

Causes and Challenges of Girl-Child Marriage in Northwest Nigeria

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Abstract

Despite national and international laws and conventions legislating against girl-child marriage, the practice continues in sub-Saharan Africa. This paper adopts a qualitative method (in-depth interviews) to investigate causes and challenges associated with girl-child marriage in five (5) wards of Kankara Local Government Area, Katsina State, Northwest Nigeria. Multistage sampling identified twenty (20) child brides of differing marital status who were less than eighteen years at first marriage. From data thematically arranged and subjected to content analysis, our results show that cultural factors, religious reasons, economic considerations, and the need to protect girl-children from unwanted pregnancy and “not socially accepted” practices provide a frame of justification for the practice of girl-child marriages. Results further revealed that girl-child marriages predispose a girl-child to various forms of emotional, social, and psychological trauma that hinder her potential and future. The study concludes that girl-child marriages violate the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The practice hinders the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of eradicating poverty, hunger, discrimination, and

poor health to engender gender equality, inclusivity, and development. The study recommends intensive enlightenment campaigns and counseling to be deployed in educating both parents and the girl-child in Northern Nigeria on the dangers inherent to the practice of girl-child marriage.

Keywords: girl-child marriage, causes, challenges, Northwest Nigeria

Introduction

Despite containment policies aimed at eliminating girl-child marriage, there is still much to do to discourage the practice. Globally, around 21% of young women were married before their eighteenth birthday (United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF 2020). An estimated 44% of girls in Nigeria are married before their eighteenth birthday, suggesting one of the highest rates of girl-child marriage globally (Save the Children International 2021).

Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 (UNICEF 1989), and Article 2 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990, defined a child as every human being below the age of eighteen years (The African Child Policy Forum ACPF 2013). In Nigeria, section 277 of the Child Rights Act (2003) defines a child as a person under the age of eighteen years. Therefore, child marriage, also known as early marriage, is "a marriage carried out below the age of eighteen years, before a girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing" (UNICEF

2021a). Although child marriage applies to boys and girls, girls are more commonly affected by this scourge (UNICEF 2014).

Admittedly, girl-child marriage is a hurtful traditional practice that violates children's rights; and is rooted in entrenched gender inequality that makes girls disproportionately affected by the practice (The Inter-African Committee, or IAC, on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children 1993). The highest rate of child marriage is in sub-Saharan Africa, with 37% of young women marrying before the age of eighteen (World Vision 2020). Niger has the highest prevalence globally, with 4.1 million child brides (United Nations Population Fund Agency (UNFPA) and UNICEF 2018).

Girl-child marriage (usually before age eighteen) differs from region to region, across nations, and within nations. For instance, the prevalence of child marriage in West and Central Africa is 41% (UNFPA and UNICEF 2018), suggesting that four out of ten girls and young women (constituting nearly 60 million) were married before the age of eighteen (UNFPA and UNICEF 2018). Similarly, there is a considerable variation between and within countries. For example, Niger has the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world at 76%, followed by the Central African Republic at 68% and Chad at 67%. Notably, the prevalence of child marriage below the age of fifteen is also very high at 14% for Africa, with Chad,

Central African Republic, and Niger all having prevalence rates over 25% (UNFPA and UNICEF 2018).

As the most populous country in Africa, Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of child brides (UNFPA and UNICEF 2018; Nzenwata 2018; Adekola et al. 2016). Nigeria is ranked eleventh among twenty countries in the world with the highest prevalence of child marriage (United Nations 2018). Unfortunately, the state of scholarly literature reveals less interrogation of the situation of the girl-child in early marriage in Northern Nigeria. In other words, there is less academic effort on girl-child marriage in Northern Nigeria. Nonetheless, some organizations have done some intervention studies on the situation of the girl-child in Northern Nigeria (International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) 2010; UNFPA and UNICEF 2018; Save the Children 2021).

Although Nigeria is considered to have one of the highest numbers of child brides in Africa, with an estimated twenty-two million child brides accounting for 40% of all child brides in Africa (UNFPA and UNICEF 2018; Nzenwat 2018), the Nigeria Demographic Health Survey NDHS (2018) reported a positive development in a reduction in the practice of girl-child marriage. For example, the percentage of women marrying before the age of eighteen has declined from 48% to 43%, with the percentage of women marrying before the age of fifteen declining from 12% to 8% (UNICEF 2021a). Similarly, UNICEF (2021a) also reported a global

reduction in the prevalence of child marriage in the last decade from one in four girls to approximately one in five today. Despite the limited achievement, it is disturbing that twelve million girls every year still get married before the age of eighteen (UNICEF 2021a) for reasons not unconnected with culture, tradition, belief system, growing poverty, and the application of customary law in Northern Nigeria, which expose the girl-child to challenging situations.

Studies have investigated the menace of child marriage using various criteria. For instance, Ifemeje (2012), Nwonu and Ifidon (2014), and Braimah (2014) examined child marriage from the legal perspective, while Mobolaji, Fatusi, and Adedini (2020) adopted the concepts of ethnicity and religious affiliation to explain issues revolving around girl-child marriage in Nigeria. Adekola et al. (2016) also investigated the effects of child marriage on female education and entrepreneurship in Northeast Nigeria. However, few studies have investigated the challenges of girl-child marriage using a combination of three significant indicators: 1) emotional challenges, 2) social and psychological challenges, and 3) socio-economic challenges.

