



Knowledge, Attitude and Practice of Traditional and Religious Leaders Towards Girl Child Marriage in Sokoto State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Early marriage, a marriage conducted before the age of 18, is now widely recognized to be deeply rooted in socio-cultural, economic and religious fabrics of society in which it prevails. This paper examines the knowledge, attitude and practice of the traditional and religious leaders towards girl child marriage in Sokoto State, Nigeria. The study relied heavily on the open-ended tradition of participatory and qualitative research tools, using specifically in-depth interviews (IDI). Interviews were conducted with a total of 48 respondents made up of 18 religious leaders and 30 traditional leaders. The study finds that there appears to be a marked difference between the attitude of rural and urban religious and traditional leaders towards early marriage. The urban religious leaders appear to have a more favorable attitude towards girl-child education which translates into delayed marriage until age 18. Enrolment and retention of girl child in formal school is the most neutral and non-controversial route to raising age at marriage.

Keywords: *Knowledge; Attitude; Traditional Leaders; Religious Leaders; Girl Child*

Introduction

Marriage is a social institution which provides a formal union for a man and a woman, by which they become husband and wife. The inauguration of marriage institution depends on people's own religions, traditions and cultural background, but what are generally regarded as marriage institution and they serve the same purpose among which are reproductive purposes, raising children and also to partake in the political and economic developmental activities of their own societies or communities. Generally, there is no clear specification concerning the age at which a girl should be married. There is, however, a drive towards a universal consensus recognizing 18 years of age as the minimum age of marriage. Accordingly, any marriage of a girl conducted before age 18 is deemed to be an exercise in early marriage.

The timing of first marriage is generally early in Africa but varies widely. In sub-Saharan Africa generally marriage occurs at much younger age than in North Africa. For example, 62 percent of women

between the ages of fifteen and nineteen in Niger, 50 percent of such women in Guinea. In contrast, few young women in Northern Africa and the Near East married as teenagers. Indeed, 99 percent of women under twenty in Libya and Tunisia, for example, have never married (Rashad et al. 1999).

Nowhere is the phenomenon of girl-child more expressed than among the Hausa – Fulani ethnic group in Northern Nigeria. According to NDHS (2008) the mean age of first marriage for women in the North-West geo-political zone is 14.6 years compared to 19.1 years in South West. A UNFPA (2004) survey indicated that 48 percent of girls in the North West were married by age 15, and by 18 years of age, 78 percent were already married. The marriage age of girls in the rural areas was given as low as 12 to 13 years while that of the boys was between 17 and 20 years (Khalid, 1997). A local survey indicated that 33.5% of the female population in Sokoto state have been married before 15 years with some 12.8% having had a least one pregnancy before that age (Shehu, 1999). This means that over one-third of school age girls in the area were either wives or mothers at a time they should have been in primary or junior secondary school.

Early marriage is now widely recognized as a violation of girl child's basic rights to health, education, and development. Traditional, religious and economic factors continue to fuel the practice of child marriage, despite its strong association with adverse reproductive health outcomes and the lack of education of girls.

Review of Related Literature

The Concept of Marriage

Marriage involves an organized and recognized union that persists beyond sexual satisfaction and underlies family life. It denotes the legitimate union of husband and wife and not merely their sex life. Marriage is publicly recognized more or less stable alliance between a man and a woman forming a conjugal unit. It recognizes sexual access and gives the children born a rightful place as members of a particular lineage or family in a society. Defining marriage can only be appreciated when such definitions take cognizance of a relatively stable society where kinship relationship are clearly enclosed in customs, traditions and family pattern in which marriage as the common regulation becomes firmly institutionalized (Sharpe, 1976).

Marriage has been described as a socially approved union of a man and woman for the purpose of sexual intercourse and procreation as well as raising children. Other reasons for marital union include economic, cultural, religious, social and emotional. In Nigeria for instance, especially among the poor, parents often marry off their children early (especially girls) on receive or anticipation of riches, reduced economic burden of taking care of the girl's needs and other responsibilities.

