

REVIEW ARTICLE

Early Marriage in Africa – Trends, Harmful Effects and Interventions

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Abstract

This article explores the pattern of early marriage in Africa. It focuses on the sub-Saharan region as an area with the highest rates of early marriage in the world. The harmful effects of early marriage are explored in terms of impact on the health, education and economic well-being of young girls. The paper outlines a framework for analyzing global, regional and local initiatives to curb early marriage and examines the application of these interventions in sub-Saharan countries. Regional patterns are then examined and countries which have made progress in reducing age of marriage are compared to countries in which age of marriage amongst girls has remained low. The paper concludes on the note that countries with the highest rates of early marriage are also the countries with the highest rates of poverty and highest population growth rates. The paper argues for a sub-regional strategy to address the problem of early marriage in the zone with the highest incidence (*Afr J Reprod Health 2012 (Special Edition); 16[2]: 231-240*).

Résumé

Cet article explore la tendance du mariage précoce en Afrique. Il met l'accent sur la région subsaharienne en tant qu'une région qui possède les taux de mariage précoce les plus élevés du monde. On a étudié les effets nocifs du mariage précoce dans le contexte de l'impact sur la santé, l'éducation et le bien-être économique des jeunes filles. L'article présente un cadre qui permet de faire l'analyse des initiatives globales, régionales et locales pour réduire le mariage précoce et étudie l'application de ces interventions dans les pays subsahariens. Les tendances régionales sont alors examinées et on a fait une comparaison entre les pays qui ont fait du progrès concernant la réduction de l'âge de mariage chez les filles est resté bas. L'article conclut que les pays qui ont les taux de mariage précoce les plus élevés sont aussi les pays qui ont les taux de pauvreté les plus élevés et les taux de croissance démographique les plus élevés. L'article préconise une stratégie sous-régionale pour s'occuper du problème de mariage précoce dans la zone où l'incidence est la plus élevée (*Afr J Reprod Health 2012 (Special Edition); 16[2]: 231-240*).

Keywords: early marriage, sub-Saharan Africa, child marriage, child rights, age of marriage

Introduction

Early marriage, also referred to as child marriage, is defined 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. While more women are marrying in their thirties in developed countries, overall, 20 to 50 percent of women are married by the age of 18 in the developing world with the highest

percentages in West African within Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Approximately 40% of women aged 20-24 worldwide who were married before the age of 18 live in Sub Saharan Africa, thus resulting in early marriage being largely sub-Saharan African phenomena. Within Africa the literature identifies countries in North as having made the demographic transition to higher age of marriage for girls, lower total fertility rates, higher education for girls; and increased status for females. While 22% of women aged 15-19 were

married in Egypt in 1975, by 2003 this figure had declined to 10%. Similarly, in Tunisia, 11% of women aged 15-19 were married in the year 1975 but by 2001 this figure had declined to only 1%. This pattern is representative of North Africa where figures range from only 1% of women aged 15-19 married in Tunisia and Libya to the highest levels of 17% in Yemen as at 2001. It is against this background that a recent UNICEF report refers to progress in North Africa as 'good news' and points out that age of marriage appears to be rising – most rapidly in Asia and in North Africa. South of the Sahara, however, one finds a different story in this zone of "natural fertility" where fertility is high and little or no control is practiced. The context of early marriage in this zone must be understood within an environment of poverty, gender inequality, cultural taboos against pre-marital sex for girls, religious beliefs and patriarchal predisposition for controlling female sexuality. Not surprisingly, Table 1 below reveals as at 2010, the top 10 countries in the world with largest percentage of girls married before 18 years were largely in sub-Saharan Africa with only 2 in Asia.

Zones of early marriages in Africa

Within sub-Saharan Africa, age of marriage is comparatively high in Central Africa and highest in West Africa with 40% and 49% of girls under 19 years in unions respectively. This compares to 20% for Northern and Southern Africa and 27% in East Africa. Within Central Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo stands out with 74% of all girls in unions by 19 years. Cameroon trails behind with 52% of girls 20-24 years married by age 18 years. West African countries reporting the highest rates of women aged 20-24 who were first married or in a union by age 15 years are Niger, Chad, Mali. These countries are also among the countries in the world that account for the highest Total Fertility Rates (TFRs) on the sub-continent. According to UNICEF 2006, on average 44% of women aged 20-24 years in these countries gave birth before the age of 18 years.

