

UNDERAGE MARRIAGE IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY: SOCIAL-ECONOMIC EFFECTS AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

In the Nigerian society, underage marriage today remains one of the most challenging phenomena that demands urgent attention. It is often deployed by some parents as a response to crisis considered to be the best possible means of protecting children from rape and other related vices. The study investigated the issue of underage marriage in the Nigerian society: The Social and Economic Effects and the Way Forward. The study adopted a descriptive survey approach. Findings from the research showed that, religion, illiteracy and poverty were the reasons why parents gave out their underage children in marriage. The study recommended that government, religious leaders and traditional rulers should be engaged through conventional, traditional and social media with a view to sensitizing the parents on the social and economic effects of underage marriage for the way forward.

Keywords: Underage, Early Marriage, Marriage, Social, Economic, Nigerian Society.

Introduction

Tens of millions of girls in the developing world are at risk of being forced to marry as part of the deeply entrenched underage marriage practice that significantly impedes progress on human rights, education, global health and economic development (International Centre for Research on Women, 2013). In developing countries, more than 40 percent of girls are married before the age of 18, and 14% before they are 15 years (Ford Foundation, 2013). As a result of this, Nigeria has once again attracted the World's attention on a topical issue of global interest. This time around, the attention of shifted from insurgency of the dreaded and uncompromising Boko Haram in the Northern Nigeria, corruption in the high places to a more sensitive issue of individual, family, state, National and global interest bothering on underage marriage.

The 1999 Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) in 2001, reports that in 26.5 percent couples, there is an age difference of 15 or more years between husband and wife. Equally, it showed the median age of marriage in South West and South East that was 20.2 years whilst those of the North West was 14.6 years and slightly higher in the North East with 15.6 years. It concluded that there was a large zonal variation in the mean age of marriage with females in the North marrying on an average of about five years earlier than those in the South.

Underage marriage is a violation of human rights in general and of girl's rights in particular. For both girls, early marriage has profound physical, emotional, intellectual and psychological impacts on their development. Despite national laws and international agreements forbidding underage marriage, this phenomenon still persists in many parts of Nigeria particularly in the North-Central, Nigeria, where there is a strong tie to traditional and religious practices. This paper views the issue of underage marriage in the Nigerian Society: The Social and Economic Effects and the Way forward. Against this background, it canvasses that the implications of this practice are with dimensions as will be analyzed.

Marriage is an old institution which came to being with creation of man. When God created man, He immediately created the institution of marriage by creating for him a woman to serve as partner (helper). Thus, marriage is an age long tradition in the history of mankind with it is a ceremony which ushers in the responsibility of procreation in the life of human beings. (Uyanga, 2023). Therefore, it is a means by which a man and woman come together to form a union for the purpose of procreation.

This is a cultural approved relationship of couples in which there is a cultural endorsement of sexual relationship between the married partners. It is further a system by which a society recognizes the right of a man and woman to live together and sexual relationship. It could be in the form of a traditional, church or court endorsement. (Uyanga, 2023). In the similar vein, marriage is the dovetailed of relationship between a man and women who have willingly, intentionally and voluntarily accepted to come and stay together for the prime purpose of procreation.

According to Elujekwute, Uwalaka and Akuezunkpa (2021) marriage i.e. considered to be a legal union of a man and a woman as husband and wife. It is a culturally approved relationship of a man and woman in which there is cultural endorsement of sexual intercourse between the married partners. Generally, that expectation that children will be born in the relationship between husband and wife make the beginning

of family creation. For Obiadi (2008) marriage is a system by which a society recognizes the right of a man and woman to live together and have stable sexual relationship. This can be categorically explained as a cultural, social and religious institution which gives a woman, conformed by some kind of ceremony or public to establish the union and sets it against irregular sexual relationship.

Concept of underage marriage: The term underage marriage is used to refer to both formal marriages and informal unions in which a girl lives with a partner as if marriage before the age of 18years (UNICEF, 2005). For UNIFPA (2006) underage marriage is also known as child marriage and is defined as any marriage carried out below the age of 18years; before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing. However, most of underage marriages are arranged and based on the consent of parents and often fail to ensure the best interest of the girl child.

Underage marriage is marriage before eighteen (18) years. It is that marriage in which at least a spouse, especially the girls are yet to attain the age of nineteen years of age. It is that marriage between a man and woman where one of the parties involved does not consent to the union and yet cannot for certain reasons stop it (Uyanga, 2023). Thus, underage marriage is a violation of human right. It has profound physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional effects on the Nigerian society.

