



Public health consequences of early child marriage in Nigeria: Way forward

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Abstract

Early childhood marriage is a major reproductive health issue and remains one of the biggest challenges in Nigeria. This type of marriage has enormous adverse effects on education, health, and the overall development of adolescents and youths and it has a huge public health consequence. Early childhood marriage is a cross-cutting issue, for the sustainable development goals to be achieved, issues of adolescent reproductive health must be addressed by stakeholders working across different sectors, including governments, Civil Society organization, communities and development partners. Thus, this paper is a literature review of the prevalence and public health consequences of child marriage status in Nigeria. The paper sought to discuss the public health consequences of early child marriage in Nigeria recommendations and way forward to ameliorate the problem were also presented.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Public Health, Consequences, Nigeria

Introduction

Early childhood marriage is a major public health issue and remains one of the biggest challenges in Nigeria. This type of marriage has enormous adverse effects on education, health, and the overall development of adolescents and youths (United Nations Population Fund & United Nations Children Emergency Fund, 2017). The World Health Organization (2019) reports that globally 39,000 girls under the age of 18 years are married daily and 14.2 million girls annually. According to the United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2019), before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 100 million girls were expected to marry before their eighteenth birthday in the next decade.

Presently, about 10 million more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides as a result of the pandemic. Despite the call by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs-5.3) for global action to end this human rights violation by 2030, early child marriage is still prevalent in Nigeria. In Nigeria between 2005 and 2017 about 22 million girls and women married in childhood which accounts for 40 percent of all child marriages in Sub Saharan region (Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS); Multi-Indicator Country Surveys (MICS), 2005-2017; UNICEF, 2018).

Nigeria enacted the Federal Child Rights Act (CRA, 2003) which prohibits marriage below age 18 (CRA, 2003). Hence it is worrisome that almost two decades after the Child Rights Act was passed; Nigerian girls are still being forced into child marriages (Segun, 2022) ^[21]. According to Human Rights Watch (2022) this act is prevalent in mostly northern states possibly because of the Islamic legal system these states operate. The affected states have failed to adopt both the federal law that approves "18 years" as the right age for marriage. On the other hand, some states in the south which have adopted this law are yet to implement it.

Consequently, the United Nations (UN) member states came together in 2015 to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a set of 17 goals set out global development priorities between now and 2030. These goals call for global action to end poverty and protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity, centred on the realization of human rights in which 193 countries have agreed to end child marriage by 2030 under the sustainable development goals. Specifically, SDG-5.3 aims to "eliminate all harmful practices, such as child early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations" by 2030.

Several stakeholders have expressed their concern on the achievement of the Sustainable development Goals without ending child marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2017; UNICEF, 2018; UNFPA; 2018)^[22]. Available evidence also shows that ending child marriage will catalyze efforts towards achieving the sustainable development goals by improving educational attainment, income, maternal and child health and sexual violence (UNICEF, 2018; UNFPA; 2018).

Sadly, Nigeria loses US \$8.9 billion annually to violence against women, child marriage and harmful practices (UNICEF, 2021). Early childhood marriage predisposing factors in Nigeria remains ranging from gender inequality, poverty, insecurity, the lack of economic and social opportunities for girls. Additionally, early child marriage is deeply entrenched in culture most Nigerian cultures and religious affiliation, weak legislative and institutional structures, conflict and political instability (Nmadu *et al.* 2018)^[17]. Nevertheless, in order for Nigeria to meet the SDG-5.3 which is to end child marriage by 2030, this issue must be addressed by stakeholders working across different development sectors, including governments.

Aim of the Review

This paper sought to discuss the public health consequences of early child marriage in Nigeria and to present the way forward.

Methods

Grey literature such as reports and research briefs from WHO, UNICEF, National Population Commission, National Demographic and Health Survey in Nigeria were used for this review. In addition, literature searches from peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 to 2022 in databases such as Pubmed, Medline, Google Scholar, Bio MED, were also used for this review.

Objectives of the Review

1. Review literatures on the prevalence of early childhood marriage in Nigeria
2. Discuss the public health consequences of early childhood marriage in Nigeria
3. Discuss the challenges involved in eliminating child marriage in Nigeria by 2030
4. Present the way forward

Literature Review on Early Childhood Marriage in Nigeria

Prevalence of Early Childhood Marriage in Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa; located on the Gulf of Guinea with an estimated population of 193.3 million with approximately half of its population as children (Nigeria Population Commission, 2017). Nigeria has one of the highest prevalence of child marriage worldwide (WHO report, 2018). According to UNICEF (2005) early childhood marriage is any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult and another child. Similarly, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, 2007)^[7], 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.

The United Nations posits that child marriage or cohabitation before the age of 18 is a human rights violation (United

Nations, 2016). It undermines girls' right to autonomy development, and the attainment of public health goals. This implies that, early marriage is a clear illustration of how millions of child brides are marginalized due to severe protection deprivation. This deprivation negatively impacts on child survival and development (Olayemi, 2016)^[19]. Similarly, Gichuhi (2016) asserts that early childhood marriage is not only a human rights violation, but a form of gender-based violence that robs children of their ability to make decisions about their lives, disrupts their education, subjects them to violence and discrimination and prevents their full participation in economic, political and social spheres.

