

## HEALTH IMPLICATION OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA

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**Abstract:** Marriage at its right time and with the right and self-selected person is one of the best things that can happen to a man. Unfortunately, as glamorous such a day of espousal would have been, child marriage has made it sour for child brides as most of them are forced into it, particularly in their mid-teens; thereby aborting beautiful and achievable life goals and future ambitions. This paper examines the factors inducing child marriage in the most endemic location in the country North-Eastern Nigeria and the health implications on victims. Primary data i.e. questionnaire and secondary data from Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 2008) were used. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also held with a group of child wives, all of who are less than 18 years. Results show that poverty and limited educational attainment are the two main cause of child marriage in the study resulting to different health problems. Recommendations were made to curb this infamous practice in Northeastern Nigeria as is a globally acceptable fact that delaying marriage until a lady is physically and physiologically mature improves her health.

**Key words:** marriage, child marriage, health, Nigeria

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### INTRODUCTION

Marriage is an institution accepted by all humans irrespective of religion and race. Although it is a general view that there are three most crucial days in the life of a man which include the day he is born, the day he gets married and the day he dies. However, it is also generally believed that man has a full knowledge of only one of these three days, which is the day of his marriage. This makes marriage day one of the most important days in the life of a man. It is at times considered the greatest and happiest day in a man's life being a day of joy and choice. Unfortunately, the menace of child or early marriage makes this day the saddest in the lives of child spouses, especially the child brides as many of them are married off to their husbands by their parents out of their wish or consent. This is why it is sometime referred to as forced marriage.

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Many of such vulnerable young girls have no choice about the timing of their marriage or proper knowledge of their partner as some are forced into it.

Several international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have defined child marriage in various ways but the general consensus is that child marriage is a marriage carried out in which one of the spouses or both of them are less than 18 years old (Adebambo, 2010; ICRW, 2007). Though child marriage affects both sexes but girls are disproportionately affected as they are the majority of the victims (UNICEF, 2001). But the main thrust of this paper centres on child brides because this menace more than 80 per cent affects girls in all ramifications than boys. According to Annabel & Mairo (2007), these young girls are often considered “*women*” by virtue of their marriage, but are still children in terms of their age and experience. Therefore, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, 2007), comprehensively defines child / early marriage as any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing.

Adolescent girls’ marriage is a global human development problem (Population Council, 2004) and it’s common in many parts of the developing world. It is endemic in Africa, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Niger, Mali, Chad, Nigeria, etc.), South-East Asia (e.g. Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, India, etc.), Latin America (e.g. Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile etc.) and the Middle East (e.g. The Philippines, Iraq, etc.). It is mostly common among the rural poor and populations under stress (PI, 2006). These countries have over 40 per cent of their teenage girls married before their 18th birthday (Population Council, 2004). In Nigeria, child marriage is endemic in the north, especially in the Northeast geo-political zones with over 45 per cent of teenage marriages and the highest level of female illiteracy in the Country. In this region, girls enter marriage and begin their sexual experience when they are young, sometimes as young as 10 years old (Adebusoye, 2006). The young girls are usually married to older men chosen for them by their parents (UNICEF, 2001). In all these endemic areas, rural girls and women are particularly affected as they continue to bear the health risks and social cost of early and forced marriage, non-consensual sex and early pregnancies.

### RELEVANT LITERATURE

Child marriage is globally recognized as a blatant violation of Fundamental Human Right Article 1 of the Convention on the Right of the Child states that a girl must have reached her 18th birthday before entering into marital union. Also, there must be free and full consent to the choice and time of her marriage. So, by international conventions, 18 years has been established as the legal age of consent to marriage. In case of Nigeria for example, under 21 and 23 of the Child Rights Act, marriage before the age of 18 is illegal (Toyo, 2006). However, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognizes that the right to “*free and full*” consent to a marriage cannot indeed be “*free and full*” when one of the individuals involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner (UNICEF, 2001). According to Adebambo (2010), child marriages are mostly conducted without the valid consent of one or both parties and are a marriage in duress. Besides, child marriage is a direct form of discrimination against the girl child who as a result of the practice is often deprived of her basic rights to health, education, development and equality.

