

Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice on Girl Child

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Abstract

Early marriage is one of the harmful traditional practices on girl child which tend to affect her life and her contributions to the society at large. This paper explores the factors behind it in the prevalence area such as poverty, bride price, insecurity and social pressure as well as socio-cultural and religious reasons. The paper addressed its devastating effects on health, psycho-social as well as the education of girl child. The paper also discussed education as a tool for curbing this ugly situation. Finally, pertinent recommendations were made to improve girl child education to curtail early marriage.

Introduction

Marriage is a holy sacred relationship between a man and a woman, designed to continue as long as they live. It is legitimate and very vital in any society and also regarded as a moment of celebration and milestone in adult life. Sadly, the practice of early marriage gives no cause for celebration, the imposition for a marriage partner upon a child means that a childhood is cut short and her fundamental human right is violated (UNICEF, 2001). A huge number of girls are married off by their parents in their early teens, when they are too young for their consent to be sought or given. In many cases, they are married to much older men, sometimes, men older enough to be their fathers or even grandfathers.

According to Situation Assessment and Analysis (2001), the 1999 NDHS (Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey) report that in 26.5% of couples, there is an age difference of 15 or more years between the husband and wife. Many of these girls have no choice about the timing of marriage or their partners, while some are too young to make an informed decision. This has profound physical, social, psychological effect and cutting of education and employment opportunities, deprives them of the opportunity for personal development as well as their right to full reproductive health and wellbeing.

Concept of Early Marriage

The term early marriage or child marriage refers to any marriage of a child younger than 18 years. In accordance of article, UNICEF (2005) describes early marriage as both formal marriage and informal unions in which a girl lives with a partner before the age of 18. It can also be defined as any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and child bearing. On the other hand, it involves either both spouse being young and can take place with or without registration, religious or customary laws (UNICEF, 2006). Early marriage according to Jonathan (2004) is a marriage of an immature child who finds it very difficult to decide between good and bad.

The extent of child marriage varies substantially between countries, the highest rates are found in the West Africa, followed by south Asia, North Africa, Middle East and Latin America (Clifton and Frost, 2011). However countries with the highest percentage of females (20-24) who report having been married before the age of 18 are not the same countries number of girls aged 10-19 across various countries, more girls are risk of child marriage in India than in most countries combined. In fact, given population size and significance rates of child marriage in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal, about one-half of the girls who are affected by child marriage live in South Asia (UNICEF, 2006).

Bayisenge (2010) also observed that African women in general marry at a much earlier age than their non-African counterparts, leading to early pregnancies. Okereke, Uwakwe and Nwamou (2013), observed in Health Demography Survey (HDS) for 1995-2003 shows that in Niger, 47 percent of women aged between (20-24) were married before the age of 15 and 87 percent before the age of 18, a total of 53percent had also had a child before the age of 18. According to SAA (2001), the 1991 census gave a detail breakdown of the ages at which females are married in Nigeria, it gives staggering information that 2percent of Nigeria married women had entered into marriage by the age

of 10. By 12 years old, 8percent were married. The proportion married then rises rapidly in the mid-teens, with more than a quarter married by the age of 15 and 64percent by the age of 18. The median age of marriage for female was found to be 16.5 years. By 1999, the NDHS was showing a slightly higher median age of female marriage years for women aged 25-49 at the time of the survey. The NDHS revealed large zonal variation in the mean age of marriage with female in the North marrying on average about 5 years earlier than those in the south. In the North West, the median age of child marriage was 14.6 years and in the North East, it was only slightly higher, at 15.0 years. Clearly, the problem of marriage is far by the most serious in the northern part of the country.

Factors behind Early Marriage

Several factors may be adduced for early marriage of a girl child. The universal declaration of human rights (UNDHR 2002), noted that the factors that promote and reinforce early marriage include poverty, insecurity and social pressure and bride price. Other factors that lead to early marriage include: socio-cultural and religious value; and notion of morality and honour.