This study, therefore, seeks to interrogate the girl-child marriage practice in the Kankara Local government area of Katsina State and recommends practical suggestions for the incidence of girl-child marriage practice in Northwest Nigeria. The objectives of this paper include 1) interrogating the factors influencing girl-

child marriage, 2) identifying the challenge(s) associated with girl-child marriage, and 3) highlighting the consequences for the future of a girl-child.

Literature Review

Causes of Girl-Child Marriage

Many explanations have been given as the drivers for girl-child marriage practice in Northern Nigeria. Child marriage is considered driven by poverty, with more significant consequences for girls (Osakinle and Tayo-Olajubutu 2017). Girl-child marriage is advantageous to low-income families in rural locations. An investment in a girl is considered not yielding to the family as an investment in a boy since the girl would end up with another family and lose her identity (ICR 2010). Thus, the betrothal of girls at a young age relieves parents of the costs and responsibilities of upbringing (Adebambo 2010; ICRW 2010; Erulkar and Muthengi 2014). Therefore, it is considered expedient for girls to marry at an early age to older men, and usually against their wishes. Girl-child marriage practice tends to stifle and hinder educational or employment opportunities for girls (UNICEF 2008; ICRW 2010). Furthermore, traditional notions of the primary role of women and girls as wives and mothers and the fear of sexual violence, rape, and losing virginity (UNICEF 2008; ICRW 2010) have primarily encouraged the culture of girl-child

marriage. It is considered that marriage serves as a refuge for protecting married persons from unwanted pregnancy and STIs/HIV through premarital sex (Ityavar and Inuwa 2006; Adekola al. 2016; UNICEF 2021b). Other reasons for girl-child marriage are social pressure, persecution, forced migration, modern slavery, politics, and financial relationship (Aduradola 2013). Studies have also implicated inadequate legislative framework, weak enforcement mechanisms, and customary and religious laws encouraging the practice of girl-child marriage, particularly in Northern Nigeria (Brammah 2014; Nwonu and Ifidon 2014).

Challenges of Girl-Child Marriage

The devastating effects of marriage before eighteen years on girls outweigh the benefits. However, the adverse effects are often ignored by perpetrators for reasons that have been mentioned earlier. Huge proportions of these young girls who are married to older men against their wishes often experience emotional trauma and violence. UNICEF (2001) has identified three key concerns a girl-child in early marriage experiences: 1) denial of childhood and adolescence, 2) curtailment of personal freedom and the lack of opportunity to develop a complete sense of selfhood, and 3) the denial of psychosocial and emotional well-being, reproductive health, and educational opportunity. The cumulative consequence of

girl-child marriage is that it prevents girls from obtaining education and destroys their health and future prospects.

The practice of girl-child marriage constitutes an affront to the rights and freedom of a girl-child and reduces her prospect for upward mobility. The broader consequence for society is that it prevents the growth of an inclusive society. At an interpersonal level, it affects the ability of a girl-child to interact with peers of the same age and socialize outside the family unit (UNICEF 2014). At personal levels, it excludes the right of a girl-child to choose her life partner. As a consequence of the practice, girl-child marriage leads to the exclusion of girls from their families, friends, communities, and significant others, with severe consequences for their physical and psychological well-being. Indeed, studies have established that girl-child marriage negatively affects the health and future of a girl-child and imposes substantial economic costs at the national level, with significant consequences for development and prosperity (Osakinle and Tayo-Olajubutu 2017; UNICEF 2021a). It is most likely that in the context of the constraining experiences of a girl-child, she is most likely to experience depression and anxiety that could culminate into suicidal ideation that eventuates into suicide.

Culture and patriarchy play important roles in how women are abused within the matrimonial family contexts. Norms about marriage, predominant male positions, and forced marriages have been identified with domestic violence

in Nigeria (Ifemeje 2012; Linos et al. 2013). Although many women experience gender-based violence in a wide variety of forms throughout their lives (physical, sexual, and psychological), child marriage exposes the girl-child to domestic violence in the hands of both her husband and his relations, constituting both physical and psychological trauma (Girls Not Brides 2014).

Notably, girls who marry early are more likely to be abused sexually, physically, and emotionally. A study conducted in India shows that girls who were married before age eighteen reported experiencing physical violence twice as much and sexual violence three times more than girls who married later (ICRW 2005). Furthermore, women often experience domestic violence for their refusal to concede to the sexual demands of their husbands and expectations from their new family unit (World Vision International 2013). Nadda et al. (2018) argued that early child marriage undermines the freedom and rights of children to live a fulfilled life. This is because girl-child marriage leads to domestic violence that threatens the girl child's life, health, and happiness. Also, patriarchal cultures have been linked to domestic violence across the globe (Kelmendi 2015; Ansari et al. 2016; Ishola 2016). Violence against women is perceived as a personal issue, and women have been socialized to accept it as normal (Ishola 2016). Cultural practices and economic challenges have largely fueled girl-child marriage. At a broader level,

girl-child marriage hinders the potential of the girl-child and predisposes a girl to several forms of abuse in marital life (Abdullahi et al. 2017).