In Nigeria, 39% of girls are married off before age 18 and 16% are married before they turn 15 years old (African Health Statistics, 2014). However, the number of Nigerian girls that are married before their 18th birthday is as high as 58.2%. The prevalence of child marriage varies widely across the country with figures as high as 88% in the North East region, compared with 10% in the South East. A major predisposing factor to the high prevalence is the lack of education as 82% of women aged 20-24 who were married by the age of 18 had no education and only 13% of them have at least finished secondary education (NDHS, 2013). Furthermore, a rural/urban disparity exists which further increases this deprivation. The African Health Statistics (2014) reports that for every girl married before the age of 18 in urban Nigeria, there are two in the rural areas.

Child marriage is predominant in northern Nigeria as it is seen in table 1. A girl child from Northern Nigeria is likely to marry at age 15 as against her counterpart at age 20 in the Southern part of Nigeria. Thus, 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 1: Prevalence of Early Childhood Marriage in Nigeria by Region

Region	No of Observation	Age of First Marriage		(% of 20-24 yr. old females married before 18 years
		Median	Mean	
North-West	6582	15	15.4	76
North-East	5467	15	15.8	88
North-Central	5630	17	18	35
South-East	3201	20	21	10
South-West	4184	19	19.5	17
South-South	4366	20	20.7	18

(Data source: Estimation from the Nigeria DHS 2008, % of 20-24 yr. old females married before 18 years NDHS, 2013)

Public Health Consequences of Early Childhood Marriage in Nigeria

Mental Health

The World Health Organization defined mental health as the level of psychological well-being or an absence of mental illness. It is the state of someone who is "functioning at a satisfactory level of emotional and behavioral adjustment" (WHO, 2001). Similarly, Partners West Africa Nigeria, (2020) asserts that mental health refers to people's emotional, psychological, and social well-being which includes how they think, feel, and act, which has implications for how they handle stress, relate to others, and make choices, especially in crisis. According to Nour (2009), child-brides are more or very likely to suffer depression and isolation as well as post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and somatic illnesses (Sezgin & Punamaki, 2020). Furthermore, girls who are forced into early marriage often become victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

Moreover, there exists data of known cases of child-bride being so estranged in domestic violence to the extent of committing murder whilst trying to escape (Agege *et al.* 2017). Consequently, this may lead to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal ideations in the long-run (Neal *et al.* 2012). In addition, depression and anxiety increase triggered by increased responsibilities of young married girls at home often lead to domestic stress, fear of uncertainties about the future, lack of personal income or savings and loneliness (Partners West Africa Nigeria, 2020). This increased burden on child-bride may also lead to some kind of domestic burn-out which usually has a significant impact on their mental health and social well-being.

Pregnancy and Childbirth Complications

Early pregnancies poses many changes for young girls such as Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) or Rector Vaginal Fistula, obstetric fistula or a combination of both as these child-brides are giving birth at a very tender age when their bodies are not physically able to deliver fetus (WHO, 2015). According to UNICEF (2018), child marriage risk for vesico vaginal fistula is as high as 88 percent. It is on record that Nigeria has the highest prevalence of obstetric fistula in the world, with between 400,000 and 800,000 women living with the problem and about 20,000 new cases each year ninety percent are left untreated (WHO, 2015; Save the Children International, 2016). This implies that about 55 women are afflicted with obstetric fistula and every day 553 new cases of VVF were recorded in Kano alone in 2013. Nonetheless, unless the fistula is surgically repaired, these girls may never have the opportunity to live a normal life again.

The World Health Organization (2019), reports that child marriage and adolescent pregnancy are essentially linked to 90% of adolescent births in the developing world of which Nigeria is a part. According to a recent report by the United Nations (2016), complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15–19 years in developing countries. Stillbirths and newborn deaths are 50% higher among mothers under 20, compared to women who get pregnant when they are twenty (20) years and above but less than forty (40) years.

Although Nigeria has recorded a decline in maternal mortality ratio (MMR) over the past decades, Nigeria, latest figures show a maternal mortality ratio of 576 per 100,000 live births, the fourth highest globally (UNICEF, 2018). However, the northern region with the highest level of girl-brides in Nigeria also represents the region with the highest levels of maternal and child under-nutrition (NDHS, 2013).

Sexually Transmitted Diseases and other Health Complications

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are a major reproductive health issue globally. It is a known fact that early pregnancies for child-bride put them at greater risk of sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhoea, HIV/AIDS and Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) (Olayemi, 2016) ^[19] which can have an adverse effect on neonates, such as premature deliver, congenital neonatal infections, and blindness.

Besides sexually transmitted diseases, child marriage victims

are at risk of other health problems such as cervical cancer. The major predisposing factor for cervical cancer is low socioeconomic status, poor access to health care and spouse who had multiple sex partners. Although many African nations do not have the capacity to adequately or effectively screen for cervical cancer, the incidence of cervical cancer in Africa is estimated to be extremely high (Bayo *et al.* 2002).