Early Marriage

Early marriage refers to any marriage of the child younger than 18 years old, as contained in the Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. While early marriage affects both sexes, girls are disproportionately affected as they are the majority of the victims in case of which their overall development is compromised, leaving them socially isolated with little education, skills and opportunities for employment or self-actualization. Early marriage is a union of couple without the requisite psychological development. It is a type contracted without experience from both the sides of husband and the wife. It puts young girls in a relationship that deprive them of their basic human rights and as such constitutes a violation of such rights (Bach, 1957).

According to Malhotra (2010) forced child marriage is a life-changing reality for many of the world's girls. Because some as young as 8 or 9 are forced to trade their childhoods for a life characterized by isolation, violence and illness. It is a practice rooted in tradition, customs and religion, and one that spans the globe, from Asia to Africa to the Americas. The number of girls who are married as children is astounding.

Nature/Prevalence of Early Marriage

Marriage of most girls at a young age has deeply rooted in traditions of most countries around the world. This is even where the law states, clearly, the illegality of marrying girls below certain age, largely due to lack of adequate knowledge and respect for the law (African Population Conference, 2007). Even though, the phenomenon of child marriage differs across societies and cultures but it mostly occurs when a young girl is married to an adult. While the practice is most common in sub-Saharan African and South Asia, child marriage occurs in all regions, including developed countries. Although its practice has decreased somewhat in recent decades, it remains common in although not only confined to, rural areas and among the most poverty stricken (UNFPA, 2005). Within many countries, there are regions with high ratio of girls married before the age of 15 (Population Council, 2011).

Marriage before the age of 18 is a reality for many young women. According to UNICEF'S (2001) estimates, over 64 million women aged 20-24 years were married or in union before the age of 18. In many parts of the world parents encourage the marriage of their daughters while they are still children in hopes that the marriage will benefit the children both financially and socially and relieve financial burdens on the family (Otoo-oryortey and Pobi, 2003). In actuality, child marriage is a violation of human rights compromising girl's development and often resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, with little education and poor vocational training reinforcing the gendered nature of poverty. (Otoo-oryortey and Pobi, 2003).

Globally, according to UNICEF, 36% of women aged 20-24 were married or in a union, forced or consensual, before they had reached 18. In the United States, child marriage is still permissible in some states, with parental or judicial consent. An estimated 14 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 give birth each year. They are twice more likely to die during pregnancy or child birth than women in their early 20s.

In developed countries 90 percent of birth among adolescents aged 15-19 occur in marriage. Girls are often pressured to have children soon after getting married, despite being children themselves. Early pregnancy is filled with risks. Young mothers face higher risks during pregnancies including complications such as heavy bleeding, fistula, anemia and eclampsia which contribute to higher mortality rates of both mother and child. At a young age, a girl has not developed fully and her body may strain under the effort of child birth, which can result in obstructed labour and obstetric fistula (Iyabode, 2010).

The age at which children are married also varies between countries but marriage before the age of 15 is not uncommon. And in some areas of West African and in Ethiopia girls are sometimes married as early as age 7 (UNFPA, 2005). For instance, a study by the National Committee on Harmful Traditional Practices of Ethiopia (NCTPE) estimated the proportion of girls who married before the age of 15 at 57 percent. The same study shows that the practice occurs in its more extreme forms in Northern Ethiopia, where girls are married as young as eight or nine years of age. In some instances, they are even pledged at birth (NCTPE, 2003).

Although early marriage is widely practiced in many parts of the country, rates in Amhara and Tigray region are much higher than the national average (82 percent in Amhara, 79 percent in Tigray, 64 percent in Benshangul, 64 percent in Gambella and 46 percent in Afar) (NCTPE, 2003). A study conducted in Amhara region also shows that 14 percent of women were married before age 10, 39 percent

before age 15, and 56 percent before age 18 (Population Council, 2004 Cited in Pathfinder International, 2006).

According to the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), 100 million girls will be married before the age of 18 in the coming decade. Most of them will be in sub-Saharan Africa and the Asian subcontinent (Nepal, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh). In Niger for example, 77% of women were married as children. In Bangladesh, 65% of women were married as children. Child marriage also occurs in parts of the Middle East, including Yemen and the rural Maghreb claiming millions of victims annually and hundreds of thousands of injuries or death resulting from abuse or complications from pregnancy and child birth.

