

Research article

REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION AND GIRL-CHILD MARRIAGE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

In a number of societies in Africa, gender discrimination is prevalent. Women are subjected to genital mutilations, sexual harassment and exploitation; relegated primarily to domestic chores, have little or no representation in politics and suffer total neglect. These have produced profound impact on the women with dire consequences. The most highlighted of all these gender based violence is the issue of girl-child marriage. In spite of Nigeria being a signatory to the Convention on Rights of the child, the predominant practice in Northern Nigeria negates this convention. More recently is the position adopted by some Nigerian Senators at the Constitutional amendment debate where they voted to keep the Constitutional clause that ensured that married underage girls are deemed to be adults. This indirectly legalises child marriage and contradicts yet another provision of the constitution which put the age of majority at 18. The implication of this is that whilst perpetrators are given constitutional protection, the problems of girl-child all over the country are compounded. This paper attempt to bring to fore, the nexus between education and girl child marriage including how the latter impact on the wellbeing of the society.

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Key words: Girl-Child Marriage, Education, Constitution, Gender Discrimination.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, like other patriarchal societies women are disadvantaged by their assigned gender roles that subordinate them to men. As a result women and girls still struggle to be seen in all spheres of life. This has its root in the preferential treatment parents give the male child over the female child in education, a prevalent phenomenon in Northern Nigeria. The girl child is considered of a marriageable age upon attainment of puberty and more often than not forced into marriage or have marriages arranged on their behalf while being denied education. This no doubt, constitutes gross abuse of the rights of the girl child. The Child Rights Act, passed in 2003 put the age of marriage at 18 years for girls. In spite of the passage of this Act, compliance at the State level appears lackluster owing to the complicated legal systems in the country which affords some measures of variance for the States. Thus, the interpretation of the Act has come within the prism of civil, customary and Islamic laws. This plurality was reflected in the recent constitutional amendment debate by the Senate where Senator Ahmad Sani Yerima of Zamfara West pushed for a second vote on the matter arguing that under Islamic law, a woman is of age once she is married and that Nigeria cannot legislate on marriages under Islamic law and customary law including matrimonial causes.

The core north has a predominately Muslim population and its long history of contact with Islam shaped its socio-economic and political framework long before colonization by the British. Therefore the introduction of Christianity, western education and colonial state structures by missionaries and colonialists threatened an established social order that derived legitimacy from its linkages with Islam. Formal education has therefore had to contend with the persistent religious parallel in the form of Islamic schools. A continuous concern in the discourse on education in Northern Nigeria has been how to mitigate the influence of Islamic schools on popular participation in state-sponsored education programmes (Nasir Mohammed Baba 2012:33). Many children in Northern Nigeria attending only Qur'anic schools where they are taught to memorize and recite the Koran, but not the numeracy, literacy and life skills needed to function effectively in today's world. Of the 10.5 million children in the country who are out of school, 60 per cent are in the North and most of them are girls. According to UNICEF field reports from Bauchi State, parents are still resistant in sending their children particularly girls to school. This in part is due to mistrust of what is considered Western education but also a low perception of the value of education and the often poor quality of teaching (UNICEF, 2014). Given these cultural and religious disposition, particularly in the Northern region, the number of out-of-school children continue to increase just as the practice of marrying girl child subsists. The logic is that the pool of out-of-school children readily provides the resource base for girl child marriage

It should be said that child marriage has over the years had negative impacts on the girl child in Northern Nigeria; a region credited with having the lowest education enrollment rates particularly among females in addition to having the highest rate of female health challenges particularly fistula. This unfortunate persistent practice of child marriage according to UNICEF is a challenge to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) such as maternal mortality rate, eradication of poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women and combating diseases.

