

THE INJUSTICE OF EARLY MARRIAGE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GIRL CHILD IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The article critically examined the socio-economic effects of early marriage on the girl-child in Nigeria, using Delta State as a case study with which to generalize on the country because of similarities in the practice. Early marriage is not new among many ethnic groups of the world particularly in Nigeria. However, the practice is the product of tradition, culture and religion. The study which utilized the in-depth and key informant interviews and group focus discussions revealed that child marriage is a common feature in the communities studied with its attendant negative reverberations on the girl-child and society. It further showed that it may likely not discontinue despite conventions against it. The study however recommended intervention strategies to equip the girls in all ramifications to free them from the burden of forced marriages and guarantee their future wellbeing.

Keywords: *Betrothal, Discrimination, Girl-child, Interventions, Practices, Rights, Status*

I. Introduction

Women constitute about 50% of the Nigerian population and over 70% of them are rural dwellers. Otite and Ogionwo (2006) contended that women studies in Nigeria can hardly ignore the factors of culture and social values with special reference to gender, age and assigned roles. These scholars averred that their evaluation is still culture-bound when related to men in matters of wealth, power and prestige under the prevailing patriarchal environment in Nigeria. According to Utulu (2001), Otu et al (2012); Ugal (2013) and Okoh, (2004)], discriminative ideas have recently become an area of concern and discussion in society. Yet these scholars observed that these practices have continued to persist despite mounted campaign and legislations. Utulu (2001), however stressed that they have dire repercussions on the psychological and educational development of the female folks. Some of these practices she further asserted have persisted because of the unequal power stabilization between the sexes and the

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disposition to manipulate the sexuality of the women. Otite (2006) noted that under this culturally regulated condition, obstacles are informally and unwittingly placed on the way of women's active involvement in world-wide women's and feminist movements and the development of associated theories.

In Nigeria, the girl-child is conditioned very early in life to house chores and related activities. Perhaps, this is why it is generally believed that the girl's place is culturally assumed to be in the kitchen. She is expected to be seen and not heard. Utulu (2001) and Otite (2006) observed that this has greatly affected the girl self-concept and self-esteem and has also made it impossible for the girl-child to challenge these cultural practices even when they have undesirable results on her. The consequences of these cultural practices in extreme cases have adverse health challenges and often times, death. In the Southern part of Nigeria, it is the male child who perpetuates the lineage's concerns and continuity of life. He is the one who retains and protects the name and property of his father's family from his generation to the future. This explains in such places why a man who has only daughters feels very sad. According to Otite (2006), instead of sending females to school, some men in this region give them out in marriage and utilizing the money realized from bride wealth, for the training of their male children.

The children particularly the girl-child represents the future and is described as the leader of tomorrow. This futuristic ideation according to Jike (2004) and its implications for institutional continuity is the main reason, the girl-child must be protected now so that we can realize their full potentials in the future. From the foregoing, this article is intended to shed more light on this inhibitive ways of life in Nigeria.

II. Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

In whatever context, child marriage is considered; it infringes on human rights apart from being an obstacle to wellbeing and is grounded on the evil effects of inequality in society. It is predicated too on the poor evaluation of the girls and women, which enhances the perpetuation of the act and the acceptability of child marriage (UNICEF, 2005 & UNIFPA, 2006). Augo (1991; Molokwu 2000; UN 1989; WHO, 1989), conceptualized early marriage as either marriage of a matured girl/boy or marriage of an adolescent girl to a matured man or vice-versa at teenage ages.

Most of these definitions are products of various conventions, treaties and international agreements not excluding the Conventions on the Rights of the child, abolishing discriminations against women. UNICEF (2014a) gave a gory picture of the situation by asserting that if the current trends continue, over 40 million girls will marry early in the coming decade and nearly 40,000 per day. Early childhood marriage is very common in Nigeria, while childbearing begins early with significant population of women becoming mothers before attaining 20 years (NPC, 2000). The literature on early marriage suggests difficulties in ascertaining the figure on early marriages due to poor

documentations in Nigeria. This necessitates a reliance on small-scale studies and incomplete descriptive reports which indicate that it is widespread (<http://www.unicef.org>). The problems associated with getting details on related statistics do not exist correspondingly with the identification of places with occurrences. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are areas where child marriages are most common.

