

AN OVERVIEW OF EARLY CHILD MARRIAGE AND ITS CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The paper examined the challenges posed by early child marriage in the Nigerian Constitution, and human right law. The article then focuses on the health risks involved in early pregnancies and, specifically, the fate of young women who are affected by Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF).

Early child marriage still poses a problem in most part of Nigeria, as in many other countries in African and beyond. It is practiced and justified in the name of tradition, culture, and religion. Especially vulnerable are young girls in rural, poor and deprived communities. This situation reflects the relatively strong adherence to tradition, and the relative lack of opportunities, affecting women in rural areas. In South South Nigeria in general, and among the Ibibios in particular, early child marriage dates back to the formation of the society itself. In this part of Nigeria, it is uncommon for girls below the age of thirteen to get married, but this is no longer very widespread. The National Baseline Survey of Positive and Harmful Traditional Practices affecting Women and Girls in Nigeria (2003) reveals that the aggregate mean age at marriage for female children is 16.7 years. In the north-east, the age is 15.2 years and in the north-west, 14. 2years. This is an indicator of the prevalence of early child marriage. Early child marriage is a form of exploitation that endangers girls and violates the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It places young girls in an environment that exposes them to physical and mental danger and leaves little protection from sexual abuse. This practice often occurs in socially conservative societies that discourage women and children from challenging the will of older men. As a result, child brides are left in compromising situations in which they are unable to negotiate safe sex behaviors leading to an increase risk of sexual violence and sexually transmitted infections (STI) transmission. They are also removed from their protective social and family networks, placing them at even greater risk for experiencing sexual abuse. .In some countries in Africa it is customary for early child marriages involving young adolescent girls to be contracted prior to the commencement of their menses. This practice often results in premature pregnancies which in turn lead to devastating physical and social consequences such as Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF).

Keywords: *Early marriage, Challenges*

Introduction

The consequences of child marriages are issues that cannot be relegated to the background, especially in an era where some parts of Nigeria believe that women belong to the “other room” or must end up in the kitchen. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund, Child marriage which is defined as a formal or informal union below the age of puberty or below the legal age of majority, is a reality for both boys and girls, although girls are disproportionately the most affected. Section 23 of the constitution of the federal

Republic of Nigeria 1999 says “a person under the age of 18 is incapable of contracting a valid marriage and if such a marriage does take place, it should be declared null and void and of no effect.” Contradictorily, section 29 (4b) of the same constitution technically approves child marriage. It says: “this is by its provision that any woman who is married shall be deemed to be of full age. “Child marriage and early marriage largely refer to the same thing: marriages in which one or both spouses are less than 18 years old. However, early marriage is also sometimes used to describe marriages in which one or both spouses are 18 or older, but with a compromised ability to grant consent. For example, the marriage of a 19-years-old who is not physically or emotionally mature, or who does not have sufficient information about her choices, would be considered an early marriage. Apart from the fact that child marriage decreases a girl's development by resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, it also exposes them to key ailments among others Vesico Vaginal Fistula popularly called VVF. Fistula is reportedly one of the worst epidemics that are predominantly caused by child marriages.

According to Nawal (2011) child marriage is a human right violation that prevents girls from obtaining an education, enjoying optimal health, bonding with others in their own age, maturing and ultimately choosing their own life partners. Child marriage is driven by poverty and has many effects on girls' health, increased risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), cervical cancer, death during child birth, and obstetric fistula. Girls' offspring are at increased risk for premature birth and death as neonates, infants, or children. To stop child marriage, policies and programs must educate communities, raise awareness, engage local and religious leaders, involve parents and empower girls through education and employment. Awareness of reproductive health issues in developing nations is growing, critical issues are the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS among young people; child bearing by young girls, which can lead to obstetric fistula and death of the mother and child marriage. In 2002, 52 million girls, 18 years of age were married. With 25,000 girls 18 years being married each day. Child marriage occurs most frequently in South Asia, where 48% of women aged 15- 25 have been married before the age of 18. These figures are 42% for Africa and 29% for Latin America and the Caribbean. Since 1948, the United Nations and other international agencies have attempted to stop child marriage. Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that persons must be “full age” when married and that marriage should be entered into “freely” and with full consent.