2.0 NEXUS BETWEEN EDUCATION AND GIRL CHILD MARRIAGE

Child bride refers to the marriage of a girl below the age of 18 years who is not mentally, physically, physiologically and psychologically matured and prepared to shoulder the challenges of marriage and child bearing (UNIFPA, 2006). Akande (1999:195) describes child marriage as an act or custom whereby girls are given out in marriage to men of their parent's choice even without their consent. These girls live with their husbands and begin to have sex at a tender age. UNFPA describes child marriage as occurring when one or both spouses are below the age of 18. While boys can be affected, the practice predominately impacts girls. The United Nations Child Summit Declaration of 1990 declared the appropriate age for marriage to be 18 years. All the 159 countries present at the summit including Nigeria were signatories. The decision of the National Assembly to pass the Child Rights Act 2003 was in tandem with this global consensus.

Consequently the constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 internalised this in Section 29 (4a). The debate by the senate committee on the amendment of clause 4(b) which states "any woman who is married shall be deemed to be of full age" while clause 4(a) puts the age for marriage at 18 years old, 4(b) can be interpreted to be

contradictory and supportive of child marriage. The Northern Senators simply sought refuge in the plurality of Nigeria's legal system by highlighting that Sharia law which they subscribed to only recognized maturity and puberty; not age as determinant for marriage.

Education is the act or process of impacting or acquiring knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for matured life. It is an indispensable asset of global development and constitutes a reawakening process through which self-esteem could be assured, by permitting an informal understanding of self and others. Education influences the behavior of the receptors and determines how they think and interact.

Education is either informal or formal with the latter involving a rigid protocol of learning and understanding. It could either be traditional or Western with the traditional involving non-structured, but organized system of impacting knowledge; usually starting from the household level to the community. Its existence is as old as the human societies that are found today; even though it could be argued that development has progressed to accommodate the formal mode at the expense of the informal.

In Nigeria, like most developing nations, formal education was introduced by the British missionaries and administrator's in-charge of the colony. It was first introduced to the Southern region in 1842 (Mbanefoh, 1994:9). Initially, people in the South did not accept this form of education as they thought it would erode their indigenous cultural practices and lead their children astray from their cherished traditional ways. After intense persuasions, they accepted albeit reluctantly, and began the experiment with the male children. This marked the beginning of the disparity in opportunity of formal education between boys and girls in Nigeria which has continually been nurtured and sustained ever since.

Statistics indicate that out of the total primary school enrolment of 406 in 1882, there were only 154 girls. In 1872 and 1881, the figures for enrolments were 1043 and 1310 for boys and 802 and 947 for girls respectively (Awe, 1990, Mbanefoh, 1994). However, this aggregate female enrollment tended to conceal the disparity in the geopolitical zones. In the West where female education was more readily accepted at an earlier date than in the East, the gap in the enrolment between boys and girls was not so wide. The ratios of girls to boys within the formal school system were 1.3 and 1.5 for the Western and Eastern parts of Southern Nigeria respectively (ibid).

Formal education was introduced to Northern Nigeria sixty years after its existence in the South. At its inception, it was the exclusive preserve of the sons of the Northern royalty, while girls and women were completely shielded away from it. The traditional argument was that since Western education possesses the potentials of exposure, the girl child was instantly exposed to contamination. The Northern girls had their first taste of Western education in 1930; twenty years after their male counterparts had been introduced to it (ibid). Table 1 below illustrates the differences between availability of school facilities and enrolment in Southern and Northern Nigeria between 1906 and 1957.

Table 1: Differential School Facilities and Enrolment in Southern and Northern Primary Education

Years	Southern Nigeria	Enrolment	Northern Nigeria	Enrolment
	No. of Schools		No. of Schools	
1906	126	11872	1	N.A
1912	150	37716	34	954
1926	3828	138249	125	5210
1937	3533	138610	539	20269
1947	4984	538391	1110	70962

1957	13473	2343317	2209	195484
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Source: Akinyemi Adekunle (1983), Trends in the Development of Primary Education

Enrolment into formal education was slow but steady throughout the colonial era until the end of World War II. By 1955, the Western regions launched the Free Primary Education Programme followed by the abolition of payment of tuition in primary schools in the Eastern regions in 1957. This was not extended to the Northern regions.