The State of Child Rights Act in Northwest Nigeria

Nigeria's Federal Government domesticated the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter and Welfare of a Child by passing the Child Rights Act (CRA) in 2003 (Abubakar 2021a). It urged various states governments to domesticate the Act into state law. Seven states constitute the Northwest geo-political zone in the country. Presently, six (6) states in Northwest Nigeria have endorsed the Child Rights Act (CRA) (2003) and have passed the bill into law, though with considerable modification of the Act. Northwest Nigeria comprises seven (7) states, namely, Kano, Jigawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara, and Kebbi States, respectively (NDHS 2018). In Northwest Nigeria, Kaduna State was the first Northwest state to adopt the Child Right Act (CRA 2003), but with some modifications in content and name, the Act is referred to it as the "Child Welfare and Protection Law." The Law came into operation on February 16, 2018 (Kaduna State Child Welfare and Protection Law 2018). The law regulates the minimum age for marriage as eighteen years, except that a Muslim child can marry at fourteen or above under Islamic law (Kaduna

State Child Welfare and Protection Law 2018). Katsina State government also introduced the Child Right Act (2003) but renamed it “Katsina State Child Protection Bill 2020” (Sahara Reporters 2021). The Katsina State government assented to the bill on December 29, 2020 (Sahara Reporters 2021; Oyelude 2021) and referred to it as the “Katsina Child Rights Protection Bill, 2020.” It defines a child as someone below eighteen and seeks to protect them from abuse. Unfortunately, it does not protect certain underage persons from being married off. Notably, the Sharia law is accorded supremacy in interpreting the law that relates to the girl-child in cases of underage marriage concerning a Muslim girl-child (Sahara Reporters 2021).

Kebbi State signed the Child Right Act bill into law on October 7, 2021 (Abubakar 2021a) but did not specify the age for marriage. The Sokoto State House of Assembly also passed the Child Protection Bill into law on November 23, 2021 (Onuminya 2021). The bill defines a child as someone below eighteen and seeks to protect children from abuse. However, the bill maintains silence on the age a girl-child is allowed to marry (Onuminya 2021). Jigawa State signed the Child Right Act bill into law on December 22, 2021 (UNICEF 2021c), but Jigawa State did not adopt eighteen years as the age of maturity for marriage. Instead, it determined the childhood age of puberty because it is believed to be controversial to the predominant culture and religion of the residents (Abubakar 2021b). Zamfara, on

the other hand, passed the Child Protection Bill into law on August 16, 2022, without mentioning the age of marriage (Nwannah 2022). However, the Kano State Government is yet to assent to the Child Rights Act. The Kano State government commented, in January 2020, that it had forwarded the bill to the State House of Assembly (Odogwu 2020). As of May 28, 2022, the Kano State government promised the “Child Rights Act” would soon be enacted (Bello 2022). Nothing cheering on the adoption of the Child Rights Act is yet to be made by the Kano State Government three years after the Bill was forwarded to the Kano State House of Assembly.

Out of the seven states constituting the Northwest geo-political zone, six (6) states have adopted the Child Rights Bill with considerable modification and passed the bill into law. Although these states, except the Jigawa States, asserted that eighteen years be considered a child’s age, all other States did not agree that the marriageable age should be set at eighteen years. Since Muslim communities predominantly dominate Northwest Nigeria, precedence is given to Sharia law concerning a Muslim child on the issue of marriage. This decision implies that though the Child Rights Protection Bill defines a child as someone below eighteen, Muslim children below eighteen can still marry due to the supremacy accorded to Sharia law over the Child Rights Bill. This implies that ending the girl-child

marriage practice in Northern Nigeria will be difficult, especially in Northwest Nigeria, where the practice is prevalent.

Against this backdrop, this study intends to 1) investigate the causes of girl-child marriage in Kankara LGA of Katsina State, 2) identify the emotional challenges of girl-child experiences, and 3) highlight the consequences of girl-child marriage for the future.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored in Max Weber's theory of social action. Weber argued that individuals' subjectively meaningful social action constitutes the most fundamental unit of social reality..." (Doyle 2008, 35). Max Weber contributed to sociology, a field of study investigating how people interact with one another in a society. Weber was credited with creating social action theory, which examines the actions of people in the context of meanings they assign to them and the relationship these actions have with the actions of others. For Max Weber, sociology is "that science which aims at the interpretative understanding (*verstehen*) of social behaviour in order to gain an explanation of its causes, its course, and its effects" to ultimately "... understand (*verstehen*) human action by penetrating to the subjective meanings that actors attach to their

behaviour and the behaviour of others” (Coser 1977, 220). Weber noted that interpretable human conduct (“action”) could be “meaningfully” interpreted if it is identifiable by reference to “valuations” and meanings that are assigned to human “action” (Ritzer et al. 2018, 177). Thus, the attitude of those who engage in girl-child marriage underscores the meanings they attach to their behaviour (or social action).

Weber was particularly interested in ways social actors often conceptualize social action in terms of meanings. An action to which a person does not attach a subjective meaning cannot be considered a social action. The meanings people attach to girl-child marriage explain why the practice has been sustained by those who indulge in it and the victims (for example, the girl-child). Weber argued that the sociological analysis of action should begin with observing and interpreting the subjective inner state of the actor. By subjective inner state, Weber was referring to the capacity of actors to act on their interpretation, understanding, and meaning to exercise rational choice in their actions.

Thus, the subjective meaning attached to girl-child marriage by society is rooted in their cultural universe to ascribe meanings to their social action. These meanings are connected to their belief system that provides a frame of justification for their action. It might be somewhat arbitrary to ascribe meanings to social actions outside the cultural expressions of the people who consider child marriage

an appropriate social action. The meanings perpetrators of girl-child marriage attach to their beliefs make the act a complex and problematic social practice to be discouraged if it is removed from familial and cultural contexts.