In 1999 Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), reported that in 26.5 percent couples, there is an age difference of 15 or more years between husband and wife. It showed 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 as the median age of marriage in the South West and South East was 20.2 years whilst those of the North West was 14.6 years and slightly higher in the North East with 15.0 years.

Similarly, the 2003 NDHS in Nigeria revealed that the timing of marriage varies considerably by region and area of residence. The median age at marriage is lowest among girls in North West and North East regions, at 15.8 and 16.8 years respectively. Rural girls were more likely to marry early compared with urban girls; for example, in the North West, 29 percent of urban girls married by age 15 compared with 65 percent of their rural counterparts who are married at the same age. From these surveys, girls from the Northern part of Nigeria marry at a relatively younger age than their Southern age mates. Likewise rural girls were more likely to get married earlier than urban girls. This indicates the higher incidence of child marriage is higher in Northern Nigeria than other parts of the country (Iyabode, 2010).

Globally, the age at which girls are married is increasing. But the pace of increase is faster in some countries than in others. In Nigeria, particularly Northern Nigeria, for example, a high proportion of girls are still married during childhood or adolescent. Quoting a survey conducted by Population Council Nigeria office on HIV/AIDS and Early Marriage in Northern Nigeria, Ma'aji (undated) shows that the parentage of girls married by age of 15 is much higher in North than in South. For example, North West alone has 35.8%, North East has 24.9%, North Central has 7.7%, and while South-West has 0.76% South-South has 0.4%.

Furthermore, most of the marriages below 18 years of age in Northern Nigeria are arranged marriage, and most of the victims are less educated, they have no opportunities and skills for income generating activities, and above all lack adequate knowledge of reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and STIs issues. The survey also shows that over 50% of the marriages are at an average of 15 years and some of the risks associated with early marriage comprises of the risks to be HIV positive because of unprotected sex with spouse that are mostly older, maternal, infant mortality and pregnancy problems, susceptibility to health conditions such as VVF, RVF, and limited involvement in decision making processes and limited educational attainment (Ma'aji, Undated)

Another study by UNICEF in six West African countries showed that 44 percent of 20-24 year old women in Niger were married under the age of 15. The need to follow tradition, reinforce ties among or between communities, and protect girls from out-of-wedlock pregnancy was the main reasons given. In the communities studied, all decisions on the timing of marriage and the choice of spouse are made by the fathers (UNICEF, 2001).

According to UNICEF, in 2007 more than 60 million girls aged 20-24 worldwide had married before their 18th birthday. If current trends continue, an additional 100 million girls – or 25,000-30,000

girls every day -- will become child brides over the next decade. While boys are subjected to early marriage, most child marriages involve girls. For instance, in Mali the ratio of girls ages 15-19 who were married as children compared to boys, is 72:1, and in El Salvador it is six to one. Similarly, an International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) review shows that rates of child marriage are highest in parts of Africa, and in South Asia, where one-half to three-fourths of girls are married before age 18. Niger, Mali and Chad have the highest rates of forced child marriage in the world, ranging from 71 percent to 77 percent. But because of the large populations of countries such as India and Bangladesh, the greatest number of child brides lives in South Asia, where 46 percent of all marriages take place before the girl is 18. (Malhotra, 2010).

Methodology and Process

The study relied heavily on the open-ended tradition of participatory and qualitative research tools, using specifically in-depth interviews (IDI). A one-day training orientation workshop facilitated by the Principal Investigator was organized for the four -member team of research assistants on the research methodology and tools as well as key principles of participatory research using IDI. A study guide to explore theme of the research, especially the cultural sensitivity of early marriage issues, was also discussed at the orientation with the view to conceptualizing it to the socio-economic and cultural realities of Sokoto State. A short trial was undertaken as part of the workshop. The key informants to be interviewed across the state will include traditional rulers, notable Muslim scholars, and academicians with specialization in Arabic and Islamic Studies in each location. They are expected to share their experiences, express opinions on the plight of girl-child in marriage and make useful suggestions.