Analysis of household Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data suggests a strong positive association between age of marriage and

TFR. This is explained by the fact that when girls get married at a young age, they are exposed to the risk of conception for a longer time as compared to those who delay marriages. Girls who marry before age 18 are more likely to have no schooling, reside in rural areas and are less likely to use any modern contraceptive method. Table 2 below, shows that South Africa and Namibia reported the lowest percentage of women marrying before age 18, (8% and 10% respectively) and these two countries also reported the lowest total

Table 1: Ranking of countries according to % of girls married before age of 18

| Rank | Country Name | % girls married before 18 |
|------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Niger | 74.5 |
| 2 | Chad | 71.5 |
| 3 | Mali | 70.6 |
| 4 | Bangladesh | 66.2 |
| 5 | Guinea | 63.1 |
| 6 | Central African Republic | 57 |
| 7 | Mozambique | 55.9 |
| 8 | Burkina Faso | 51.9 |
| 9 | Nepal | 51.4 |
| 10 | Ethiopia | 49.2 |
| 11 | Malawi | 48.9 |
| 12 | Madagascar | 48.2 |
| 13 | Sierra Leone | 47.9 |
| 14 | Cameroon | 47.2 |
| 15 | Eritrea | 47 |
| 16 | Uganda | 46.3 |
| 17 | India | 44.5 |
| 18 | Nicaragua | 43.3 |
| 19 | Zambia | 41.6 |
| 20 | Tanzania | 41.1 |

ICRW (2010). *Analysis of Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data. Most recent surveys for all DHS surveyed countries. Rankings are based on data in which women ages 20 – 24 reported being married by age 18.*

Table 2: Percentage of women aged 20-24 years married by exact age 18 and TFRs for selected African Countries as at 2011

| Country | Percent | TFR |
|-----------------------------|---------|-----|
| Benin | 37 | 5.5 |
| Burkinafaso | 62 | 5.9 |
| Cameroon | 52 | 4.7 |
| Chad | 71 | 6.2 |
| Cote D'Ivoire | 33 | 4.6 |
| Egypt | 20 | 5.1 |
| Ethiopia | 49 | 4.6 |
| Gabon | 33 | 3.4 |
| Ghana | 28 | 4.3 |
| Guinea | 64 | 5.5 |
| Kenya | 25 | 4.8 |
| Malawi | 46 | 6.0 |
| Mali | 65 | 6.5 |
| Mozambique | 55 | 5.1 |
| Namibia | 10 | 3.4 |
| Niger | 73 | 7.2 |
| Nigeria | 42 | 5.6 |
| United Republic of Tanzania | 39 | 5.6 |
| Rwanda | 20 | 5.4 |
| Senegal | 36 | 5.0 |
| South Africa | 8 | 2.6 |
| Togo | 30 | 4.3 |
| Uganda | 53 | 6.4 |
| Zambia | 42 | 6.2 |
| Zimbabwe | 29 | 3.5 |

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division: Population facts No. 1 December 2011

fertility rates of 2.1 and 3.4 respectively. Conversely, countries such as Niger, Chad, Mali and Nigeria have the highest percentage of women married before they were 18 years, with correspondingly high TFRs of 7.1, 6.2 and 5.6 respectively. The nuptiality-fertility table drawn from UN data establishes a positive correlation between a high incidence of early marriage and total fertility rates.