The right to exercise that choice was recognized as a principle of law even in Roman times and has long been established in international human rights instruments. Yet many girls, and a smaller number of boys, enter marriage without any chance of exercising their right to choose. Some are forced into marriage at a very early age. Others are simply too young to make an informed decision without their marriage partner or about the implications of marriage itself. They may have given what passes for ‘consent’ in the eyes of custom or the law, but in reality, consent to their binding union has been made by others on their behalf. According to UNICEF (2012), early marriage, or child marriage, is defined as the marriage or union between two people in which one or both parties are younger than 18 years of age. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the right to “free and full” consent to a marriage, acknowledging 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. Nonetheless, in many low and middle – income countries, particularly in poorer rural areas, girls are often committed to an arranged marriage without their

knowledge or consent, such an arrangement can occur at infancy. Parents see marriage as a cultural rite that protects their daughter from sexual assault and offers the care of a male guardian. Parents often feel that a young girl is an economic burden and therefore wish to marry off their young daughters before they become an economic liability. Marriage at its right time and with the right and self-selected person is one of the best things that can happen to a man or woman. Unfortunately, as glamorous such a day of espousal would have been, child marriage has made it sour for child brides as most of them are forced into it, particularly in their mid-teens; thereby aborting beautiful and achievable life goals and future ambitions.

International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, 2022), comprehensively defined child / early marriage as any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing. Though, child marriage affects both sexes but girls are disproportionately affected as they are the majority of the victims (UNICEF, 2021). The main thrust of this topic centers on child brides because this menace more than 80 per cent affects girls in all ramifications than boys. According to Adebambo (2010), child marriages are mostly conducted without the valid consent of one or both parties and are a marriage in duress. Besides, child marriage is a direct form of discrimination against the girl child who as a result of the practice is often deprived of her basic rights to health, education, development and equality.

Prevalence of child marriage

Child marriage is often the result of entrenched gender inequality, making girls disproportionately affected by the practice. Globally, the prevalence of child marriage among boy is just one sixth that among girls. While the prevalence of child marriage has decreased worldwide – from one in four girls married a decade ago to approximately one in five today – the practice remains widespread. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 100 million girls were expected to marry before their eighteen birthday in the next decade. Now up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides as a result of the pandemic. Child marriage is a global problem with an estimated 12 million girls given out in marriage every year before they turn 18 that is around 41,000 girls every day Some as young as 9. With approximately 1 in 2 girls married before the age of 18, South Asia has the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world. UNICEF reports that the top eight nations in the world with highest observed child marriage rates are Niger (76%), Chad (72%), Mali (71%), Bangladesh (64%), Guinea (63%), Central African Republic (61%), Mozambique (56%), and Nepal (51%). According to the data, the Central African Republic has the highest prevalence of child among males (28 per cent), followed by Nicaragua (19 per cent) and Madagascar (13 per cent). The estimates bring the total number of child brides and child grooms to 765 million. Girls remain disproportionately affected, with 1 in 5 young women aged 20 to 24 years old married before their 18th birthday, compared to 1 in 30 young men. Out of the top 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage across the globe, 17 are African countries, and Nigeria ranks at number 11. In neighboring West African country, Niger, 76 percent of girls are married before the age of 18, while in Central African Republic the figure stands at 68 percent. In Nigeria, child marriage has ancient cultural, religious and economic ties. It is believed that girls who marry after the age of 18 can become promiscuous, while other families give out their daughters to “escape poverty”. The UNICEF in its 2017 report said that 43 percent of Nigerian girls are married off before their 18th birthday, while 17 percent are married before they turn 15.

The prevalence of child marriage in Nigeria varies from region to region, with figures as high as 76 percent in the North Western region and as low as 10 percent in South Eastern region.

Causes of child marriage

i. Child marriage is often the result of entrenched gender inequality, making girls disproportionately affected by the practice. Factors that promote and reinforce child marriage include:

ii. *Poverty and economic survival strategies:* Extreme poverty may make daughters an economic burden on the family, which may be relieved by their early marriage, to the benefit of the family as well as the girl herself. Where poverty is acute, giving a daughter in marriage allows parents to reduce family expenses by ensuring they have one less person to feed, clothe and educate. Child marriage can also be seen as means of ensuring a girl's economic security, particularly if she lacks family members to provide for her. In communities where a dowry or "bride price" is paid, it is often welcome income for poor families; in those where the bride's family pay the groom a dowry, they often have to pay less money if the bride is young and uneducated and sometimes girls themselves believe that marriage will be solution to secure their future.