Eliminating Child Marriage in Nigeria by 2030

While the prevalence of child marriage has decreased worldwide from one in four girls a decade ago to approximately one in five today, the practice remains widespread. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals call for global action to end this human rights violation by 2030. Achieving this goal in Nigeria calls for relevant stakeholders to adopt a holistic approach as more than a third of girls in Nigeria end up in child marriages, and with 22 million married before the age of 18, the nation have the highest number of child brides in Africa (UNICEF, 2018; UNFPA; 2018).

Arguably, early childhood marriage does not only violate the fundamental rights of women and girls; more often, it is the result of entrenched gender inequality, making girls disproportionately affected with the practice (United Nations, 2013). Early marriage is a widespread practice in Nigeria, with an unfounded belief that when a girl is married off early, she does not have the opportunity to become promiscuous. Therefore, this places a heavy societal burden on young girls and the reality is different.

Previous studies suggest that one of the factors underpinning the continuity of girl marriage is a lack of political will coupled with multiplicities of laws (customary, Islamic), the recognition of these types of marriages by the Nigerian government further reveals the value of culture and religion in the Nigerian community (Ukwuoma, 2014; Braimah, 2014) ^[23, 3]. These issues accounts for non-apprehension and prosecution of girl marriage offenders, it allows them to hide under the customary and Islamic marriage.

Sequel to the above, Sundaram (2020) ^[2] Executive Director of *Girls Not Brides* a global partnership committed to ending child marriage asserts that unless we bring an end to child marriage, 8 of the sustainable development goals (*Goal 1: No Poverty, Goal 2: Zero Hunger, Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing, Goal 4: Quality Education, Goal 5: Gender Equality, Goal 8: Economic Growth, Goal 10: Reduce Inequalities, Goal 16: Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions*) may never be achieved. This is because early childhood marriage violates girls' rights to health, education and opportunity; increases their risk of maternal morbidity and mortality exposes girls to violence throughout their lives, and traps them in a cycle of poverty (Odigwe, 2018; Santhya, 2011; Nour, 2006; Fatusi, 2016) ^[20, 18].

Olayemi (2016) ^[19] asserts that "education" is a vaccine, which is capable of empowering girls to make independent choices in the future, including family planning. Therefore, failure to attend up to at least junior secondary school education may mean that the girl will be dependent on others to provide for her and thus be in perpetual poverty. He further posits that child marriage and malnutrition has a strong link in Nigeria.

The Way Forward

Nigeria passed the Child Rights Act in 2003 which prohibits marriage below the age of 18 years. Nonetheless, it is

worrisome that nine (9) of the Northern states (out of 36 states) are yet to domesticate the Act. Thus, UNICEF expresses concern that Nigeria's population of child bride is expected to double by 2050 if the current pattern continues (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, there is need for Nigeria to urgently harmonize its laws to conform to international legal standards to protect children from marriage (Segun, 2022) [21].

In the course of the review, it was discovered that majority of the previous studies carried out on child marriage focused more on Nigerian Northern region. However, projection data and analysis clearly shows that the fast-growing population in Nigeria especially in the Northern region will lead to a larger number of child brides, offsetting any positive potential gains made through declines in child marriage prevalence. This calls for action to address the population dynamics and demographics in Nigeria and integrate this in sectoral plans and programs that aim to address child marriage and high levels of adolescent pregnancy if Nigeria plans to meet the SDG 5.3 which targets is to end child marriage by 2030. Furthermore, government at all levels should take the lead and ensure the immediate implementation of the Child Rights Act 2003.

The Child Rights Act should be adopted and put into practice by all states. The federal government and state authorities that have adopted the law should create a strong action plan to ensure effective implementation of legislation and sanction noncompliance. Child marriage is a cross-cutting issue, and for the SDGs to be achieved, it must be addressed by stakeholders working across different sectors, including governments, Civil Society/Community and Development partners.

Government at national and sub-national levels needs to take the lead. The states that have not passed the Child Rights Act need to do so immediately and start implementation. They must remove all barriers that make it difficult for young girls to go to school, including the costs associated with school attendance such as uniforms, extra school-imposed levies and transportation costs. Schools must also be sensitive to cultural norms.

Civil Society will have to organize itself by putting continuous pressure on government at national and sub-national level regarding the implementation of free and compulsory education. Community leaders need to ensure that the community structures continue to respond positively to all efforts encouraging girls to stay in school until at least the completion of junior secondary education.

Donors and implementing partners need to put girl-child development at the center of their development efforts, knowing that doing so will lead to rapid and lasting change. Continual production of evidence and learning will also need to be supported by development partners.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed literature on the prevalence of early child marriage in Nigeria, it has discussed the public health consequences of early child marriage and the challenges involved in eliminating child marriage in Nigeria by 2030. Furthermore the reviewers have suggested ways forward for Nigeria to end this type of marriage before 2030 which is in accordance with the sustainable development goals-5.3.

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