Risk factors for child marriages in Africa

Research findings suggest that historical, religious, cultural, economic and sociological factors interact to keep the girl child at risk of early marriage in sub-Saharan Africa. Given that early marriage is an effective mechanism for transferring a father's patriarchal rights over his daughter to an often-time older male in the community, these practices

reinforces the family's social status and consolidate economic relationships. Religious injunctions and time honored cultural practices are used to justify the preference for early marriage by both fathers and mothers in these contexts. Other risk factors of significant note are wars and civil conflicts, as well as the maximization of fertility where infant mortality is very high. The economic context in which early marriage exist in Africa is one of household poverty, vulnerability, uncertainty, seasonality of labor, labor surplus economies in a low productive rural setting. In this context, poverty is a significant risk factor as marrying girls off before the age of 18 is experienced positively for poor families who are relieved of the responsibility of feeding, clothing and protecting the girl child in an uncertain and insecure society. Moreover, in a labor surplus, low productivity economy where even men are not able to secure employment, early marriages means that girls are recruited into the labor intensive domestic economy for the replication of the family. The fact that this is a labor sector which is not recognized, unpaid, exploitative and akin to slavery is often lost on husbands, society, the girl's family as well as the child brides as the economy is perceived as presenting no other options for girls over 18 to earn a livelihood. Against this background the demand for child brides is continually being met by a ready supply of young girls who are excluded from school by real and opportunity costs of going to school. While economic risk factors for early marriage derive the pre-industrial agrarian economy of sub-Saharan Africa, socio-cultural risk factors such as religion and culture are underpinned by a traditional social stratification structure in which women are accorded low social status. In such traditional systems, the male dominated power structure conflates religious injunctions with customary practices to justify marrying off girls before puberty. This is so in both the Christian traditional regions of Ethiopia as it is in Muslim countries of Northern West Africa such as Chad, Mali and Niger. The question of how economic realities interact with culture, religion and gender roles in traditional settings requires in-depth consideration through empirical investigation. Studies on nuptiality and gender roles in traditional societies,

however, suggest that the more traditional the society, the greater the likelihood that religious tenets will be used to justify early marriage for girls. Such a context renders progress against early marriage difficult as male, and in some cases female custodians of culture and religion must be persuaded to abandon their support for this harmful traditional practice.

Harmful effects of Early Marriage on girls in Sub-Saharan Africa

The literature on child marriage in Africa is largely dominated by works which explore the harmful effects of this practice on the young victims as well as on family, society and the economy. The harmful effects of early marriage on the girl child is explored through five interwoven themes in the literature starting with the harmful effects on girls' health and moving on to examine harmful effects on psychological development, human rights and girls' economic survival.

Studies on harmful effects of early marriage on girls health reveal that girls who are married off before the age of consent, 18 years, experience earlier sexual debut, give birth to more children and loose more children to neonatal and childhood diseases. Studies show a strong positive correlation between an early median age of first marriage and an early median age of first birth (see Table 3). This explains in part the high maternal mortality and morbidity amongst this population. Moreover, research findings by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) argue that girls younger than 15 are 5 times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s. Pregnancy is the leading cause of death worldwide for women 15 to 19. Similarly, recent studies based on DHS data demonstrate a strong positive correlation between HIV prevalence and the median age of first marriage as well as first sex. While the correlation between early marriage and vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF) has been hotly contested, case reviews of VVF patient's shows clearly that most are young wives with limited education who often married to older men. Hence the significant incidence of VVF in locations with high rates

Table 3: Average age of girls at first marriage and first birth of selected countries

| Country | Median Age at First Marriage | Median Age at First Birth |
|----------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Nigeria | 17 | 20 |
| Cameroon | 17 | 19 |
| Mali | 16 | 19 |
| Senegal | 17 | 19 |
| Guinea | 16 | 18 |
| Niger | 15 | 18 |

Source: Forward, EARLY MARRIAGE: WHOSE RIGHT TO CHOOSE? 2000

of early marriage such as Ethiopia, Niger, Mali and in Northern Nigeria where education rates are low. The harmful effect of this phenomenon is also borne out by the fact that early marriage is largely equated with forced marriage as girls are removed from school to become child wives. The feature of polygamy has been an important focal point for researchers on early marriage as it an intermediating variable which has strong positive correlations with domestic violence, number of births and life changes of the girl child as a wife. Data also shows that the higher the percentage of child brides in developing countries the lower the level of female literacy and this is especially so for countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In Niger, Chad and Mali roughly 70% of girls 18 and under are married and only 30% of women aged 15 to 18 years are found to be literate.