Poverty

Poverty and lack of viable income generating options for girls and young women are important factors contributing to high child marriage rates. The rationale behind this approach is that immediate economic opportunities would provide an acceptable alternative to marriage and increase the value and contribution of the daughter to her parental family. Furthermore, direct cash in the hands of families may increase their sense of economic security or allow upward mobility. This reduces both the economic and social pressure to marry a daughter early. This financial incentive is sometimes tied to educational investments in daughter and or to the condition that they are not marrying until age 18.

Insecurity and Social Pressure

A sense of social insecurity has been a cause of early marriage across Nigeria. Some parents fear likely social stigma if grown up adult girls (above 18 years), still at home without a partner. In addition to this child marriage is justified by parents on the ground that it forestalls promiscuity among girls which is assumed to be at risk immediately girls reach puberty (SAA, 2001).

Bride Price

This is the amount paid by the groom to the parents of a bride for them to consent him in marrying their daughter. In some Northern part of the country, the younger the bride, the higher the price she may fetch. This practice creates economic incentives where the girls are sought and married early by family to the highest bidder. Early marriage of girls is a way out to a desperate economic conditions or simply a source of income to the parents.

Socio-Cultural and Religious Value

In societies where early marriage is prevalent, there is strong pressure on families to conform. The old notion of an ideal age for marriage, the desire for submissive wives, and other customary requirements are all enshrined in local customs or religion norms (Bayisenge, 2010). In the Northern part of the country, religion plays major part in perpetuating early marriage, for example, Muslim Man is entitled to marry many wives up to 4 not minding the age. In the southern part of Nigeria, where extended family system is strong, the influence of relations in early marriage phenomenon cannot be over emphasized.

Notion of Morality and Honour

It has been suggested that the dominant notion of morality and honour are important factors encouraging the practice of child marriage. The importance of maintaining family honour and the high value placed on virginity plays an important role in the family. Pregnancy outside marriage is not welcome in many societies, yet, giving the prevalence of teen pregnancy, many societies settle for early marriage for girls. Awake (2004), reports that 31,857 children between 10 and 14 years of age gave birth in Brazil in 1998, in Britain, 90 percent of teenage births in 1997 born outside marriage, while in the United States, 4 in 10 teenage girls get pregnant at least once before they reach the age of 20.

Implication of Early Marriage

Based on the United Nations (UN) convention on the rights of the child, UN (2000), child marriage disproportionately affects young girls, who are much more likely to be married as children than young boys. The latest international

estimates indicate the world wide, more than 60 million women aged (20-24) were married before they reached the age of 18. Early marriage is associated with certain consequences which include:

Health Implication

Early marriage is harmful to girls in numerous ways. It thrusts upon them marital and reproductive responsibilities for which they are neither physically nor mentally mature to carry out. The 1999 NDHS according to SAA (2001) indicated that 27percent had given birth before they were 18 years old and 8.5percent before they were 15 years old. About 22 percent of teenagers aged 15-19 were either already mothers or pregnant with their first child. In the zones where girls tend to marry early, these figures for early child-bearing were also found to be much higher than the national averages. In the North West and North East, over 50percent of girls aged 15-19 were either already mothers or pregnant, compared with about 8 percent in the southern zones.

Early pregnancy is likely to be one of the main reasons for the much higher maternal and mortality and greater prevalence of conditions such as vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF) and recto-vaginal fistula (RVF). These conditions arise from obstructed and prolonged labour. When an underage girl goes into labour, pelvic bones are not yet sufficiently developed to allow the passage of the baby's head. As a result, the foetal head presses on the surrounding tissue and organs. If this continues for long time, the pressure can lead to fistula, in the form of holes between the bladder and the vagina (VVF) and in extreme cases between the vagina and the rectum (RVF). The continual leakage of urine and/or faeces by VVF/RVF victims results usually in their being rejected by their husbands and socially stigmatized.

Many end up resorting to begging for survival. The harmful traditional practices study has reported that 80-90 percent of wives with VVF are divorced by their husbands (UNDS, M-1998).