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iii. *Gender inequality:* In many communities where child marriage is practiced, girls are not valued as much as boys – they are seen as burden. The low value placed on girls in many cultures limits their educational and employment opportunities. Social norms that priorities boys' interests over girls' can mean parents do not invest in their daughters' health and education, seeing child marriage as the only alternative. The challenge will be to change parents' attitudes and emphasize that girls who avoid early marriage and stay in school will likely be able to make a greater contribution to their family and their community in the long term.

iv. *Culture and Tradition: Religion, culture and civil law:* Child marriage is a traditional practice in some cultures that many places happen simply because it has happened for generations – and straying from tradition could mean exclusion from the community. Some cultural traditions also support child marriage, dominant in patriarchal societies like the Nigerian Islamic Hausa-Fulani tribe that practices Sharia law. According to Sharia law, an individual reaches adulthood at puberty and can be contracted into marriage – advantageous for poor families in rural areas and reducing family responsibilities for short term. Cultural norms in northern Nigeria associate a girl's virginity with family honour and suggest early marriages to prevent sexual assault, out-of-wedlock pregnancies and family dishonor. The Nigerian constitution recognizes Sharia law, and Islamic customary marriages are common in the north, immune to the prohibition on child marriage as outlined in the Child's Right Law.

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v. *Fear and Social Pressures/ Insecurity* A sense of social insecurity has been a cause of child marriages across the world. Many parents marry off their daughters young because they feel it is her best interest, often to ensure her safety in areas where girls are at risk of physical or sexual assault. For example, in Nepal, parents face likely social stigma if adult daughters (past 18 years) stay at home. Others fear of crime such as rape, which not only would be traumatic but may lead to less acceptance

of the girl she becomes victim of a crime. For example, girls may not be seen as eligible for marriage if they are not virgins. In other cultures, the fear is that unmarried girls may engage in illicit relationships, or elope causing a permanent social blemish to her siblings, or that the impoverished family may be unable to fine bachelors for grown-up girls in their economic social group, such fears and social pressures have been proposed as causes that lead to child marriages.

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vi. *Belief that Child Marriage Create a Sense of Protection:* An additional factor causing child marriage is the parental belief that early marriage offers protection. Parents feel that marriage provide their daughter with a sense of protection from sexual promiscuity and safe from sexually transmitted infections. However, in reality, young girls tend to marry older men, placing them at an increased risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Protection through marriage may play a specific role in conflict settings. Families may have their young daughters marry members of an armed group or military in hopes that she will be better protected. Girls may also be taken by armed groups and forced into marriages.

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vii. *Law:* The lack of an adequate legislative frame work that can be forced to address cases of child marriage, while most countries legislate for minimum legal age for marriage, this is often not effectively enforced.

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viii. *Persecution, forced migration, and slavery:* Social upheavals such as war, major military campaigns, forced religious conversion, taking natives as prisoners of war and converting them into slaves, arrest and forced migrations of people often made a suitable groom a rare commodity. Bride's families would seek out any available bachelors and marry them to their daughters, before events beyond their control moved the boy away.

ix. Insecurity particularly during war, famine or epidemic.

x. Control over sexuality and protecting family honor.

xi. Religion of residence.

xii. Family alliances or ties in which marriage is a means of consolidating powerful relations between families.

Reasons for early child marriage

Legal Loopholes and Parental consent– Among the 190 UN member states that have ratified the convention on the right of the child, 12 percent have no legal minimum age for marriage that protects girls under 18. Furthermore, many countries where 18 is minimum age for marriage have legal loopholes which include different minimum age for girls and boys and allow for children to marry with parental consent.

Giving parents this decision- making power is problematic as it takes away a girl's right and agency to decide whether, when and who to marry. Often the girls involved have no say in the matter because of unequal gender power relationships in households. Recently, Plan International helped close parental consent loopholes in marriage laws in Malawi, Honduras and the Dominican Republic but there are still many others countries where girl's parents have final say.

Lack of Birth Registration: Globally, 230 million children under the age of 5 have never had their births registration; and more than 100 developing countries do not have efficient public birth registration systems – this mean millions of children are living without a birth registration? A birth certificate not only provides information on a child's identity and place of birth, but also acts as a shield from child marriage and other exploitative violations such as trafficking and child labor. In other words, if a girl cannot prove her age or identity, then who is to say her marriage is against the law?