Methodology

Study Area

The study was conducted in five wards of Kankara Local Government Area (LGA) of Katsina State. Kankara is one of the thirty-four LGAs that make up Katsina State, in Northwest Nigeria, with its headquarters in Kankara. The LGA was created in 1989. Kankara LGA has eleven wards, with surrounding towns and villages. The LGA has a total population of 243,259 (NPC 2006). Projecting the population at a 3.7% annual growth rate in 2022 leaves Kankara's population at 434,700. The LGA occupies 1,260 square km (Katsina State 2022), with most Hausa and Fulani extraction inhabitants speaking Hausa and Ffulde languages. Islam is commonly practiced in the LGA, and farming and trading are the dominant occupations.

As banditry and insurgency have become significant problems in Kankara LGA, it is not unlikely that this social problem would further compound the freedom of the girl-child, accessibility to education, and social situation. This problem is reflected by the number of out-of-school children in Katsina State, and

skeptical views of bandits seem to have further forced people to keep their female children out of school and forced them into early marriage (Relief Web 2018). More likely, the number of out-of-school children would soar in an environment ravaged by grinding poverty, high illiteracy, and growing banditry.

The study was conducted in Kankara Local Government Area (LGA) of Katsina State, Northwest Nigeria, using a cross-sectional research design and a multistage sampling technique comprising simple random, snowball, and purposive sampling techniques. Kankara LGA has eleven wards. In the first stage, five wards were selected using a simple random sampling procedure and denoted as *Ward 1*, *Ward 2*, *Ward 3*, *Ward 4*, and *Ward 5*. In the second stage, four (4) participants were chosen from each selected ward using snowball. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants based on marital status (currently married, separated, divorced, and widowed). In other words, four categories of participants were identified in each ward. Thus, twenty (20) participants were recruited for the study. The inclusion criterion was that all participants were under eighteen (18) years at first marriage.

An interview guide was developed with question items on a broad range of issues relating to marriage arrangement (probing if brides consented to marriage before it was consummated), educational background, age at first marriage, reasons for going into marriage at an early age (causes of child

marriage), nature of the challenges encountered, and nature of violence experienced during the marriage (if any). Other questions asked from the girl-child during the in-depth interview include: *How did the girl-child brides meet her husband? Were the husbands forced on them? Have they ever been traumatized by their husbands or their relations since marriage? Were they the only wife of their husband when they got married?* Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data for the study were sourced from in-depth interviews with the girl-child brides. Interviews were recorded on tapes, translated, transcribed, and arranged thematically.

This ethnographic study explains thinking systems, beliefs, and behaviour within time and space and accurately reflects "... the views and perspectives of the participants in the research" (LeCompte and Schensul 1999, 12). In simple terms, ethnography means writing about the culture of the people. It reflects what occurs in the natural settings to maintain "the position that human behaviour and how people construct and make meaning of their worlds and lives are highly variable and locally specific" (LeCompte and Schensul 1999, 1). Ethnography was used for this study as a technique "... to study and describe the functioning of cultures by studying social interactions and expressions between people and groups (Berg 1998 cited in Bordens and Abbott 2002, 199). In gathering data for this study, we adopted non-participant observation. Our field notes were first read

to identify the themes and research questions to extract major themes in our field records. The latter stage involved analyzing the data to code the systematic patterns in our notes. We did the content analysis, which analyzes written or spoken records for specific events or behavior. In conclusion, the findings were interpreted within the research questions' context.

Results

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The mean and median ages of participants at first marriage were 15.2 years and 15.5 years, respectively, with a minimum age of thirteen and a maximum of seventeen years old. Educational qualifications of participants revealed that a more significant number of participants (17) had received a formal education, and only three (3) had received Islamic education. However, the highest formal education received by participants was a Secondary School Certificate of Education (SSCE). Notably, one (1) participant was purposively selected from different marital statuses, which included currently married, separated, divorced, and widowed from the five wards selected for the study. This allowed for the richness of data to accommodate diversity and more inclusive responses. In all, 20 child brides participated in the study. Fourteen (14) participants were of Hausa ethnic extraction, and six (6) were of Fulani extraction. They all practice the Islamic religion. Analyses in this study were based on the primary data obtained via in-depth interviews conducted with twenty (20) girl-child brides in Kankara LGA. The question guide responded to the primary objectives of the study.

Research Objective 1: Causes of Girl-Child Marriage

The study investigated reasons participants were conscripted into marriage at an early age. Participants gave several reasons. The participants' responses below provided insights into sundry reasons for the practice of girl-child marriage in the study area.

"I was given out in marriage at an early age because it is our cultural belief that a girl is more respected when she marries early. Another reason is that we needed financial support in my family; so my father felt that my prospective husband could assist to provide my economic needs and help to improve my education if I marry him."(IDI_ A widow _ age 22_ married at 13 years_ JSS_ 1 co-wife_ Ward 1)

"...I wish to further my education to university level, but unfortunately after my secondary school, my father started talking about marriage which I opposed seriously. I ran away from the house for some time, and later returned back to still meet him still insisting that he wants me to marry so that I will not be promiscuous..." (IDI_ A divorced child bride_ age 21_ married at 17_ SSCE_ 1 co-wife Ward 2)

"My father has 4 wives and 22 children. The situation of the country made things so difficult for our parents to provide adequately for our needs. So, my father decided to give those of us who are girls out in marriage to reduce the economic burden on him."(IDI_ A widow_ age 27_ married at 16_ JSS _Ward 3)

"I was only 14 years old, I just finished my junior secondary school when my father told me about marriage, I tried to resist it and told him that I was not ready for marriage and still wanted to further my education, but my father would not listen to anything, he was only

interested that I get married because he wanted me to marry a cousin.”(IDI_ A currently married child bride_ age 17_ married at 14_JSS_2 co-wives_ Ward 4)

“My father insisted that I get married at an early age because he felt my bride price would be more attractive as a young bride than when I become of age. He also said that marrying early would serve as a protection for me and give me respect in the society.”(IDI_A separated bride_ age 25_ married at 13_ Islamic Education_ 2 co-wives_ Ward 5)

All these responses revealed that participant married against their consent and mostly for economic reasons. Another reason given by one of the participants was that her father took her into marriage to ensure she did not become promiscuous. Some were conscripted into forceful marriage to earn respect as married women in the community. Thus, child marriage exists within the context of meanings people attach to their actions. It is a consequence of a belief system rooted in the culture and religion of the people.