Despite nearly universal condemnation and global campaigns against this act, this harmful tradition thrives. Girls aged 15 to 19 give birth to 15 million babies a year (UNICEF, 2001). Approximately 51 million underage girls are married. If nothing changes, another 100 million girls will be married within the decade (ICRW, 2007). These marriages are mostly against their will and in violation of international laws and conventions on women’s rights. With limited education and economic opportunities, child brides are often condemned to a life of poverty, social isolation, and powerlessness, infringing on their human rights, health, and well-being (PRB, 2011). Also, births resulting from child marriages are said to be “*too soon, too close and too many*” (Gbadamosi, 2007). For example, a high percentage of girls in Ethiopia (25%), Uganda (42%) and Mali (45%)

have given birth by the age of 18 compared with only 1% in Germany, 2% in France, and 10% in the United States. The problem with “*children delivering children*” according to Nour (2006) is that the young mothers are at a significantly higher risk than older women for debilitating illness and even death. Secondary data from different sources such as Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), NPC were used for this study. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also held with a group of eight (8) child wives, all of who are less than 18 years in Gamawa Local Government Area of Bauchi State, Northeastern Nigeria.

### **THE STUDY AREA**

This study was conducted in Northeastern Nigeria. Northeastern Nigeria has six (6) states, namely-Taraba, Adamawa, Bauchi, Bornu, Gombe and Yobe States respectively. Northeastern geo-political zone of Nigeria is reputed to be the poorest, the most educationally backward and has the highest rate of child marriage in Nigeria. Bauchi State which is one of the States in this region was purposively selected for this paper because the researchers have firsthand experience of the practice in the State. Bauchi State occupies a total land area of 49,119 km<sup>2</sup> representing about 5.3% of Nigeria’s total land mass and lies roughly between latitudes 9° 3' and 12° 3' north and longitudes 8° 50' and 11° east of the Greenwich Meridian. Its capital is Bauchi located in the Guinea Savannah vegetation belt of Nigeria and so its vegetation is largely grassland.

Bauchi State is divided into 20 Local Government Areas which are governed by democratically elected chairmen. According to the 2006 Census, the last census held in Nigeria, the total population of Bauchi State was 4,653,066. It is a multi-tribal State. It has a total of about 55 tribal groups in which Hausa, Fulani, Gerawa, Sayawa, Jarawa, Kirfawa, TurawaBolewa, Karekare, Kanuri, Fa'awa, Butawa, Warjawa, Zulawa, and Badawa are the main tribes. This means that they have backgrounds, occupational patterns, beliefs and many other things that form part of the existence of the people of the state. There are cultural similarities in the people's language, occupational practices, festivals, dress and there is a high degree of ethnic interaction especially in marriage and economic existence. Some of the ethnic groups have joking relationships that exist between them, e.g. Fulani and Kanuri, Jarawa and Sayawa, etc.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Data for the study were collected through primary and secondary sources from Gamawa town in Bauchi state. Secondary data considered include population records from National Population Commission (NPC) offices, Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) and primary health care in Gamawa. Primary data include the use of questionnaire. One hundred and twenty questionnaires were administered on individual using simple random sampling method to draw information on causal and effect factors of child marriage. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also held with a group of eight (8) child wives, all of who are less than 18 years in the study area. Simple percentages and correlation were used for data analysis. Tables, charts and figures were used for the summary and presentation of data.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

#### **Demography characteristics of respondents**

The study adopted a sample size which tilted heavily in favour of women, child wives to be precise hence 66.7% the respondents were women. However because it was necessary to obtain the views of men on such topic, a sample size of 33.3% of men was selected (table 1). Since the study focused on child brides or people who have understanding of the meaning, the majority of the respondents were between the ages of below twenty and fifty. The lowest age recorded was thirteen while one respondent claimed to have attained the age of fifty two years. Greater percentage the respondents (75%) belong to the Muslim faith. This was expected because Islam is the dominant faith in Bauchi state where the study was conducted. Respondents that were Christians constituted 25%.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of Respondents  
(Data source: Author Field Work, 2015)

Variable	Category	Freq	%
Sex	Male	40	33.3
	Female	80	66.7
Age	Below 20	70	58.3
	21 – 30	32	26.7
	31 – 40	10	21.7
	41 – 50	5	4.2
	51 <sup>+</sup>	3	2.5
Religion	Christianity	30	25
	Islam	90	75
Marital status	Single	5	4.2
	Married	65	54.2
	Divorced	35	29.1
	Widowed	15	12.5
Level of education	Some higher degree	5	4.2
	School certificate	15	12.5
	Primary school	20	16.7
	No formal education	80	66.7

On marital classification, 54.2% of all the respondents are married, 29.1% are divorced 12.5% lose their partner due to death (widowed) and 4.2% are single. Most respondents 70.2% have between one and four children, while 24.2% have between five and nine children, those that have above ten children constitute 1.6% of the sample population while the remaining 4.0% do not have any child. The educational level of respondents revealed that with 66.7% had no formal education, 16.7% of them had primary education, secondary education constitutes 12.5 while the remaining 4.2% had some higher degree.