Climate Change: Climate change is affecting the world in various ways temperatures are raising, floods are happening in places previously affected by drought and vice versa. This change are having devastating effects on families in some of the poorest regions of the world – especially in Africa where changing weather patterns and reducing crop yields for farmers. In countries such as Malawi and Mozambique, farming families who could once afford to provide for their children are now struggling with poverty. As a result they are marrying off their daughters at a younger age. So, why is this happening? In times of uncertainty and financial struggle, daughters are often married off as soon as possible in finding husband for her, parents believe they are providing for their child without putting additional stress on their client situation. In 2015. UNICEF warned that the total number of child brides across Africa could more than double to 310 million 2050.

Menstruation: A girls' first menstrual period can be interpreted as a sign that she is ready for motherhood in many part of the world. However, girls are neither physically nor emotionally prepared for marriage, pregnancy and childbirth until adulthood. According to girls not brides, WHO, complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading causes of girl under age of 15. Often the beginning of a girl's period can mark the end of her education because of the fear, shame, embarrassment and stigma that surrounds menstruation in many parts of the world. In addition, many schools lack functioning, sanitary and safe toilets and girls' can often not afford product like tampons or pads. When girls are in school, they are more likely to become child brides. According to girl's brides, girls who have no education are three times as likely to marry by 18 compared to girls with secondary of higher education. However, education is a powerful weapon against child marriage because the long a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to get married before the age of 18.

*Conflict :*During times of conflict, war and civil unrest, girls become increasingly vulnerable to child marriage. Displacement, instability, harsh living conditions, the threat of violence and poverty lead families to marrying out their daughters either to protect them from potential violence or to alleviate financial stress. In most cases, parents think they're doing what's best for their daughter by agreeing to her marriage. According to the United Nations, there has been an alarming rise in child marriage rates since the onset of the Syrian refugee crises. In a survey of some 2,400 refugee women and girls, more than a third between 20 and 24 years, more old had been married before aged 15 and 17, 42 percent are married.

Implications of child marriage

The consequences of child marriage range from socio-economic effect, psychological effects and health effects.

Health effects

Child marriage robs children especially girls of their childhood and threatens their lives and health.

1. *Child Marriage, Child Mortality and Maternal health:* Child brides often become pregnant during adolescence, when the risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth increases – for themselves and their infants. Many child brides become pregnant before their bodies can safely carry or delivered children, endangering their health. It is particularly severe for girls who give birth before the age of 15 as they are five times more likely to die in childbirth than girls in 20s. Perinatal deaths are 50% higher among babies born to mothers under 20 years of age than among those born to mothers aged 20-29 years.

2. *It also exposes them to life threatening illnesses such as* Anemia, High Blood Pressure (HBP), Premature Birth, Malnutrition. Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and Human Immune Deficiency Virus (HIV) due to inability to negotiate safer sexual practices, postpartum depression (PPD), Vesico-vaginal Fistula popularly called VVF and even suicide. Large spousal age difference among child spouses is common in sub-Saharan Africa. The younger the bride, the larger the age difference between her and her spouse and the more her level of powerlessness. Women in northern Nigeria cannot take decisions independent of their husbands. They may not even be able to seek medical care even when they are sick because they need permission of the husband who foots the bill. Among ailments/ health risk respondents claimed to have treated / undergone in recent time are STIs, VVF and cesarean tear among others.

Socio-economic effects

Among the socio-economic and psychological effects are: poverty, limited educational attainment, low status and power for decision making.

- i. *Illiteracy and Poverty:* Child Marriage denies children of school age their right to the education they need for their personal development, their preparation for adulthood, and their ability to contribute to their family and community. Child brides are likely to remain in school, interrupting the child's education and limiting her of opportunities for career and vocational advancement.
- ii. *Development:* Child marriage impacts a girl's health, future and family, it imposes substantial economic costs at the national level, too, with major implications for development and prosperity. Girls who marry young do not receive the educational and economic opportunities that help lift them out of poverty and which are necessary to build a sustainable and prosperous future for their communities and countries. They have worse economic and health outcomes than their unmarried peers, which are eventually passed down to their own children, further straining a country's capacity to provide quality health and education services.
- iii. The effects of child marriage on boys include being ill-prepared for certain responsibilities such as providing for the family, early fatherhood, and a lack of access to education and career opportunities.