Research Objective 2: Challenges of Girl-Child Marriage

The study investigated the challenges of girl-child marriage, using three major indicators: 1) emotional challenges encountered, 2) social and psychological challenges, and 3) socio-economic challenges.

1. Emotional Challenges of Girl-Child Marriage

The majority of the girl brides were forced to accept the marriage arrangements; otherwise, they would have to face negative consequences. However, a few brides (4) accepted the marriage arrangement, often accepting the decision as an arrangement ordained by Allah. Participants revealed these findings during in-depth interviews.

The participant's responses to how they met their husbands revealed that their consent was not sought; instead, the marriage arrangement relied on their fathers' and husbands' decisions or choices.

"My husband was forced on me, I was not interested in the marriage arrangement because I wanted to go to school like my other friends, but my father frustrated me. He said I was not respecting his wishes and thus, was going to disown me if I do not respect his order. That was the reason I accepted to marry the man he already arranged for me."(IDI_A divorced bride_ aged 28_ married at 16_ JSS_ 1 co-wife_ Ward 2)

"I never knew him before my marriage, it was my father who made the arrangement, and I only accepted it to save my mother from being tormented by my father because he said I should leave his house for him together with my mother if I will not listen to his instruction. Since, I had nowhere to go, and I would not want him to frustrate my mother, I accepted the offer."(IDI_A currently married child bride_ age 20_ married at 14_ JSS_ 2 co-wives_ Ward 4)

"...I never knew that my parents had planned to marry me out without my consent. All of a sudden, I noticed that a man continue

bringing all sorts of gift items to my parents which I could not understand. One day, I heard my parents deliberating on how to tell me that they wanted to give me out in marriage, so I fled to my grandmother's house. They later came for me there, and brought me back home to plead with me, so I had no choice than to accept."(IDI_A separated child bride_ age 19 years_ married at 15_ JSS_ 1 co-wife_ Ward 5)

These responses highlighted a state of helplessness of the girl-child who were not allowed to decide when and whom to marry. Their husbands were imposed on them for reasons that neither protected nor advanced their interests. From the narratives of one of the girl-child in *Ward 5*, she experienced/endured emotional trauma because she was forced into a marriage without her consent. Some of them wanted to further their education before their fathers forced them into early marriage. This evokes empathy and sympathy for the girl-child who could not achieve her dream. This is also an indication that the institution of patriarchy is powerful in Northern Nigeria and that men overwhelmingly determine family issues.

Furthermore, findings revealed that while the majority (16) of the participants accepted the marriage arrangement grudgingly, very few (4) accepted the arrangement as the will of Allah. These are some of the responses of those who took their fates as the will of Allah:

"No, my husband was not forced on me. It was Allah who chose him for me. I was 13 years [old] and had finished my primary education

when he came to visit my father in our house because he was my father's friend. He told my father he would like to have one of his daughters for a wife. So, my father arranged me for him because I am the eldest among his daughters, and I believed it was Allah who arranged it and when my father introduced me to him, he asked me if I liked him and I said, 'yes' and my father gave me to him in marriage."(IDI_ A widow_ age 20_ married at 13 years_ primary education_ 2 co-wives_ Ward 1)

"I met my husband as designed by almighty Allah. He is my cousin and because my father wanted me to marry within the family circle, he and other members of the family arranged the Nikkai (wedding) for both of us, and I willingly accepted the arrangement as the will of Allah."(IDI_ A currently married bride_ aged 25_ married at 16_ SSCE_ Ward 3)

2. Social and Psychological Challenges of Girl-Child Marriage

Aside from facing challenges of forced marriage, girl-child marriage in Northern Nigeria also predisposes the girl-child to other challenges, such as vulnerability to social and psychological trauma. The narratives of some interviewees, especially those who were forced into marriage, revealed their ordeal:

"...My husband does not like seeing me associating with my friends and my family members, probably because he felt I might report how he was maltreating me to them, so he always discouraged me from welcoming them in our house when I was with him."(IDI_ A separated child bride_ age 25_ married at 17_ SSCE_ 1 co-wife_ Ward 2)

The narrative of this participant reveals the strategies that some abusive husbands employ to inflict social and psychological trauma on the girl-child in Northern Nigeria. Isolation from friends and family members is a key strategy abusive husbands deploy in treating their wives.

Another participant narrated the psychological/emotional trauma she experienced from her husband. This is stated in her response:

“After some years of marriage, my husband started bringing in different ladies to sleep with, in our matrimonial home and always threatens to divorce me and my co-wives if we complain. This behaviour affected me so much that I developed high blood pressure.”(IDI_A separated child bride_ age 20_ married at 13_ primary education_ 2 co-wives_ Ward 4)

Psychological abuse from the husband is another challenge a girl-child experiences due to early marriage. The participant's narrative reveals that the husband does not respect her and the other co-wives. This is an extreme form of emotional trauma for a woman to see her husband having sex with another woman in her matrimonial home. The act debases and demeans the worth of women as an essential part of the family.