In spite of the increasing number of schools in all the geo-political zones of the country in the past four decades following independence, the enrolments of girls in the Northern region was still below par in comparison to the Southern regions as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Percentage of Enrolment of Girls between North and South 1975- 1991

Year	North	South
1975/76	33.5	46.2
1980/81	29.9	49.6
1985/86	38.0	49.0
1990/91	37.8	48.6

Source: Federal Ministry of Education, Abuja

In addition, table 2 shows that the Northern zone in general lagged far behind other zones in education particularly female education.

In the 21st century education assumed a broader dimension with the development of Information Communication Technology (ICT), increase in the number of schools at the Local, State and Federal levels and the closeness in proximity of schools to residential areas. Statistics taken over three years (2010-2013) from the West Africa Examination Council show that in 2010, Northern states did poorly in female enrolment. For example, Kebbi recorded a total number of 38,546 female candidates, Katsina 71,006; Kano 148,041; Niger 94,237 and Nassarawa 141,288 compared to some States in the South- West States of Ogun with 226,909; Ondo 180,616, Osun 182,376 and Lagos 648,928.

Table 3: Educational attainment among girls aged 20 to 29, by region and area of residence

Literacy	Urban			Rural		
	Percent who Cannot read or write	None Primary	Secondary or Higher	None Primary	Secondary or Higher	
North Central	48.6	24.1	17.0	59.0	31.1	38.8
North East	64.3	38.0	18.5	43.5	75.5	12.2
North West	70.8	41.7	15.4	42.9	74.9	12.4
South East	9.7	4.3	23.2	72.6	2.4	19.7
South-South	17.0	1.6	14.6	83.7	6.2	23.5
South West	17.5	1.4	18.6	80.0	14.9	40.0

Source: Population Council, Abuja, 2007

Table 3 above also illustrates by region the low female education rate particularly in the North East and North West. At the National level, this disparity is equally glaringly apparent when the ratio of male to female admissions is considered as shown in table 4.

Table 4: University Admission by Gender (2003-2011)

Sex	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Male	73,369	83,098	38,399	63,398	80,009	95,337	115,344	111,913	131,473
Female	54,056	62,679	26,925	44,000	53,723	64,746	75,750	81,263	93,329

Male percentage increase (2003-2011) = 79.2%

Female percentage increase (2003- 2011) = 42.1%

Source: Joint Admission Matriculation Board, Nigeria, 2013

3.0 CAUSES OF GIRL-CHILD MARRIAGE IN NIGERIA

According to the International Centre for Research on Women, one third of the World girls are married before the age of 18. 1 in 9 is married before the age of 15. In 2010, 67 million women 20-25 around the world had been married before the age of 18. Given the extant trend, 142 million girls will be married before their 18th birthday over the next decade. The highest prevalence of child marriage is in West Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. A look at the Countries presents an appalling data of those who marry before the age of eighteen. 75% in Niger, 68% in Chad, 63% in Guinea, 55% in Mali, 52% in Burkina Faso, and 44% in Sierra Leone. According to the United States Embassy in Nigeria (Tell Magazine, March 25, 2003) “non-school attendance is highest amongst States in the North-East and North-West zones in Nigeria with 72% primary age children never having attended school in Borno State”. Northern states in Nigeria however top the list of female illiteracy rates, with a high rate of adolescent marriages and highest number of under 18 year’s child mothers in addition to the health problems of Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF), HIV/AIDS that come with child marriages and pregnancy. Education is therefore relegated to the backburner for girls. Although, North Central, North East and North West states are known to have the highest rates of child marriage and high rate of girls out of school other Northern states also have the same problem. For example Nassarawa has 56.7%, Benue 56.4%, Adamawa 53.1%, Kaduna 45.3%, Plateau 45.3%, Kogi 36.4% (Punch Newspaper, October 18, 2013). According to the African Health, Human and Social Development Information Service, Africa Coalition and Maternal Newborn and Child Health and Pan African Campaign Against Forced Marriage of underage Children (Punch Newspaper, October 18, 2013): Ten states have the highest number of girls not in secondary school in the North West, North East and North Central geo-political zones these include Kebbi 87.1%; Sokoto 87%; Jigawa 80.7% ; Zamfara 76.8% and Kastina 72.1% from the North East Bauchi 86.7%; Yobe 77.4%; Borno 70.9% and Gombe 67.8% ; the North Central Niger with 73.8%.