Early marriage practice according to Bammeke (2004), can be traced within the historical beginning of many traditional communities in Nigeria, led by beliefs and values which are socially passed on, norms of union and kinship relations are sustained despite changing realities of the present. Among communities in Nigeria, particularly in Edo State, marriage by betrothal, does not take cognizance of the ages of the intended bride and groom, as even a fetus could be betrothed. In communities where betrothal is practiced, a girl was made to understand as she grew up, that she had been promised or given in marriage to a family. To the child, it is normal and hardly asked or questioned the practice since the child had been socialized into it as an aspect of their culture (Haruna, 2003). NDHS (1990) showed that most women in Nigeria were married at 17 years while the median age varied. Similarly, NDHS (1992) observed that in the northern states of Nigeria, 47% of women aged between 20 and 24 got into wedlock under 15 years and 87% before 18 while 53% had also given birth to children before 18 years (Locoh, 2000).

Substantial research findings pertaining to the factors that provoked teenage marriages, particularly the consequences, have been carried out (See Jain and Kurz, 2007; Klugman et al, 2014; Malhotra et al 2011; Lloyd, 2005; Santhya, Haberland and Singh, 2006; UNICEF, 2005; UNFPA, 2012; UNICEF, 2014b;). The reviews suggest paucity of information on the issues raised and canvassed here, from the African context because of cultural variance. This perhaps explains why the practice persists in Africa; as they see no contradiction but a perfect blend with their culture.

Theoretical Framework: Radical Feminism

The guiding framework for this article is feminism. It concerns the study of human relationship at the gender level and a pivot for new kind of narratives concerning human society in recognition of the power structure and how this makes for equity in social contact for both sexes in male-dominated African societies, particularly Nigeria. As Awe (2004) rightly noted, “feminism is the creation of space for women and the establishment of a level playing ground to enable the women realize their potentials. Otite and Ogionwo (2006), defined feminism generally as women’s struggle to defend their rights and privileges with its body of knowledge. Feminism values women as women, as women in themselves and not as objects of men’s sexual satisfaction or society’s children bearers.

Over the years, feminism has developed into various groups and applications that overlap, such as integral feminists, radical feminists, liberal feminists, literary feminists and into various other disciplines. The radical feminism perspective deals with the exploitation of women, blaming this phenomenon on men who are also regarded as the beneficiaries of women's work. Women are critical components of the economy and bear children to replenish society's human capital but have restricted access to political and economic power. Women are ruled and oppressed by men as reflected in this article which needs women revolutionary activities to offset.

Olujinmi (2009) sees feminism therefore, as transformational because it involves a vision of a future society and sees social, political and economic change as necessary for that vision to be realized. Feminism's political perspective is pro-women and favor changes that will impress their collective status, living conditions, opportunity, power and self-esteem. In summary, female emancipation, in whatever name it is called anywhere, focuses on female's efforts towards their liberation and appropriate integration in all spheres of human endeavor. Bryce (1988:11), affirms that:

“Feminism projects a total transformation of society and distributions of power, which will eradicate permanently, all divisions into dominated and dominate. It is beyond either a search for mere social equality within the status quo or individual fulfillment”.

III. Methodology

The data feeding this article was sourced from Delta State of Nigeria through in-depth and key informant interviews besides employing group focus discussions. Delta State with 25 local government areas is a miniature Nigeria with most communities of the various major and minor ethnic groups in Nigeria, residing across the study area. The state is largely rural with few urban centers. Key informants such as traditional rulers, opinion leaders, Christian and Muslim clergies, widows, married women and divorcees provided the desired information. A sample of 350 respondents was selected through simple random and systematic sampling techniques to ensure adequate representations of the various elements indicated.

IV. Results/Findings

The research revealed that under aged and imposed marriages was a common feature in all the communities as indicated by 61% responses and 52% reports of key informants. However, the problem was predominant among the Hausa, Nupe, Fulani, Edo, Ibo, Calabar and minimally amongst the Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Isoko and the Yoruba communities residing in the area. Muslims were more in the habit of child marriage because of religious and cultural approval. This was indicated by 74.2% of individual respondents and 62.4% of key informants while 20% and 17% respectively reported the practice to be common among Christians, the uneducated, local indigenes and Moslems.