Psychological effects

1. Sexual and Domestic Violence: Child marriage puts women and girls at particular risk of sexual, psychological violence throughout their lives. Girls who are married before 18 are more likely to experience domestic abuse than their unmarried peers and to report that their first sexual experience was forced. In areas where girls are at high risk of physical or sexual assault, some parents choose to marry off their daughters because they believe it will ensure their safety. These concerns are real, but early marriage does not provide a safe alternative. As minors, child brides are rarely able to assert their wishes to their much older husbands or negotiate safe and consensual sex. They are also more likely to believe that a man is sometimes justified in beating his wife than women who marry later. A husband's family may also have higher expectations for the girl's submissiveness to her husband and his family because of her youth. Large age gaps between the child and her spouse makes her more vulnerable to domestic violence and marital rape. Girls who marry as children face severe and life threatening marital violence at higher rates. Husbands in child marriages are often more than ten years older than their wives. This can increase the power and control a husband has over his wife and contribute to prevalence of spousal violence. Early marriage places young girls in vulnerable situation of being completely dependent on her husband.
2. The practice of child marriage can also isolate girls from family and friends and exclude them from participating in their communities, taking a heavy toll on their mental health and well-being. This sense of isolation from a support system can have severe mental health implications including depression.

Demerits of early child marriage

1. Lack of compromising abilities in either of the partners.
2. Untimely pregnancy and its risks. Most women, due to repeated miscarriages and abortions. Become infertile. However, it is not the same for all women.
3. Education tends to take a back seat for couples planning to marry early as the focus shifts to areas such as financial stability and family planning.
4. In case of early marriages, sexual relations can be strenuous and dangerous

Vesico-Vagina Fistula (VVF)

A Fistula is an abnormal passageway between two organs that do not normally connect. Fistula can appear in most parts of the body and can be caused by trauma, surgery, or can be present at birth. A vagina fistula is an abnormal opening that connects the vagina to another organ, such as the bladder, colon or rectum. It can be described as a hole in the vagina that allows stool or urine to pass through the vagina. Vagina fistula can develop as a result of an injury, a surgery, an infection or radiation treatment.

Types of Vaginal Fistulas

There are several types of vagina fistulas:

Ureterovaginal Fistula -This type of fistula happens when the abnormal opening develops between the vaginal and the ducts that carry urine from the kidneys to the bladder (ureters).

Urethrovaginal Fistula - In this type fistula, also called a urethral fistula, the opening occurs between the vagina and the tube that carries urine out of your body (urethra).

Rectovaginal Fistula -In this type of fistula, the opening is between your vagina and the lower portion of your large intestine.

Colovaginal Fistula -With a vaginal fistula, the opening occurs between the vagina and colon.

Enterovaginal Fistula -In this type of fistula, this opening is between the small intestine and vagina. Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF)also called a bladder fistula, this opening occurs between the vagina and urinary bladder and is the type that doctors see most often. Fistula is reportedly one of the worst epidemics that are predominantly caused by child marriages.

A vesicovaginal fistula (VVF) is an opening that develops between the bladder and the wall of the vagina. A vesicovaginal fistula (VVF) connects a woman's bladder directly to her vagina, which causes urine to drain into the vagina without passing through the urethra and result in loss of bladder control. The result is that urine leaks out of the vagina, sometimes lightly but it can be steady if the fistula is large. In addition to being a serious medical problem, this condition is very upsetting. The leakage is embarrassing and can smell bad, leading to loss of bladder control and incontinent. According to International Fistula Foundation, an obstetric fistula is a hole between the vagina and rectum or bladder that caused by prolonged obstructed labor, leaving a woman incontinent of urine or feces or both. An obstetric fistula is a child complication due to obstructed labor when the tissues between a woman's vagina and her bladder or rectum are damaged from the continuous pressure from the baby's head stuck in the birth canal. The dead tissue falls off resulting in a hole through which the woman continuously leaks urine or feces or sometimes both. Medically, when an under-aged girl has sex, gets pregnant and goes through childbirth, because her body is not developed enough for child bearing, she is highly exposed to a fistula. Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) occurs when the blood supply to the tissues between the vagina and bladder is restricted due to prolonged obstructed labor, leading the tissues to necrotize and then forming holes which urine passes uncontrollably. Some patients develop VVF where the holes form between the tissues of the vagina and rectum leading to the uncontrollable leaking of feces. In a press release issued by International Female Right Advocacy Platform, it was revealed that 65 percent of all cases of obstetric fistula occur in girls under the age of 18. The same report also revealed that girls who give birth before the age of 15 are likely to die in childbirth than girls in their 20s.