Denial of Education

Early marriage result to school dropout and its chain effect. In northern Nigeria, 12million girls aged between (13-14) are married in the region (IRIN Africa, 2008). The denial of education reduced such girls to that of the dependence and subservience. Fairaa (2007), states that the gender inequality present in all aspect of the society, including education leads to girls often lacking life skills and power. Husbands of young wives are often older men who expect their wife to follow tradition, stay at home and undertaking household and childcare duties. The thought of continuing schooling is often lost. Some schools have a policy of refusing pregnant girls or girls to attend or return to school after birth. Early marriage undermines the Millennium Development Goals (2 and 3) that seeks to achieve universal primary education, and promote gender equality and empower women. This also affects, not only the health of the child of the illiterate mother, but the child's all round development (UNICEF, 2001). It is also observed that literate women are more aware of health and reproductive issues and the important of children's education than illiterate women.

Domestic Violence

Married teenage girls with low level of education suffer a greater risk of social isolation and domestic violence than more educated women who marry as adults. (Commission on the Status of Women, 2014) following marriage, girls relocate to their husbands home and take on the domestic role of being a wife, which often involves relocating to another place. This transition may result in a young girl dropping out of school, moving away from family and friends, and loss of social support that she had once. This sense of isolation from a support system has severe mental health complications including depression. Large age gap between the child and her spouse makes it more vulnerable to domestic violence and non-consensual sexual intercourse. Girls who marry at early age face more severe domestic violence.

Lack of Power

Women who are married as children have less decision making than women whose marriage is delayed until adulthood. They do not have the ability to make decision on their own such as health care, contraception, household budget, and visit to family friends. They have little power or no power in relation to their husbands and in-law (UNICEF, 1996).

Education as a way out

Research shows that girl's education is strongly associated with delayed marriage. Girls with secondary schooling are up to six times less likely to marry as children when compared to girls who have little or no education (UNICEF, 2007). According to Lloyd & Mensch (2006), schooling is protective against early marriage for at least two reasons. Normatively, simply being in school helps a girl to be seen as a child, and thus not marriageable. Other than home, schools can be seen as a 'safe space' for girls. This seems to be largely the case, even with continued parental concerns about violence or sexual harassment in many settings. Thus, as it becomes a socially acceptable alternative, school attendance helps to shift norms about early marriage. Additionally, the experience and content of schooling help girls to develop social networks and acquire skills and ability to better communication and negotiable their interests.

Women are the health of many societies regardless of whether they are working or not, mothers are very influential people in children's lives. According to SAA (2011), educating a girl is one of the most important investments that a country can make in its future. Education has profound effect on girls and women's ability to claim their right and achieve status in society such as economic independence and political representation. Early marriage stands in direct conflict with the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Mathur, Green & Malhotra, (2003) noted that it threatens the achievement of the six goal respectively, eradicating extreme poverty, hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

For parents and society, better quality and secondary education may make the returns to human capital investment in girls more obvious and justifiable. For all these reasons, formal schooling should have emerged as one of the strongest program interventions to prevent child marriage, especially given the existing momentum toward universal schooling and increased emphasis on secondary education. Past reviews, however have found this strategy to be under-utilized as a route to child marriage prevention (Jain & Kurz, 2007). In this review, we find encouraging signs of an increasing number of programs employing for school as a means to delay marriage.

Conclusion

Early marriage is an issue that cannot be solved in isolation because; it results from a complexity of social, cultural, religious, economic dimensions and widespread gender discrimination. The health and psychological consequences of early marriage can constitute a huge problem which can be detrimental to their life and also affect the society at large. In order to stem the tide of early marriage and its consequences, education of the girl child must take preeminent position in society.

Recommendations

Early marriage is harmful to girls in numerous ways. Besides leading in many instances to the withdrawal of girls from school, it thrusts upon them marital and reproductive responsibilities for which they are neither physically or mentally mature to carry out. For this reason the following recommendations are made to curtail the incidence of this practice.

1. Creating awareness among the people about the negative consequences of child marriage.
2. Establishment or reform of legal minimum age of marriage.
3. There should be improvement in the school curriculum and training of teachers to deliver content on topic such as life skills, sexual and reproductive health and gender sensitivity.
4. Cash, scholarship, fee subsidies, uniforms and supplies as incentives for girls to enrol and remain in school should be encouraged.
5. Political leaders, planners and community leaders are encourage formulating and enforcing laws and policies to prohibit the marriage of girls before the age of 18 years.

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