A participant reveals how her husband uses economic power to deny her a decent living. This is depicted in her report:

“Actually, I never had any issue throughout my stay with my husband because I tried to manage the situation. But I was never a happy person since I got married to him because of his stinginess. He was very rich when I was with him but very stingy. He never took good care of me and my children, yet he would not allow me to work or do any form of business that can generate money for me, so I left him so that I could find a solution to myself because I cannot continue to suffer ...”(IDI_A divorced child bride_ age 29 years_ married at 17_ SSCE_ no co-wife_ Ward 5)

Depriving a woman of economic support by her husband is a form of emotional abuse, especially when the husband is not poor, and also denies her the right to work for survival. There is no way a woman who experiences this situation would be happy in her marriage.

Most brides have one or more co-wives, and some perceive the co-wives to be a great source(s) of challenges, as revealed by some participants:

“I was not the first wife of my husband. When I was married, the co-wives see me as an obstacle to having access to our husbands because they believe that being the youngest among them, our husband loves me more than them. So, whenever he is away from home, they try to frustrate me in one way or the other. They give me lots of stressful work to do even when I was pregnant, and warned me never to report to him or else they will frustrate me more.” (IDI_A currently married child bride_ age 19_ married at 14_ JSS_ 3 co-wives _Ward 1)

Another participant with co-wives reported a similar experience:

“Marrying too young is a very sad experience especially when you are given to a man who already has wives at home. My experience with my co-wives was a very bitter one. I was always given the most difficult household task to do including cooking of the food that will

be eaten by all the family members, yet when my co-wives are to share the food, my own is always the smallest. This bad treatment persisted until the day I decided to tell my husband, who later made a rule that we should always eat together to avoid any complaints of given one person the smallest portion of the food.”(IDI_A widow_ age 30 _married at 15_ Islamic education_ 3 co-wives_ Ward 3)

Participants expressed that they do not enjoy marriage because their husbands are married to more than a wife. Thus, polygyny presents a difficult context for the girl-child to have emotional fulfillment in her home. Most of the brides have one or more co-wives, and most of the participants with co-wives reported facing challenges with them. The institution of polygyny is widely practiced in Northern Nigerians as Islam encourages polygyny.

Domestic violence (such as physical assault) is a common challenge a girl-child experiences in marriage. This is not only peculiar to early or child marriage but also the current situation of the marriage institution in Nigeria. Domestic violence is common within adult marriage as well. This form of gender-based violence is usually perpetrated against the girl-child due to the circumstances that led to her marriage.

The following narrative captures the painful experience of one of the participants:

“...I never enjoyed the marriage since I married him, and we are always fighting each time I ask him to provide money for my needs

and the children's needs. He beats and calls me all sorts of names most often. I had always wanted him to divorce me, but he refused". (IDI_A currently married child bride_ age 21 years_ married at 15_ SSCE_ 3 co-wives_ Ward 3)

3. Socio-Economic Challenges of Girl-Child Marriage

Girl-child marriage deprives a girl of her economic power. Some participants identified economic abuse or marginalization as one core problems girl-child experiences in marriage because Northern Nigeria has a greater poverty incidence than Southern Nigeria and records higher discrimination against women. In addition, the inaccessibility to education also affects women who marry early in age because of culture and religion, thus, impacting their futures. The isolation of women from the workforce seems to be related to issues around the exclusion of the girl-child. The narratives of some participants captured their difficult situations:

"My greatest challenge is that my husband did not allow me to work or engage in any business activity when he was alive. I lost him eight years after my marriage, and things have become very difficult for me and the children." (IDI_A widow_ age 26_ married at 17_ SSCE_ Ward 5)

"One of the challenges I am going through presently is that things are not going on well for me and my children and I cannot assist financially because I have been a full-time housewife with no single source of income. Most of the time, I do send my children out to scavenge for food."

(IDI_A divorced early married bride_ age 24_ married at 16_ Islamic Education_ Ward 4)

“...Presently, I have a child who needs to be taken to the hospital for medical treatment but could not afford the bill because I am a petty trader whose income is not even sufficient for our feeding, and my husband has deserted me and my children for an unknown place for over two years now...” (IDI_A separated bride_ age 29_ married at 17_ SSCE_ Ward 1)

“I was into petty trading before I got divorced. After some time, I could no longer maintain the business because I have used all the business money to feed the children and my ex-husband is not sending anything to maintain the children. Now, we are finding it difficult to cope financially...”(IDI_ A divorced bride_ age 23_ married at 16_ SSCE_ 2 co-wives_ Ward 2)

Discussion

While Child Protection Bill endorsed in Northwest Nigeria defines a child as a person under the age of eighteen, the precedence accorded to Sharia law in Northwest Nigeria on issues of marriage concerning a Muslim child contradicts the Child Right Act (2003) provisions and constitutes a challenge to realising the objectives of the Child Rights Act. For instance, in Northern Nigeria, traditional and cultural practices are greatly influenced by religious beliefs and practices derived from Sharia law, and the age at which a girl-child could be thrown into early marriage is lower than eighteen years. For instance, it was argued by lawmakers in Jigawa State that it is very difficult to determine the age of a girl that is ready or developed for marriage; thus, because of the controversial nature of child marriage, it was expunged totally from the bill (Abubakar 2021a). Katsina

State also passed the Child protection bill that defines a child as someone below eighteen years but does not protect underage children from getting married (Oyelude 2021). Therefore, the domestication of CRA by various states in Northwest Nigeria will only protect the girl-child from other forms of abuse. It also implies that the CRA is deficient in terms of being unable to adequately protect the interests of the girl-child, irrespective of religious practices.