Research findings show that child marriage damages the mental, physical wellbeing and life chances of young girls. Studies on education reveal that early marriage denies school age children the right to education and access to a school environment for self and community development. The literature on early marriage and economic development also identifies an inverse relationship between the phenomenon and the effectiveness of development assistance. When aggregated, the individual suffering of child wives

Table 4.0: Levels and types of early marriage interventions in Africa

| Levels of interventions | Type of interventions | |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| | Prevention interventions | Services support interventions |
| LAWS | Age of marriage laws Child rights and protection laws. Human rights legislation, free and compulsory education laws. Anti-trafficking laws, advocacy & research. | Minimum standards, benchmarks and quality of services protocols on integrated and vertical services in maternal health, HIV/AIDS, trafficking, education and social welfare services. Advocacy & research. |
| POLICY | National gender policies. Education, Employment and labor policies. Population policies. Adolescent RH policy, HIV/AIDS and OVC policies. Policy reform for gender responsive budgeting & domestication of MDGs. Advocacy & research. | Orphans and vulnerable children policies. Domestic violence policies. Child rights budgeting. Advocacy & research. |
| PROGRAM | Promotion of girl child education. Adolescent reproductive health programs. HIV/AIDS BCC interventions. Youth and girl child empowerment programs. Advocacy & research. | Married adolescents family planning programs. Community empowerment programs. Advocacy & research |
| INSTITUTION | Gender Unit in the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Children's Unit within National Human Rights Commission. Child protection Units. Global, regional and local coalitions & networks. Institutional assessments & information sharing. | Children's Budget Unit within line Ministries or as parastatals. Global, regional and local coalitions and networks. Advocacy & research. |
| PROJECT | Conditional cash transfers and school feeding projects. Youth leadership development in RH. Mass media sensitization & campaigns. Advocacy and research. | Life skills, micro-credit, shelters and psycho-social support projects. Interventions to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity among married adolescent. Making early motherhood safe. Interventions to reduce neonatal and infant mortality. Advocacy & research. |

contributes to societal underdevelopment through an increased disease burden and low productivity.

Curbing child marriages in Africa – Interventions at policy and project levels

Global and local stakeholders have sought to reduce the incidence of early marriage using both prevention and service support interventions. Legal and policy interventions to outlaw early marriages and protect the girl child have emerged as the major prevention program. Other prevention interventions include girl child education programs, and mass media sensitization projects to

educate parents about the dangers of child marriages as well as economic empowerment programs to improve the economic status of girls within the family. Support interventions target the already married adolescent to provide legal, psychosocial, livelihood skills and microcredit services to vulnerable child wives. Table 4 summarizes current interventions in terms of levels and types of interventions.

Child rights, child protection legislative prevention approaches

Child rights, enforcement and legal protection approaches have been promoted by UNICEF and

the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) in the UNDP from as early as 2001 as a mechanism for catalyzing political leadership and compliance with global standards and conventions. DAW and the UNICEF have argued that in protecting the rights of the girl child international standards on elimination of discrimination and violence against girl children are an important starting point. Thus a comprehensive package of international legislation and conventions on child rights in general and the rights of the girl child in particular have been recommended throughout countries with high rates of early marriage as an effective means of reducing the scourge.