### Prevalence of child marriage

Child marriage is predominant in northern Nigeria as it is seen in table 1 Nigeria. A girl from Northern Nigeria is likely to marry at age 15 as against her counterpart at age 20 in the south. Furthering of education and entrepreneurship are almost impossible for these myriads of girls who have to depend on their husbands for everything almost for the rest of their lives.

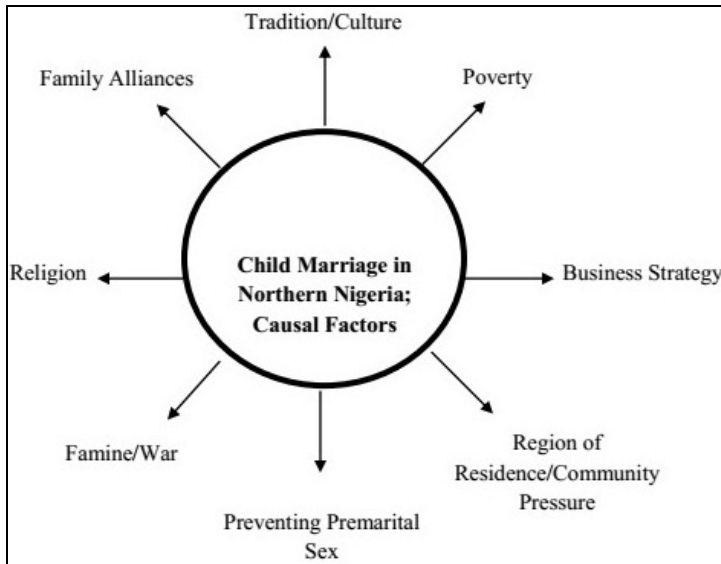
**Table 2.** Age of Child Marriage by Location in Nigeria  
(Data source: Estimation from the Nigeria DHS 2008)

Region	No of Observation	Age of First Marriage	
		Media	Mean
North Central	5630	17	18
North East	5467	15	15.8
North West	6582	15	15.4
South East	3201	20	21
South West	4184	19	19.5
South South	4366	20	20.7

The major implication of this is that most of these girls would have to drop out of school to concentrate on being housewives and child bearing resumes almost immediately which most times greatly adversely affect their health and limits their economic opportunities.

### Factors Promoting and Reinforcing Child Marriage in Northern Nigeria

The overall summary of the causal factors of child marriage in Nigeria is presented in figure 1. Despite global condemnation of this health risk practice, there are certain factors, as depicted in figure 1 causing its continuous perpetuation in endemic areas of Northern Nigeria where 73 per cent of girls marry within ages 13 and 19 year.



**Figure 1.** Causal Factors of Child Marriage in Northern Nigeria  
Source: Author fieldwork 2015

Though the causal factors differ from one region to another but generally some of the main factors as depicted in figure 1 are poverty, culture, means of preventing pre-marital sex, religion, family alliances and transactions, region of residence, famine and war (Adebambo, 2010; ICRW, 2007; IPPF, 2007; UNICEF, 2001; Adamu, 1997). Poverty is one of the main reasons why majority (60%) of girls in Northern Nigeria goes into early marriage. A few interviews held with the child wives revealed that this will help the parents of girls' secure political ties with the rich. Besides, heavy bride price will also be paid to their parents and this will improve their family's economy status.

Most parents see a girl child as an economic survival strategy. *"These are not necessarily heartless parents but, rather, parents who are surviving under heartless conditions"* (Nour, 2006). Fear of unwanted pregnancies as a result of premarital sex is another factor Northern society totally abhors and refuses pregnancies outside wedlock. So, they had rather given in to child marriage rather face the shame of pregnancy out of wedlock which is seen by this society as one of the gravest offence of a teenage girl. Also, most child marriages in Northern Nigeria are often arranged marriages where the girls' parents marry off their daughters to family friends and business partners. These are usually aimed at reinforcing family linkages which in turn enhance political, economic, and social alliances (PC, 2004). The inference from this is that the summary of the causal factors for child marriage to an average Nigerian girl is poverty.

### Consequences of Child Marriages in Northern Nigeria

The consequences of child marriage range from socio-economic effect, psychological effects and health effect. Among the socio-economic and psychological effects are: poverty, limited educational attainment, low status and power for decision making. The focus of this paper is the health effect among which are VVF, Cesarean Tear and Pregnancy Related Death.