The study contributes to the existing literature on girl-child marriage in numerous ways. First, it is one of the few empirical studies of child marriage in African settings. Second, it is one of the few studies investigating girl-child marriage using three major indicators (emotional, social, psychological, and socio-economic challenges) to explore the challenges encountered by child brides in Northwest Nigeria.

Having examined girl brides' narratives, some significant findings emerged from this study. Causes of girl-child marriage include economic gains, protection of girls to retain chastity, conferring respect on girl-child, retaining family lineage, preservation of virginity, and socio-cultural values, among other factors. Some participants said they were given out in early marriage, expecting the bride price to be more attractive than they were told. This study strengthens an earlier study that asserts that in Asia and Africa, the importance of financial transactions at the time of marriage tends to push families to marry their daughters early (ICRW

2010). Some brides also expressed that they were given out in early marriage with the expectation that their prospective husbands could assist in supporting economic needs. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Hotchkiss et al. 2016; Osakinle and Tayo-Olajubutu 2017). However, the study argues that the practice of girl-child marriage constitutes a violation of human rights, encouraged by weak legal frameworks, particularly the inability of the Child Rights Act domesticated in northwest Nigeria.

The broader influence of patriarchy on girl-child marriage cannot be ignored in Northern Nigeria. This study revealed that fathers are the sole decision-makers in contracting out a girl-child for marriage. All interviewees said their fathers arranged their marriage. The dominant voice of men to impose their will on their daughters without their consent is rooted in values anchored and entrenched in patriarchy. Few interviewees accepted conscripted marriage as the “will of Allah,” as most of the girl-child interviewees objected to the marriage arrangement but grudgingly had to accept it to avoid being described as an outcast who rebels against cultural or religious precepts.

The girl-child experienced diverse challenges due to child marriage, ranging from emotional, social, and psychological challenges, and socioeconomic deprivations. Instructively, some interviewees accepted forced marriage arrangements to protect their mothers from their own fathers’ maltreatment. Girl-

children endured the emotional trauma of accommodating abuse before their marriage was nurtured. This finding reinforces the conclusion of earlier studies that emotional threat is used against a girl-child to concede to forceful marriages (Le Strat and Le Foll 2011; Nour 2009) and also corroborates with studies' conclusions on how the consent of a girl-child is usually not sought before she is given into marriage (Adekola et al. 2016; Erulkar and Bello 2007). This is evident as most interviewees said they were given into marriage by their fathers against their wishes. This suggests that the institution of patriarchy in Northern Nigeria has been sustained by a culture that promotes misogyny. The fact that most interviewees said it was the sole decision of their fathers to give them out in marriage against their wishes shows that the harmful traditional practice is rooted in a sexist ideology that denies women the freedom to make choices on reproductive and sexual matters. Significantly, the interviewees' narratives revealed that girl-child marriage is anchored in a cultural value that degrades and marginalizes women.

Further, the study reveals that girl-child marriage within a polygynous family structure experiences emotional trauma. She usually experiences acrimonious relationships with other wives who often think the girl-child "has come to snatch their husbands." Most participants had one or more co-wives reported as the source(s) of negative experiences within their matrimonial homes.

Matrimonial tensions threaten the girl-child's mental health and emotional stability as most brides are too young to defend themselves against unwholesome treatment from co-wives, who sometimes could be the age of their mothers. Polygyny is expected to be prevalent in Katsina State because it is one of the Islamic states in Nigeria, where Islam encourages and allows polygyny. This finding corroborates with previous studies describing Islam as the dominant religion in Katsina State (NDHS 2018; Erulkar and Bello 2007).

The attempt to justify child marriage is always given in cultural frames and justified by religion. Therefore, Weber's social action theory bears relevance in terms of explaining the girl-child phenomenon in Northern Nigeria. It connotes that social action or human behaviour can be understood through the actor's subjective interpretation of action or by interpreting human culture in its subjective motivation through the understanding of symbolic relationships. Social behavior is a product of cultural imperatives that drive cultural outcomes. In other words, people would only behave how their cultural universe expects them to behave. For example, the culture in Northern Nigeria is that a girl-child should be given out early so that she does not become wayward or lose her virginity.

Notably, girls who marry early operate within the context of asphyxiating social conditions predisposing them to be social and psychological challenges ranging from intimate partner violence, isolation from friends and families, and

sometimes frustration from co-wives. This study's findings regarding isolation from significant others are consistent with previous findings (Patoari 2020; World Vision International 2013; ICRW 2010). Isolation is a strategy that violent or abusive husbands employ to prevent their abused wives from escaping domestic violence or other forms of virulent intimate partner violence. UNICEF (2021a) and Ityavar and Inuwa (2006) had earlier concluded that regrets, divorce, and separation were common psychological challenges associated with the girl-child. This study reveals that girl-child bride often employs divorce and separation to get out of crushing, debilitating contexts that suffocate them in a marriage that does not give them social and psychological satisfaction.