Several governments on the continent have adopted global standards and legislation to prevent early marriages. Governments have also established legal minimum ages at marriage for both women and men and have sought to protect the rights of the child through legislative instruments. Global and regional legal instruments with implications for early marriage in Africa include:

- *The Convention on the Rights of the Child*
- *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)*
- *The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1964) Articles 1, 2 and 3*
- *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women (1979) Articles 2 and 16*
- *The United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institution and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956), Article 1(c)*
- *Plan of Action for the Elimination of Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children*
- *The African Charter on Human and People's Rights*
- *The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) Article XXI*
- *Key international and regional human rights instruments relating to child marriage*

- *The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1964)*
- *The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976) Article 12*
- *The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989)*
- *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (known as the Maputo Protocol) (2003) Article 6, clauses (a), (b), (d)*

Despite the domestication and enactment of relevant legislation, enforcement still remains a challenge. Table 5 below shows the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa which have enacted legislation on age of marriage with and also without parental consent. For most African countries, the average minimum legal age of marriage without parental consent is 18 for girls and boys although there are substantial variations in some countries ranging from 15 years in Niger and Democratic Republic of Congo, to 22 years in Central African Republic.

Table 5: Legal age at marriage for selected countries in Africa as at 2009

| Country | Without parental consent | | With parental consent | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|------|-----------------------|------|
| | Women | Men | Women | Men |
| WEST AFRICA | | | | |
| Benin | 18 | 18 | <18 | <18 |
| Burkinafaso | 18 | 20 | 16 | 18 |
| Cape Verde | 18 | 18 | 16 | 16 |
| Cote d'Ivoire | 18 | 21 | <18 | <21 |
| Ghana | 18 | 18 | 16 | 16 |
| Guinea | 17 | 18 | .... | .... |
| Guinea-Bissau | 18 | 18 | 17 | 17 |
| Liberia | 18 | 21 | .... | .... |
| Mali | 18 | 21 | 16 | 18 |
| Mauritania | 18 | 18 | .... | .... |
| Niger | 15 | 18 | <15 | <18 |
| Nigeria | 18 | 18 | .... | .... |
| Senegal | 18 | 18 | 16 | .... |
| Sierra Leone | 21 | 21 | <21 | <21 |
| Togo | 17 | 20 | <17 | 20 |
| NORTH AFRICA | | | | |
| Algeria | 19 | 19 | .... | .... |
| Egypt | 16 | 18 | .... | .... |
| Libyan Arab Jamahiriya | 20 | 20 | <20 | <20 |
| Morocco | 18 | 18 | <18 | <18 |
| Sudan | .... | .... | .... | .... |
| Tunisia | 18 | 18 | <18 | <18 |

Table 5 Continued

| Country | Without parental consent | | With parental consent | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|-----|-----------------------|------|
| | Women | Men | Women | Men |
| SOUTHERN AFRICA | | | | |
| Botswana | 21 | 21 | 18 | 18 |
| Lesotho | 21 | 21 | 16 | 18 |
| Namibia | 18 | 18 | .... | .... |
| South Africa | 18 | 18 | <18 | <18 |
| Swaziland | 21 | 21 | 16 | 18 |
| EASTERN AFRICA | | | | |
| Burundi | 18 | 21 | <18 | <21 |
| Comoros | 18 | 22 | <18 | <22 |
| Djibouti | 18 | 18 | <18 | <18 |
| Eritrea | 18 | 18 | 16 | .... |
| Ethiopia | 18 | 18 | .... | .... |
| Kenya | 18 | 18 | 16 | .... |
| Madagascar | 18 | 18 | .... | .... |
| Malawi | 18 | 18 | 15 | 15 |
| Mauritius | 18 | 18 | 16 | 16 |
| Mozambique | 18 | 18 | 16 | 16 |
| Rwanda | 21 | 21 | <21 | <21 |
| Seychelles | 18 | 18 | 15 | <18 |
| Somalia | 18 | 18 | 16 | .... |
| Uganda | 18 | 18 | 16 | .... |
| Tanzania | 18 | 18 | 14 | 14 |
| Zambia | 21 | 21 | <21 | <21 |
| Zimbabwe | 16 | 18 | .... | .... |
| MIDDLE AFRICA | | | | |
| Angola | 18 | 18 | 15 | 16 |
| Cameroon | 18 | 18 | 15 | 18 |
| Central African Republic | 22 | 22 | .... | .... |
| Chad | 15 | 18 | .... | .... |
| Congo | 18 | 21 | <18 | <21 |
| Democratic Republic of Congo | 15 | 18 | .... | .... |
| Equatorial Guinea | 18 | 18 | .... | .... |
| Gabon | 21 | 21 | 15 | 18 |

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division: Population facts No. 1 December 2011

Apart from Gambia which does not have yet have such legislation all other West African countries have such legislation.