The affirmation to the practice among traditionalists was by only 3.4% and 5% respectively. 70.5% affirmed that it was common among all social classes while 61.6% of individual respondents and key informants responded in the affirmative. 25.5% and 15.2% reported the prevalence among the poor while 10.5% and 0.6% respectively reported that the practice was more by the rich because of their wealth and influence.

Mean scores and standard deviation analysis on the causes, revealed that poverty of parents was responsible for child marriage, the mean score of 3.14 is greater than the benchmark of 2.60. Fear of losing virginity with mean score of 2.78, protection from sexual promiscuity with mean score of 2.86 while Moslem religion which approves child marriage had a mean score of 2.95, 2.67 mean score for high bride price as cause of early marriage, mean score of 2.68 was for economic security and 2.75 mean score for unwanted pregnancy. Similarly, 1.82 mean score for Christian religious reason and 1.82 mean score for political promotion which was not a factor for child marriage. This was because the two mean scores for political promotion and Christian religious practice were below the benchmark of 2.60.

V. Discussion

The study confirmed existing literature that under aged and compelled marriages exist in Nigeria with attendant problems but not restricted to Nigeria though practiced by many ethnic groups around the world. However, it has contributed far reaching negative consequences both on the girls and the society where they persist (UNICEF, 2010). The girl's rights are not only trampled upon but also have profound physical effects, retardation in personal development and the deprivation of education and employment chances. (UNICEF, 2005 & UNIFPA, 2006). Similarly, Erulkar and Bello, 2007 & Rai, 2010), observed that every culture and society has some basic norms and believes that guide its people. In Nigeria, according to these scholars, specifically in Northern Nigeria, (Hausa-Fulani dominated), permitted childhood marriages to preserve virginity, avoid pre-marital sexual activities and maintain cherished norms and values. In most cases, they forgot the side effects it had on the girl-child and their community development, largely due to ignorance.

Adedokun, et al. (2012) and Bala (2003), contended that girl-child marriage impacted negatively on the victims themselves with attendant effects on offspring, families and mankind. Health care costs, population pressure, loss of opportunities of individual upliftment are but a few of the burden that society carries because of the incidence of teenage pregnancies. The arrangement of girl-child marriage tends to undermine concerted international efforts at fighting poverty in the less developed countries of the world. Forward (2008) stressed that the occurrence is more rampant in the rural and often times poor communities where unprotected girls are seen as economic burden and likely married off to alleviate expenses on the family demands. The educational and economic openings to these girls are few and are married out to protect them and the economic wellbeing of the family. The bride price or wealth paid in exchange for the bride's labour and fertility is a vital resource for greater wealth and survival of the

family and therefore, may be the incentives for early marriage arrangements by parents (Lloyd, 2005), Nour; 2009; Asad, 2013, Bearala, 2006; Soroya, 2006; Boyden 2012, Showdhury, 2004), while Giyan (2009) argued that religious practices, such as Islam encouraged it and the parents resort to this for fear of their daughter being pregnant out of wedlock and the available option, is early marriage (Nour, 2006). These facts are amply tested in the study as indicated in the results and findings.

Further confirming these results and findings, Abdallah (2011) in a similar research, observed that in Nigeria the evil disposition of pushing children into illegal marriages is deeply rooted in tradition, culture and religion and concluded that the country is identified with one of the highest figures of child marriage globally, with estimated 42% percent of girls married before 18. In addition, it is also practiced across all the geo-political zones of the nation with the northern axis having the highest rates. Adedokun et al. (2012) in their study of child mothers in Gombe state, Nigeria, examined the health of women during pregnancy, childbirth and postnatal periods and implications for marriages. Based on reports from 200 respondents; mothers between 15-24years, the study revealed that over 60% had primary education, 50% married far between 5-9 and 70% had complications during childbirth.