Interviews were conducted with a total of 48 respondents made up of 18 religious leaders and 30 traditional leaders in 9 Local Government Areas across the **three** Senatorial Districts of the state. In each of the selected 9 LGAs, respondents will be purposively selected taking into cognizance the rural/urban as well as sectarian divide of (especially the *ulema*) population.

Findings

Early marriage is widely practiced in the state. A girl should, ideally, be married at the onset of menarche (menstrual period from the age of 12) and before her sexual potential is fully developed. The research revealed that age at marriage differs in terms of gender and rural-urban divide of the society. For girls in the rural areas, marriage age was given as 12-15 years, while that of boys was between 17 and 20 years.

Matrix 1: Views on the Prevalence of Early Marriage	
Religious Scholars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early marriage is still prevalent • The stage of menarche (usually defined by onset of menstruation) signifies readiness for marital union. • Girls' acquisition of some level of education (especially secondary) is important for some urban scholars. • Early pregnancy may lead to adverse outcomes such as Vesico-Vagina Fistula
Traditional Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early marriage is still practice across the communities • It is customary for girls to marry at a very young age (especially from 12 years old)
Inferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age at marriage differs in terms of gender and rural-urban divide of the society. • There is a general submission that a girl should be married before the age of 18. • It is evident many of the respondents have daughters already married before the age of 18. • Urban religious leaders appear to have a more favorable attitude towards girl-child

education.

- Many of the urban scholars are aware of the Child Act Rights

Source: Qualitative Data

‘For a girl, she is supposed to get married from the age 13 years. For a boy, he is supposed to get married at the age of 20 to 25 years’ (*Traditional Ruler, Rural*).

You know if a girl is matured, you will know it is as soon as you see her. For instance she will develop breast and her body will expand in size. For me a girl should get married at least at the age 13 or 14 because at that time even if she has sex with her husband and get pregnant, she will not face problem... Our tradition here is that as soon as a girl is matured we will quickly get her married (*Traditional Ruler, Rural*).

‘You see, as soon as a girl start menstruation she is supposed to get married’ (Islamic Scholar, Rural).

In the urban areas girls got married at the age of 14-18 years.

Girl’s age at marriage should be from 15 to 16 years. So girls marry earlier than boys (Islamic Scholar, Rural).

Yes, in my community girls are married at the age of 15, 16 and 17 (*Traditional ruler, Urban*).

Even now we use to marry off our daughters early. A girl who is up to 14 to 15 years, we can marry her off. Even I, two of my daughters got married at the age of 14 years because to me they are matured. (Islamic Scholar, Rural)

When asked about the age at which they married out their female wards, there was a marked difference between the rural and urban respondents:

Two of my daughters got married and one of them got married at the age of 13 years and the other one at the age of 14 years because she even went to secondary school (Islamic Scholar, Rural).

This contrast sharply with the urban religious leader who take cover with education to delay his daughters’ wedding:

‘Yes, I allowed them to finish secondary school, so they reach the age of 18 years and above. Though they were proposed earlier, but I insisted that they must be allowed to finish secondary school’ (Islamic Scholar, Male, Urban).

Another urban scholar responded thus:

‘I cannot give my daughter out for marriage until she acquire adequate and good quality Islamic and western education, at least up to secondary school level’ (Islamic Scholar, Male, Urban).

The general explanation given for variations in the age at marriage for boys and girls was that girls mature into puberty much early and that it is ‘not safe’ to keep them unmarried if there are suitors.

You know there are problems if you have a daughter and you refuse to get her married, she can bring something shameful to the family. No matter how watchful you are, if your daughter is matured she will always get ways to escape from your sight (*Traditional Ruler, Rural*).

Girls get matured faster than the boys. A boy can reach up to 17 years before he matures but a girl can get matured even at 12 years. (Islamic Scholar, Male, Rural).

There was a girl we gave out for marriage at the age of 12 years, she got pregnant at the age of 13 years and she delivered safely. She now has many children (Islamic Scholar, Rural).