Prevention Projects to keep girls in school

The need to keep girls in school is the underlying justification for the global consensus around recent

education reforms which are being implemented in Asia and Africa. Research findings suggest that the longer the period of education to which girls are exposed, the less likely they will be married off as a child. United Nations driven initiatives such as the Education for All campaign, the Universal Basic education reforms, the MDGs, as well as the new focus on Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) all set goals of enrolling and retaining more girls in schools to increase low enrollment and reduce dropout rates. The United Nations has made the case for keeping girls in school as a means to reduce high rates of early marriage in countries such as Niger.

One of the most successful interventions designed to keep girls in school is the community empowerment and conditional cash transfer project first piloted in India in the 1990s and now implemented in West Africa with the support of international development agencies. Similarly, in Ethiopia, USAID is supporting initiatives to delay the age of marriage through a combination of economic incentives and life skills training. Emerging findings from the ICRW community empowerment project of adolescent girls in 55 communities in Senegal, suggest that collective upliftment coupled with life skills is associated with increases in the age of marriage for girls. Given the context of poverty in which early marriage takes place, conditional cash transfer programs (CCTP) in which care givers are compensated for income lost by sending girls to schools have been found to be effective and sustainable at minimal costs.

Global and local advocacy networks for prevention and service delivery

Global and local advocacy coalitions have been active in several African countries to improve prevention as well as to support service delivery interventions. Coalitions have been successful in putting early marriage on the agenda for African governments and well as global policy making bodies. One such initiative of note is the coalition of NGOs from six West and East African countries, working with support from the United Kingdom-based Forum on Marriage and the

Rights of Women and Girls, which met in Burkina Faso in February 2003. The coalition issued a declaration calling upon African governments, civil society organizations and the international community to work together to end child and forced marriages.

“ We call on governments and international development agencies to recognize the efforts being made by civil society organizations in addressing the concerns and situation of girls and women affected resources to respond to the challenges posed by child and forced marriages. That our governments and the African Union adopt a clear and unambiguous position on child and forced marriages and rectify the legislative loopholes between religious, customary and civil marriages, and sign the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa and ensure that special measures are taken to help end this practice”

Source: Ouagadougou Declaration on Child Marriage, October 2003 in Otoo-Oyortey, N. and Sonita Pobi, 2003.

Legislative advocacy to make and enforce free compulsory education, age of marriage laws and child protection legislation has also been at the forefront for groups such as Save the Children and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association. Similarly, the Forum for African Women Educationists (FAWE) with support from the Norwegian Development Corporation (NORAD) has been supporting gender based advocacy and research initiatives on girl child education in Africa.

Services support interventions - Family Planning Services and youth empowerment initiatives for married adolescents

The 1990s witnessed path breaking interventions targeted at married adolescent girls to provide them with quality family planning services and information. International development partners such as Pathfinder International, Population

Council, the MacArthur Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation as well as USAID initiated programs in Kenya and Ethiopia in East Africa and Ghana, Mali and Senegal in West Africa to provide such services. The married adolescent approach recognizes married girls as being in legitimate unions and seeks to provide them with information and services to reduce the number of births, improve their health seeking behaviors thus increasing their life chances.

In short, married adolescent initiatives aim to provide a mix of information and catalyze the uptake of reproductive health, family planning and HIV/AIDS services. Some married adolescents initiatives also incorporate skills acquisition and economic empowerment components.

The Orphans and Vulnerable Children services support interventions

The high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in many African countries provided an opportunity to increase public awareness of child vulnerability and the problem of child brides within a wider framework of an orphans and vulnerable children policy. Such interventions have built the capacity of child welfare agencies, and have provided psycho-social, nutritional and other forms of support to vulnerable girls along with mentoring and supportive supervision of care facilities.