While Bala (2003) further confirmed the existing literature on the status of the girl-child in Northern Nigeria. The perceived expectations from the father and later, the husband in the life of the child wife emphasized her dependence status. As the study showed, she has no right to choose a spouse. According to a study conducted by Awogbade and Alti-Mu'azu (2000), in Kano and Kaduna, both in northern Nigeria a significant number of respondents acknowledged the Islamic injunction; which permits a father to marry out his girl-child, provided it is her first marriage. Since fathers have no decision-making power over their daughters' subsequent marriages, many girl-child became young divorcees, relocated to urban centers and became commercial sex workers.

Early marriage is likely to persist considering the findings of this study despite the obvious consequences. There is still a tremendous support for the girl-child marriage because it is a culture –bound practice as they see no contradiction but a perfect blend with their culture and tradition. Similarly, the concerted efforts and clarion calls for the liberation of these vulnerable child wives from the strong grips of dehumanization and the attendant relegation to a vulnerable position, has persisted and has continued to be resisted by obnoxious traditional beliefs, despite the United Nations Declaration (UNICEF, 2001) on the inalienable rights of these unfortunate children.

VI. Implication for Research and Practice

What can be done to eliminate this ugly trend? Child marriage interventions and review shows that some reform of legal and policy framework is urgent but insufficient path to the answer of girl-child marriage. As

succinctly observed by Malhotra et al. (2011), interventions are most potent when they; equip the girls with desired information, skills, support networks, access to quality formal education and the offer of economic support and incentives for the families and girls to sustain their schooling and of course, marry later. Another key component of intervention with proven success is the education and mobilization of community members and parents in opposition to the menace of girl-child marriage. In addition, dialogue with religious and significant individuals and groups is required to redefine the idea of girls' transition to adulthood without marriage. These religious dignitaries and leaders are known to wield great influence on their subjects.

The girl child ought not to be alienated from participation in the processes of decision-making about issues affecting her life and those facing household family and the community. Klumman et al. (2014) asserted that a girl has voice and agency when she can take decisions about her future and put in motion her inspirations and projections without the repercussions of retributions or violence. Child marriage positions the girl under the subjugation of the husband and in-laws who restrict and trample on her strength to air opinion and chart her own plans to achieve her destiny. As the absence of empowerment and autonomy in taking decision has a significant influence on economic decisions. When girls engage in motherhood too early, their lives are altered, which means, they are cut-off from knowledge path and the necessary life tools to navigate through existence. They are subsequently detached from social network and support structure that schools provide.

VII. Conclusion

Early marriage still thrives in Nigeria despite the various conventions against the practice and it is predicated on the ways of life of the people. Although reasons often given for the persistence of girl-child marriage practice may appear attractive on the face value however, the physical, health and psychological out-come quite out way the benefits; and can constitute a huge price. Early marriage is intrinsically associated with; school dropout syndrome, alienation from participation in decision making on matters affecting their lives, high levels of violence and abuse, social isolation, exposure to obstetric fistula due to prolonged delivery, loss of opportunity for personal development and wellbeing. The practice also threatens global efforts at fighting poverty and allied challenges in the developing countries.

Engaging critical stakeholders with a view to examining holistically the immediate and remote causes and implications of early marriage no doubt will contribute immensely in shoring up supports for adequate policy formulations geared towards curbing this practice. Concerted efforts driven towards implementing policies and sanctions is incumbent on the government and her statutory agencies, non- governmental organizations, civil society and human rights organizations; to restore the dignity of those already married and ensure that all intervention measures are available to married and unmarried girls in Nigeria.

Marriage is often marked with joy and calls for celebrations however; girl-child involvement in marriage is a sad commentary on the marriage institution which does not elicit the jubilation and merriments of the populace. It is obvious that compelling a husband on a child, signals that the girl's life is cut short and fundamental rights are compromised. Lack of enforcement renders laws prohibiting early marriages ineffective. Through media campaigns and educational outreach programmes, government should take responsibility for stopping the practice.

Future Research

Intervention measures and legal and policy framework are very crucial in stemming the tide of early marriages but can only be meaningful if such intervention strategies are tailored towards empowering the girls and the vulnerable in society. Future research therefore should be geared towards empowering girls with information, skills, support networks, accessibility enhancement for formal learning, economic support and palliatives for families to keep girls in school and marry later.

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