The indices above illustrate the significant impact child marriage and consequently child pregnancy has on girl child education in Nigeria particularly in the North therefore exacerbating the gender imbalance in education nation- wide between the ratio of male to female attendance and in extension the economic gap that results from the educational gap.

What then account for this abysmal trend in the region? Put differently, what are the common denominators predisposing this region to this scourge?

There are diverse causes of girl-child marriage all over the world. These ranges from religious, social, economic and security factors and these are also at par with the situation in Nigeria.

Cultural and Religious belief paramount to child marriage

3.1 Perhaps the most common factor amongst these Countries is the practice of Sharia, the law derived from Islamic religion. In Nigeria, Islam had taken firm root even before the arrival of the Colonial government. The Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio not only infused the practice of Islam in its purest form in the Region, but equally replaced the people’s culture with the culture of Islam. The belief is that girls should be married at a tender age to prevent

promiscuity and to strengthen existing bond between families. From the religious perspective, a marriageable age under Islamic law is the period of attainment of puberty.

3.2 Closely related to the above is the belief that girl-child marriage protects virginity. The notion that when a girl marries at a tender age, it helps to keep the honour of the family as she remains a virgin before marriage. This is also to prevent unwanted pregnancy and abortion as is common among teenagers.

3.3 Poverty, an economic and social menace plays a major role in the prevalence of child marriage in Nigeria. Most parents are poor and cannot afford basic amenities such as food, clothing and shelter. As a result they are less concerned with family planning and focused on their survival. It is therefore this survival instinct of most parents that prompt girl-child marriages. The burden of caring for these girls is automatically transferred to their spouses. On the other hand, girls are giving out in marriage in exchange for unpaid loans or erasing debts owed by the parents.

3.4 A high Illiteracy rate in rural areas especially in Northern Nigeria has perpetuated the culture of child marriage. Ignorance is also pervasive as people do not understand the negative consequences the practice is having on the society.

3.5 The commercialization of qualitative education from primary level to tertiary institutions further lends credence to the challenge of early marriage for girls. Although, Nigeria is naturally endowed the high corruption rate has crippled most government institutions and infrastructures including schools. With 70% of the population living below poverty line (NAPEP, 2001:1, World Bank 2006: 71), most parents cannot afford the high rate of fees charged in private schools. Consequently, boys are favored over girls who are given out in marriage to relieve the burden of educating them.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS OF GIRL-CHILD MARRIAGE ON EDUCATION

According to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), education is the strongest predictor of marriage age. Girls –not- bride estimates in Nigeria that around 14 million girls are married before 18 years i.e. a national average of 39% and 16% married before the age 15. Relatively few studies have attempted to carefully measure the impact child marriage has on education. One of the main barriers to the research outlined by Nguyen and Wodon in their study is that the decision by a girl (or parents) to marry early is likely to be itself a function of the girl's education potential. For example, girls with lower education prospects because they may be weaker academically face smaller expected losses in future earnings and thereby have lower incentives to continue to study as compared to girls who are academically stronger. These girls may be more willing to marry early or their parents may be more inclined to have them marry early. In addition, they found that the possible elimination of child marriage and early pregnancies could potentially reduce the gender gap in education by about half (Nguyen and Wodon 2012).