Trends in early marriages in Africa

Despite numerous interventions to increase age of marriage in Africa, recent studies show limited improvements in few countries. Studies based on DHS time series data show two discernable trends in age of marriage in sub-Saharan Africa. On the one hand, Kenya, Senegal, Uganda and Zimbabwe have experienced increases in the age of marriage while on the other hand countries such as Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Mali, Niger and Chad experiencing little change. The much documented success story of Kenya has been attributed to increase retention of girls in schools as well as the success of female economic interventions. Westoff (2003) identifies Liberia, Mali, Cameroon, Cote d’

Ivoire and Lesotho as countries with no evidence of increase in the age of marriage and Kenya, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Uganda, Zimbabwe and possibly Ghana showing some increasing age of marriage as well as age of first birth. Table 6 below, demonstrates the changing pattern of early marriage. For countries such as Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana and Benin significant reductions in age of marriage can be seen between younger women in the 20-24 age cohorts as compared to older women in the 45-49 year cohort. Little change is evident for countries such as Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Within sub-Saharan Africa early marriage continues to be perpetuated in countries where the old risk factors of poverty and patriarchal social norms conspire to reduce the impact of interventions. New risk factors such as climate changes, insecurity and civil wars add to the old barriers to change and create a dynamic which perpetuates early marriage.

Table 6: Changes in age of marriage amongst women 45-49 and 20-24 in selected African countries

| Country | Year of data collected | % of women between 45-49 married by age 18 | % of women between 20-24 married by age 18 |
|--------------|------------------------|--|--|
| Benin | 2001 | 41.2 | 36.7 |
| Burkina Faso | 1999 | 64.5 | 62.3 |
| Chad | 1997 | 74.7 | 71.4 |
| Ghana | 2003 | 33.1 | 27.9 |
| Mali | 2001 | 65.3 | 65.4 |
| Niger | 1998 | 87.7 | 76.6 |
| Nigeria | 2003 | 70.6 | 43.3 |
| Senegal | 1997 | 64.4 | 36.1 |
| Togo | 1998 | 40.5 | 30.5 |
| Zambia | 2002 | 63.7 | 42.1 |

Source: UNICEF, 2006, 2000, 2005 and 2007

Conclusions

The incidence of early marriage is highest, most persistently reported and most pervasive in a cluster of neighboring countries spanning from Mali in Northern West Africa to Cameroon in Central Africa. This cluster of countries also encircle the core North of Nigeria. Interestingly, when age of marriage data for Nigeria is teased out by zone, the pattern in the Northern states is

markedly similar to that of neighboring countries such as Niger and Chad. This region is similar in terms of culture, religion, a fragile Sahelian ecosystem, growing insecurity and high incidences of poverty in the context of economic growth. Over 83% of the population of Chad live on less than US\$2.00 per day, while in Niger the figure stands at 75.9% and in Mali the figure stands at 77.1%. In Nigeria 83.9% of the population lives on less than US\$2.00 per day and in Burkina Faso the figure is 81.2%. Side by side with high rates of poverty in these countries is the phenomenon of stable and indeed positive economic growth rates, ranging from an annual average growth rate between 2000-2009 of 0.5% in Niger to 4.0% in Nigeria and 6.7% in Chad. The context of early marriage in this zone suggests the need for a sub-regional strategy to reduce poverty and address societal inequality in general and gender inequality in particular. Targeting girls within the family is an effective entry point for such interventions. This can be done through school enrollment and retention programs, as well as school clubs and career guidance programs for acceptable service sector roles in education and health. Education, experience sharing and sensitization interventions which target traditional opinion leaders such as community and religious leaders, complement such interventions and create an enabling environment for girl child focused strategies. Changing the behavior, opinions and attitudes of traditional opinion leaders is an important requisite for societal mobilization against this harmful practice. It is at this point that the state has a catalytic role to play expanding employment opportunities for young females and males, as well as providing the policy and legal framework for action and enforcement. Coordination and collaboration across the range of stakeholders committed to reducing early marriage in the sub-region is a necessary condition for sustaining change.

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