Causes of VesicoVaginal Fistula (VVF)

Vesicovaginal fistulas can be congenital (present at birth) or acquired (developing over time). Congenital causes are rare and include anomalies that occur during fetal development when the reproductive, intestinal, urinary tracts merge to create a single pathway.

Acquired Causes of Vesicovaginal Fistula (VVF) include:

- (i) Prolonged and obstetric labor during childbirth (in which cases is known as an obstetric fistula), when a prolonged labor passes the unborn child tightly against the pelvis, cutting off blood flow to the vesicovaginal wall. The affected tissue may necrotize (die), leaving a hole.
- (ii) Surgical damage such as hysterectomy.
- (iii) Vaginal fistulas can also result from particular violent cases of rape, especially those involving multiple rapist and or foreign objects.
- (iv) Radiation treatment for pelvic cancer.

All of the above place stress on the bladder and vaginal wall, which can weaken and tear tissue and lead to a vesico vaginal fistula (VVF).

Effects of Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) on Maternal and Child Health

The most prominent symptom is incontinence or urine leakage, with severity depending on the size and location of the fistula. When a fistula is small, some urine still passes through the urethra and may cause only slight leakage, If the fistula is large and all of the urine flows from bladder vagina, total incontinence can occur. Even small amounts of urine can irritate the woman's valve and perineum if leakage is chronic. When these structures are irritated, a woman may notice the following:

- 1. Flatulence, loss of bladder control or urinary incontinence, or urine leakage which may be continual or happen at night.
- 2. Foul-smelling vaginal discharge and smelly urine.
- 3. Repeated vaginal or urinary tract infections.
- 4. Irritation or pain in the vagina, pelvis or surrounding areas.
- 5. Pain during sexual activity.

Strategic Efforts to Prevent/End Child Marriage

In 2016, UNICEF, together with UNFPA, launched the Global Programme to End Child Marriage. Empowering young girls at risk of marriage or already in union, the programme reached more than 7.9 million adolescent girls with life-skills training and school and school attendance support over its first phase (2016-2019). Close to 40 million people, including key community influencers engaged in dialogue and communication campaigns to support adolescent girls or other efforts to end child marriage. In recent years, the Nigerian Government has awakened to the reality that VVF has become an embarrassing which is confronted with these damning statistics. There was a National Strategic Framework for the Elimination of Obstetric Fistula in Nigeria 2011 – 2015. It was the first real coordinated attempt to tackle the problem, but it turned out there was nothing strategic about it as new cases continue to emerge. Condition not only for those living with it and those that would develop it, but also for the government.

To end child marriage the following should be considered

- 1. One of the key ways to end child marriage is educating the girl child by enhancing the accessibility and quality of formal schooling for girls.

2. Empowering the girl child with skills, information and supportive networks.
3. Mobilizing and educating parents and communities
4. Raising awareness and enlightenment campaigns on the media against child marriage.
5. The government and non – governmental organizations can offer economic support and incentives for girls and their families.
6. Fostering an enabling legal and policy framework against child marriage.

Conclusion

Child marriage is a menace to the society, therefore, addressing child marriage will reduce the high burden of Vesico–Vaginal Fistula (VVF). It will help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty by allowing girls and women to participate more fully in society. Empowered and educated girls are better able to make informed decisions concerning their sexual and reproductive health, nourish and care for their children, leading to smaller, healthier families. The NGOs, religious bodies and community leaders should campaign aggressively and raise awareness about early marriage. Eradicating it would increase women's status and power within the family and community. To end child marriage, individuals, lawmakers and world leaders need to challenge norms that reinforce the ideal that girls are inferior to boys. Instead, we need to empower girls to be their own agents of change. Providing girls with equal access to support themselves and lead fulfilled, independent lives. Creating safe spaces and channels for them to speak up and speak out will allow their voices to be heard.

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