Motives behind Underage Marriage in Nigeria

1. **Poverty:** According to International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2010) poverty is one of the major factors for underage marriage in Nigeria. This could be seen where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older person could serve as a family survival strategy and may even be seen as in her interest. A practice very common in the North, the bride's family may receive cattle from the groom or the groom's family as the bride price for the daughter.
2. **Economic Support:** This practice is also very common in the North-Central States of Nigeria. Here, the money received as a bride-price is used to train male children with the belief that they are the ones to take over the affairs of the family.
3. **Cultural Values:** This is also another factor for underage marriage in Nigeria. The traditional perception of a girl child moves some parents into giving their daughter out for marriage before the age of

eighteen years. In the Northern States, underage marriage is seen as a means of protection for the girl child. In some Southern States before the advent of Western Education, a girl child was seen as somebody without a value to the community except in the kitchen. She was never to be trained as that will result in waste of resources, thus, should be given out for marriage (Uyanga, 2020).

4. **Life-threatening Conflict and Persistent Insecurity:** This occurs when families live in unsafe regions, parents may genuinely believe that marrying their daughter under the age of eighteen years is the best way to protect them from danger. Furthermore, in many traditional societies in Nigeria, some parents in unsecured environment are under pressured to marry off their daughters as early as possible in an effort to prevent her from becoming sexually active before marriage. A woman who does so brings dishonor to her family and community.
5. **Religion:** In Nigeria, underage marriage is a phenomenon that is practiced predominantly among the Islamic adherents especially in the Northern region of the country. Islam has its own distinctive legal system, that is, Sharia law. Thus, Islamic jurists have tackled the issue of age of marriage based on the interpretations of the Quran. According to these jurists, a child “experiencing wet dream” or “experiencing (a) monthly course,” as stated in the Quran in relation to the age of marriage, indicates the age of maturity for males and females. Therefore, Islamic law does not fix any age for marriage; and this probably explains the higher incidence of marriage of minors or underage marriage in the North (Center for Islamic Studies, 2004).

Socio-Economic Effects of Underage Marriage in Nigeria

1. **Effect on Offspring:** According to World Health Organization (2006) underage marriage affects more than the young girls, the next generation is also at higher risk for illness and death. These deaths may be partly because the young mothers are unhealthy, immature, and lack access to social and reproductive services. Their babies are also at high risk of acquiring HIV at delivery and during breast feeding. Mothers who have had malaria are at increased risk for premature delivery, anemia and death.
2. **Children Delivering Children:** Birth resulting from underage marriages are said to be “too soon, too close, too many, or too late”.

United Nations Population Fund Campaign (2006). Girls aged 10 – 15 years are especially vulnerable because their pelvic bones are not ready for childbearing and delivery. Their risk for fistula is as high as 88%. United Nations Children Fund (1998). Once a fistula is formed, focal or urinary incontinence and personal nerve palsy may result and may lead to humiliation, ostracism and resultant depression. Unless the fistula is surgically repaired, these girls have limited chances of living a normal life and bearing children.

3. **Academic Development:** Many husbands are apprehensive in sending their wives to school on the fear of loss of control over them on their attainment of higher academic qualifications especially when the husband has not achieved that feat. This is very common in Nigeria, even in the South-South Region. The fear will be that she might become the boss of the house, thus, not subject to the husband. Uyanga (2023). According to United Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2012) this has made wives in their homes to be reduced in status to mere housewives. In addition to this, underage marriage has profound physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional impact, cutting of educational opportunities and chances of personal growth to educational development of female child.

The Way Forward

According to Clifton and Frost, 2011 (ICRW, 2011) Nigeria and International communities are increasingly recognizing underage marriage as a serious problem, both as a violation of girl's human rights and as a hindrance to key development outcomes. As more programmes, policies, donors and advocacy agencies pledge commitment, resources and action to address this problem, it becomes important to find model solutions to address the issue of underage marriage which has become a challenge in our Nigeria Society today. It is important to state here that the extent of underage marriage varies substantially between countries; the highest rates are found in West Africa and Nigeria in particularly, followed by South Asia, North Africa/Middle East and Latin America.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be said that in all of these, ending underage marriage requires a multifaceted approach focused on the girls, their families, the community and the government. Traditionally, appropriate

programs that provide families and communities with education and awareness which can stop underage marriage. Other sources for sustenance in other to spare and keep the lives of our children be sought, instead of giving out their children early for marriage.

Recommendations

Media campaigns, educational outreach programmes and government should take up the responsibility for stopping the practice of underage marriage. Health outreach programs for girls and boys should be put up on local, regional and national levels. Government should incorporate preventive and treatment programmes on reproductive health issues into their health service. There should be avenue for proper orientation on some major factors that Northern people might see as those that militate against girl-child education like culture to mention just this.

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