Child marriage also has considerable implications for the social development of child brides, in terms of low levels of education, poor health and personal autonomy. The Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls explains that ' where these elements are linked with gender inequities and biases for the majority of young girls, their socialization which grooms them to be mothers and submissive wives, limits their development to only reproductive roles'. While girls in Africa are already less likely to attend school than boys, particularly in poorer households, the non-education of the girl child is a problem compounded by child marriage, with studies showing a strong correlation between a woman's age at marriage and the level of education she achieves. Large numbers of the girls who drop out school do so because of early marriage, leaving many women who married early as illiterates. Lack of education also means that young brides often lack knowledge about sexual relations, their bodies and reproduction, exacerbated by the cultural silence surrounding these subjects. This denies the girl the ability to make informed decisions about sexual relations, planning a family, and her health. The cyclical nature of child marriage results in a likely low level of education and life skills, increased vulnerability to abuse and poor health, and therefore acute poverty.

It is a huge responsibility for a young girl to become a wife and mother. Because girls are not adequately prepared for these roles, the heavy burden has a serious impact on their psychological welfare, their perceptions of themselves and also their relationship. Women who marry early are more likely to suffer abuse and violence, with inevitable psychological as well as physical consequences. Studies indicate that women who marry at young ages are more likely to believe that it is sometimes acceptable for a husband to beat his wife, and are therefore more likely to experience domestic violence themselves. Violent behavior can take the form of physical harm and psychological attacks. Girls that enter into early marriage suffer a great deal of dependence in emotions, knowledge and materially. This could result in a decreased sense of self-worth thus predisposing them to risky behaviors.

THE WAY FORWARD

It is important that a multi-pronged approach is evolved towards addressing the issue of girl child marriage. First is the need for universal national acceptance and acknowledgement of the supremacy of the constitution particularly section 29(4a) which recognizes the age of majority as eighteen years. Second, is the need to out rightly expunge section 29(4b) which supports child marriage. The continued retention of this section in the constitution certainly cannot be justified in the face of all known international Conventions on the Rights of Women and Children. Continuous aggressive public enlightenment in the states and communities where this phenomenon is prevalent is equally desirable. This has the potentials to influence public attitudes about the roles of women in the society. Continuous conversation and dialogue on the issue among community leaders, religious groups, associations and age groups are important ways of highlighting the negative consequences of child marriage.

Particularly, religious leaders could play pivotal role in raising awareness of parents and their communities to the dire negative consequences of child marriage especially on the overall wellbeing of the society.

There is also the need to legislate and enforce compulsory enrolment of school going age children such that it is made a punishable offence for parents and guardians not to enroll and keep any child in school up till the age of 18. On the part of Government, the need to create and expand educational infrastructure cannot be overemphasized. The educational environment must be conducive, accessible and reliable. It is important that government consider taking on the full responsibility of education at this level by making it free. Support systems must be created and devoted to reorientation of the children bride and return them to school. Where returning them to school is impossible, the support system must be capable of providing them the relevant skills that could support their meaningful existence and reduce their dependence.

It is equally necessary for government at all levels to forge an enduring partnership with development agencies, non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations. Access to sexual and reproductive health services most especially for girls including family planning and maternal health services must be provided and sustained.

CONCLUSION

From the forgoing, the nexus between education and child marriage is found to be strong. Particularly is the fact that child marriage has to a large extent resulted from lack of education amongst other factors. The Northern part of Nigeria is noted for the high incidence of child marriage owing to a number of religious and cultural practices. All of these have negative impact on the social, economic and psychological wellbeing of the girl child with the attendant consequences for the society. Constitutional redress of this phenomenon through an amendment to section 29(4b) which recognizes married underage girls as adult is imperative. It is equally important to stress that a reversal of the ugly trend of child marriage and the promotion of aggressive girl child enrollment in school will result in drastic decline in the incidence of poverty not only in the Northern part, but in the entire country as a whole. As poverty reduces, conflicts and other social ills associated with it will decrease and ultimately, the nation would be poised for sustainable development.

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