In most cases, girl-child marriage affects the socio-economic status of the girl-child to maintain the home as mothers and wives. Consequently, most brides become an economic burden to themselves, their children, and society, especially when they lose their husbands or marry older men who may be unable to care for their economic needs. The study revealed that some participants had lost their husbands, leading to emotional trauma for them to cope with feeding their children. Even some girl-child brides who still have their husbands express difficulty sustaining themselves because their husbands do not allow them to work. The result of this study reinforces an earlier study (ICRW 2010) which opined that early-married girls are least likely to benefit from educational and

economic policies and programmes. These include primary and secondary school enrollment and expanded opportunities for credit or participation in the paid workforce. Adekola et al. (2016) also reported in a study on child marriage that avoidable poverty, limited educational attainment, and powerlessness of women are the three main effects of child marriage in Northern Nigeria which seriously affect women's entrepreneurial skills and overall development. The lack of access to these opportunities makes the girl-child vulnerable to abject poverty and consequently burdens her and society economically.

Thus, the practice of girl-child marriage in Northern Nigeria would hinder the goals and objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aimed at eradicating extreme poverty, hunger, poor health, gender inequality, indecent work, and lack of economic growth to engender an inclusive prosperous society.

Conclusion

The right to free and full consent to marriage is recognised by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and in many subsequent human rights documents that acknowledge that consent cannot be "free and full" when at least one of the partners involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner (United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, 1948),

therefore, girl-child marriage is not justifiable in the modern world as it constitutes an assault on the dignity of the girl-child to live a fulfilled and decent life.

Despite enacting the Child Right Act (2003), the girl-child is not adequately protected in Northwest Nigeria, where the practice of child marriage is high. The inadequacy stems from the weakness of the CRA, which delegates power to all State governments to pass CRA into law in their various States before girl-child marriage would be considered illegal in the State. Therefore, because the CRA is not implemented and adopted by all the States in Nigeria, it leaves children in States that have not signed the CRA vulnerable to girl-child marriage and other forms of child abuse. The study also identified the weakness inherent to the partial adoption or perverse implementation of the Child Rights Act by some States in Northwest Nigeria. Some States in Northwest Nigeria still allow a girl-child into a marriage below eighteen years old due to the supremacy given to Sharia law and other cultural beliefs of the people of Northern Nigeria. This makes it daunting to dissuade people from practicing girl-child marriage in Northern Nigeria.

The practice of girl-child marriage has persisted in Northwest Nigeria because it is driven by traditional gender norms, poverty, and cultural beliefs that legitimise the extenuating excuse that early marriage discourages girls from having premarital sex, pregnancy out of wedlock, losing virginity, and preventing promiscuity. The precedence accorded to religious beliefs and practices over the

Child Protection Bill makes it quite problematic to realise the objectives of the Child Rights Act. Thus, the preference for Sharia law in Northwest Nigeria constitutes a problem to the final adoption of the Child Rights Act in Northern Nigeria. It is essential to appreciate that the consent of a girl-child is not usually sought in marriage and, therefore, constitutes a violation of her freedom of choice.

It would be difficult to achieve gender equality and an inclusive society when the practice of girl-child marriage continues. Girl-child marriage obstructs the goals of sustainable development. Therefore, more proactive measures involving governmental agencies, civil society, and non-governmental organisations are needed to dissuade people from the girl-child marriage practice.

Recommendations

The Child Rights Act (2003), domesticated as the Child Protection Bill by States in the Northwest geo-political zone of Nigeria, is a corrupted version of the Child Rights Act. It is unsure if it can discourage the practice of girl-child marriage. Sharia law is the instrument for interpreting issues around Child Rights Act or girl-child marriage in Northern Nigeria. However, the amended Act had been assented to and passed into law by six States in Northwest Nigeria, except for Kano State, which is yet to pass the bill into law. It is essential to state that despite

recognizing that all six (6) Northwest states have adopted the child protection bill, no State in the Northwest defines a child as a person below eighteen years old except Jigawa state. However, the child protection bill does not protect Muslim children (who constitute the majority of the population of Northwest Nigeria) on issues of child marriage because it is believed to be conflicting with the culture and religion of the people of Northwest Nigeria. A child below eighteen can still be married off per Sharia law. In order to effectively address issues around girl-child marriage, the government, civil society, and non-governmental organisations should intensify efforts to enlighten people about the evils child marriage constitute to the girl-child. This can be achieved by:

1. Organising regular seminars to educate and counsel people in the community in Northern Nigeria about how girl-child marriage encumbers the growth and development of a girl-child. The seminars must aim to change the people's worldview to raise their voices against the practice.
2. There must be enlightenment of a girl-child to resist the attempt to marry her off to a marriage without her consent.
3. Since this study revealed that fathers are the significant determinants of the timing of marriage of a girl-child, there is the need for a sensitization programme directed to fathers on the harm their decision does to their daughters.

4. There must be a support programme to be anchored by (inter)national civil rights bodies for mothers who are ready to support their daughters' decision to further their education and are not ready for marriage. This support is essential for mothers because it is not unlikely that their husbands could persecute them for supporting their daughters to have an education instead of marriage.
5. Free and supportive educational programmes should be embarked on to strengthen girls and provide them with literacy to know their fundamental human rights. This will ensure that girls stay in school to learn and acquire educational skills that will make parents consider it worthy of postponing their marriage.
6. Vocational training for girls in various crafts will also help reduce girls' tendency to become economically dependent, even when they marry as adults.
7. Educating girls on the negative consequences of child marriage will help to discourage them from accepting it.

Funding: The study was not sponsored by any individual or corporate organisation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

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