### Health Consequences of Child Marriage

Large spousal age difference among child spouses is common in sub-Saharan Africa. The younger the bride, the larger the age difference between her and her spouse and the more her level of powerlessness. Women in northern Nigeria cannot take decisions independent of their husbands. They may not even be able to seek medical care even when they are sick because they need permission of the husband who foots the bill. Among ailments/health risk respondents claimed to have treated/undergone in recent time are STDs, VVF and cesarean tear among others (table 3).

**Table 3.** Health problems associated with child marriage  
(Data source: Author Fieldwork 2015)

VARIABLE	FREQ	%
STDs	95	79.2
VVF	42	52.5
Infant Mortality	22	27.5
Hard Labour	60	75
Cesarean Tear	18	22.5
Access Family Planning	5	6.25
Pregnancy Related Death	8	20

The common ailment treated by both male and female respondents is STDs with 79.2% of the sample population. This is expected because of the high level of polygamy in the area where the child brides have other co-wives. Among the women respondents, out of 80 respondents sampled 52.5% have had VVF at one time or the other, 75% experienced hard labour, about 22.5% had undergone cesarean tear while only 6.3% of the women had access to family planning. There is low access to sexual and reproductive health services because most times their husband do not approve it. Almost all husbands kick against effective contraceptive methods such as pills, injectable, implants, sterilization, the IUD, diaphragm or condom in northern Nigeria. In fact, it is a taboo to most of them who believe that Allah is the giver of children and they can give birth to as many as God would give them. So, the overall effect of this on child wives is a feeling of inferiority complex. Among the men respondents, out of 40 respondents sampled 20% of these husbands have had wives who die as a result of pregnancy related cases.

It is noteworthy that in all the empirical studies in our contemporary world, there is almost no singular positive effect of child marriage except for the fact that it prolongs a woman's fertility period thereby leading to 'excess births'. This also in the long run is a negative effect because high fertility has so many negative consequences on the mother and her baby as it may lead to short birth spacing, low birth weight, mal-nutrition, etc., all of which may increase the risk of infant and maternal mortality.

Findings revealed that high correlations existed between causes of child marriage and its effects on observed respondents, table 4. It may be seen as one variable causing the other or mutual interaction of two variables. Poverty which is the reason for child marriage as revealed in figure 1, was not significant with cesarean tear. Also poverty has no significant with family alliances and business strategy. One may wonder why these variables did not maintain significant relationship; this may be connected to the fact that like poverty, respondents had other reasons why they

engaged in child marriages. In another dimension poverty has significant relation with STDs, VVF at 0.05 levels. For instance poverty had significant relation with STDs ( $r=0.606$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). This implies that poverty induce child marriage resulting to STDs. Others variables that have high correlation are VVF and culture, VVF and poverty, Hard Labour and VVF, and Cesarean tear and family alliance among others.

**Table 4.** Correlations of causes and effects of Child Marriage  
(Data source: Author Fieldwork 2015)

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
A- Poverty	1							
B- Culture	.018	1						
C-Family Alliance	.016	.020	1					
D-Business Strategy	.202	.040	.020	1				
E- STDs	.606*	.372	.214	.202	1			
F- VVF	.505*	.672*	.381	.214	.370	1		
G- Hard Labour	.524	.301	.672*	.198	.448	.606*	1	
H-Cesarean Tear	.214	.215	.593*	.314	.198	.302	.574*	1

\*Correlation significant at 0.05

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper identifies North-East Nigeria as endemic area of child marriage. The causal factors and effects were also examined. However, despite all the efforts that have been put forward by the government and other NGOs, this health risk practice continues to thrive in the face of harmful cultural and religious practices in Northeastern Nigeria. Therefore, more purposeful preventive interventions are seriously and urgently needed. There is no single approach best suited for tackling this social challenge. If child marriage with its negative impact must stop, a range of policy and programmatic actions need to be taken. These actions should be bi-dimensional in nature; actions to fulfill or restore the rights of those already married should go hand in hand with preventive actions aimed at wider society. It is therefore recommended compulsory secondary education for all. Girls with eight or more years of schooling are not likely to marry earlier than girls with zero to three years of education. Since child marriage in Northern Nigeria is mostly culturally, politically and religiously motivated, the co-operation of political and religious leaders with traditional rulers is needed to appeal to their people to change such a practice. Community leaders should be made to understand the gains in delaying child marriage for a little girl. If they do, they will join hands to admonish parents to encourage their children/ward to remain in school and delay marriage till after graduation.

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