There appears to be a marked difference between the attitude of rural and urban religious and traditional leaders towards early marriage. The urban religious leaders appear to have a more favourable attitude towards girl-child education which translates into delayed marriage until age 18. When asked about the advantages and disadvantages of early marriage, below are some of the responses of urban-based religious leaders:

Honestly, child marriage does not have any benefit more especially if the girl is too young to know about herself and her religion. It is not good at all. (Islamic Scholar, Urban)

Is better to allow the girl acquire adequate knowledge about marriage life (Islamic Scholar, Urban).

Another respondent states that:

Honestly, there are problems associated with child marriage. Firstly, if a girl is too young that she did not acquire adequate religious knowledge, then she will be having problems with her husband. Secondly early pregnancy is dangerous for young girls because it causes VVF, more especially, considering our current economic situation (Islamic Scholar, Urban).

Yes, I allowed them to finish secondary school, so they reach the age of 18 years and above. Though they were proposed earlier, but I insisted that they must be allowed to finish secondary school (Islamic Scholar, Male, Urban).

I cannot give my daughter out for marriage until she acquires adequate and qualitative Islamic education and western education at least to secondary school level (Islamic Scholar, Male, Urban).

Discussion

The research revealed that age at marriage differs in terms of gender and rural/urban divide of the society. For girls in the rural areas, marriage age was given as 12-16 years, while that of boys was between 17 and 20 years. In the urban areas girls got married at the age of 14-18 years, while marriage age for boys was given as 20 to 25 years.

The general explanation given for variations in the age at marriage for boys and girls was that girls mature into puberty much early and it is “not safe” to keep her unmarried if she has a suitor. Underlying this attitude is the fear of possible pregnancy outside wedlock. Unwanted pregnancies are considered to be the result of parental irresponsibility. Thus, the implication for a family of such development can be adverse. It will certainly lose its honour and respect in the eyes of the community, for a family is accorded honour on the basis of its ability to control, manage and bring up its members according to the norms and standards of the community. There are many reasons why girls are married early. One reason occurs when a society define girls and women solely as wives and mothers. In this social setting it may be that getting married and having children is the only means for young girls to secure identity and status in families as adults in society. Also, in Sokoto State, as in many cultures around the world, a woman’s sexuality is out of her control and is in the hands of male relatives. Because of this, the decision to marry and to initiate sexual activity is often not a young woman’s but that of the family members, whose honour is defined in terms of whether or not she is chaste before she marries. Again, economic factors play a role in early marriage. In families that are very poor, a daughter may be seen as an economic burden that must be shed through marriage as early as possible.

The respondents are quite familiar with the adverse consequences of early marriage: early marriage contributes to a series of negative consequences both for young girls and the societies in which they live. Young married girls are at greater risk of reproductive morbidity and mortality. The timing of early marriage almost always disrupts girl's education, reducing their opportunities for future financial independence through work. Young women are often married to men who are much older, and find themselves in new homes with greater responsibilities, without much autonomy and decision-making power, and unable to negotiate sexual experience within marriage. Conditions are thus set for girls-child marriage with all its attendant negative social consequences and health hazards. Yet neither the traditional nor the religious leaders are ready to critique the practice.

It was observed that most Muslim leaders, especially the urban-based, do not subscribe to early marriage as they allow their daughters to at least complete secondary education, yet they see themselves as morally and ethically bound to defend early marriage particularly if they perceive assault against it from non-Muslim source.

The trend today is that of universalizing culture and civilization. Many of these issues are alien to our own culture, values or civilization. They are exported from people who have different culture or values from us. As Muslims, our values and civilizations are clearly guided by the Qur'an. We don't have to be apologetic or compromise our values because of such attack on our belief, but be proud of what we believe in.' (Islamic Scholar, Urban)

Recommendations

Enrolment and retention of girl child in formal school is the most neutral and non-controversial route to rising age at marriage. Government should, therefore, make education free and compulsory at the primary and secondary level to discourage early marriage.

There is need for constant and sustainable effort to dialogue with the religious and traditional leaders especially in the rural areas on how best to solve the challenge of enrolment and retention of girls in schools.

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