such families are discriminated against because of the need to give the male children the best of training; thereby neglecting the girl-children whom such families regard as inferior to the male children. The girl-children are neglected in several aspects of family lives, including the distribution of daily food, education as well as skills acquisition programmes. The poor parents feel that giving-out such girls to an older man could become a relief to the girl-child, giving her an earlier opportunity to thrive better, eat better and live better (Orjiako, 2018).

The practice of child marriage also persists in many rural populations of the developing countries due to the practice of payment of bride price to parents of the girl-child. Therefore, child marriage continues to persist because such parents would collect such bride price to better the situation of their families. The older the husband to their girl-bride, the greater such bride price is paid to the parents of the girl-bride. The daughters of such families are therefore treated as economic commodity that their families have to give out to obtain financial blessings for development of the remaining family members. Sometimes, the girl-child may also be given out to settle debts or for stabilisation of relationship between families (Abdallah, 2010).

Child marriages also persist in many cultures due to genuine fear from the parents that their daughters may bring shame to family by becoming pregnant out of wedlock. To such parents, the only available alternative and better option is giving such girls for child-marriages to avoid pre-marital sex that could result in unwanted teenage pregnancy. Such parents therefore enter into early marital arrangement to give out the girl child for marriage. The notion of morality and honour are important influences on such parents and they believe that the practice of the child marriage is a better option to ensure the preservation of the virginity of their daughter to their rightful husbands.

Abdallah (2010) also opined that the practice of child marriage is deeply entrenched in tradition, culture and religion. He further pointed out that Muslim religion in particular encourages the practice of child marriage in a much greater scale than any other religion in the world. Orjiako (2018) reiterated that Nigeria is one of the countries with a high rate of child marriage across the globe. He therefore further requested that stringent measures should be made to discourage and ban this dreadful and erroneous practice in the country.

### **Geographical Distributions to the Practice of Child Marriage in the World**

The United Nations Children's Fund (2010) submitted that child marriage is still widely practised in many parts of the world, most especially in the developing countries. But the practice of this obnoxious culture has been reported to be prevalent in African countries, Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the Southern Asia. The regional estimate on the occurrence of child marriage in the world in this present decade is made up of 48 percent of the incidence of child marriage in South Asia, 42 percent in Africa and 29 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean with wide differentials across the countries in these regions.

In the West Africa sub-Region, the proportions of girl-children that are married below the age of 18 years vary from 28 to 43 percent in countries like Ghana, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire Senegal, Benin Republic and Nigeria; and 60 to 80 percent in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and the Niger Republic (UNICEF Report, 2010). In Nigeria, child marriage is predominantly practised among the Muslim communities in the Northern parts of the country. Islamic religion has been reported to encourage the practice of child and early marriage among the Muslim faithfuls of the Hausa-Fulani of North-west and North Eastern Nigeria (Abdallah, 2010).

### **Adverse Consequences of Child Marriage against Wellness Promotion**

1. Child marriage is often associated with life threatening health consequences. According to Kuehn (2011), child marriage lead to mental disorders such as depression in more than half the numbers of girls that are married before the age of 18 years. Most of the child brides are

reported to be consumers of mental health services due to the attendant frustration, depression and dissatisfaction in themselves and their marriages (Adegbarowa, 2014).

2. Child marriage is known to dis-empower women, causing them to be over-dependent on their husbands and thereby depriving the child brides of their fundamental human rights to health, education and safety. It endangers personal development of the girl-child; and hinders her wellness. It is a human rights violation that must end to allow the achievement of a better and fairer future for our young girls and the society. The child brides are at greater risk of experiencing adverse conditions in their marriages, their pregnancies and child births (Adebambo, 2010).
3. Higher maternal mortality is another problem that child marriage causes on child brides. Girls who are married before the age of 18 years often have children long before they are physically ready for parental role. Studies revealed that greater complications of pregnancy and child birth occurred in girls-motherhood than those women that are of full age before they start to bear children (USAID, 2009).
4. Child marriage hinders educational programme of the girl-child, thus, frustrating the girl-bride from becoming what she would have been in life (Ango, 2001).
5. Child brides also have higher rate of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections than their counterparts who are outside wedlock, and they also suffer higher numbers of ill-health and premature deaths than other girls/women of their age-group (Bala, 2004).
6. Child marriage and girl bride has been associated with increased number of infant mortality. Adolescents are more likely to give birth to premature and still-born babies. Their babies and children are at increased risk to die during infancy and early childhood before the age of six. Infant death rates in babies of mothers under the age of 20 are 50% higher than those of over 20 years of age (Girls Not Brides, 2004).
7. Other health consequences of child marriage include several complications of pregnancies and child births, such as profound pelvic-disproportions, perennial laceration, vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF) post-delivery depression and puerperal psychosis (Bala, 2004).

### **Social and Developmental Problems of Child Marriage**

1. School drop-out and non-completion of educational programmes had remained one of the well known social and developmental problems of child marriage. Early marriage and resultant effects on girl-child's education are profound. Once married, the girls are often taken out of

school as their lives would now be dominated by domestic works, care for the husband and looking after the children. Girls that are married before the age of 18 years reduced their literacy level by 5.6% (Girls Not Bride, 2004). Daughters of young mother's (girl brides) are more likely to drop out of school and get married as young teenagers as their mother did.

2. Higher risk of violence also occurs in child marriage. Child brides are much more likely to be victims of physical and sexual abuses by their husbands.
3. Child marriage hinders and blocks every useful opportunity of the girl-child to attend meaningful education or gaining of vocational and life skills to make useful and independent life.
4. It exposes the girl-child to the risk of teenage pregnancy, earlier child-bearing, and girl motherhood before they are physically and psychologically ready for such role.
5. Child marriage prevents the girl-child from having their ideal choices and well selected life partners that they could be able to share and enjoy balanced marital and sexual relationship together. This is one of the problems that could make the girl-brides to feel frustrated and most often psychologically sick, when they discovered too late that they are wives to the husbands that are not their choice.

### **Prospects for Eradication of Child Marriage**

Nigeria and the International communities have increasingly recognised child marriage as a serious problem; both as a violation of the girl-child's human rights and as hindrances to key development outcomes. Several home and international programmes, policies, donor and advocacy agencies have already pledged much commitment, resources and actions to address the child marriage problem in the country. Nwosu and Oyakhiromen (2014) reported that child marriage has been known to be an unwholesome practice that has over the years remained as a great challenge to every well-meaning Nigerian citizen. It therefore, requires an absolute commitment from thoughtful Nigerians to find a model solution to child marriage which has already come to stay or remains as one of the unbearable challenges of our Nigerian modern society.

The global records revealed that the greatest numbers of cases of child marriages are found in sub-Saharan Africa followed by South Asia, North Africa and Latin America (Okafor, 2014). It is very sad that our great country-Nigeria is already known as one of the countries with high number of the child marriages-particularly from the Northern parts of the country.

According to the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) (2011), effort to address child marriage in many parts of the world dated back to

1920s. For example, the first legislative attempt to put an end to child marriage in India was through the passing of a bill in 1929 (Nwosu & Oyakhiromen, 2014). Later, several legal reforms began to gain ground in the 1970s and 1980s when many countries, including Bangladesh, India and Indonesia established their legal minimum age of marriage to 18 years for girls. That was also the time that many Human Rights and the United Nations launched their efforts to address the harmful traditional practices that affect women and the girl-children. But a more serious pragmatic intervention to eradicate child marriage had only gained momentum from 1990s; and that had coincided with the programmes that gave attention to adolescents' reproductive health at Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 (Abdallah, 2010).

The assertion of women's and girls' human rights at the United Nations International Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was an effort to put an end to this evil practice of child marriage. Nigeria can be recognized internationally as a responsible and responsive country in marriage related issues that promote the rights of children, most especially that of the girl-child if adequate measures are taken to put a stop to the practice of child marriage. Therefore, we must endeavour to be committed to specific strategic programmes to effectively eradicate child marriage from the country.

### **Conclusion**

Child's marriage is known to inevitably deprive female children of school age of their rights to education and effective preparation for adulthood. It hinders the future wellbeing of the girl-child, the family as well as the society. There is therefore a clarion call for the liberation of girl-children from the shackles of child marriage and its attendant consequences against wellness promotion. The United Nations Declaration on the Fundamental Human Rights stated that child marriage is a global problem that undermines global developmental efforts toward the achievement of a healthier and stable population.

The practice of child marriage has received global condemnation and has identified to have contributed greatly to the slow pace of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The United Nations Children's Fund's Policy recommended and endorsed the implementation of the Rights of the Child among the United Nation's member states, which include the right to free and full consent to marriage. Most of the member states of United Nations including Nigeria, have domesticated this international agreement and enacted Acts that further enhanced the rights of the girl-child. We must enforce these Acts to stop child marriage in our country. Some recommendations to curtail child marriages include the following:

1. Provision of free universal and compulsory primary and secondary education by the three levels of government in Nigeria. This would to a

- great extent ensure increased enrolment of girl-child in school programmes.
2. Health educators should work with chiefs and heads of rural communities to sensitise their communities on the importance of sending children to school with more emphasis on the girl-child education.
  3. Extension of family planning services to the girl-children so as to be able to prevent teenage pregnancies that often compel many of them to enter or accept child marriages when they do not have other alternative after being already pregnant.
  4. Extensive health education campaign against pre-marital sexual indulgence by the youth, emphasizing abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage.
  5. Enacting and enforcing specific laws to protect the girl child from every form of parental enforcement into child marriage.
  6. Improving the school curriculum and training of teachers to be able to provide sound teaching on topics such as life skills, sexual reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and gender to educate children and the youths to know the dangers of child marriage.
  7. Government at all levels should improve and intensify efforts to boost the economy since child marriages are induced by poverty and inability to ensure adequate financial sustenance in individual families.
  8. The government should also ensure adequate legal and political legislation against any religious and cultural practices that tend to promote child marriage.
  9. There should be adequate public/community enlightenment campaign against all of gender inequality with adequate legislation to stop all forms of discrimination against girl-child rights from the family level.
  10. Family and community should support the girl-child education to ensure that all girl-children complete their educational programmes before getting married.

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