

EARLY MARRIAGE OF YOUNG AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS: CAUSES AND IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND SOCIETY

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Abstract

Child marriage is extremely prevalent in some regions of the world, particularly in the developing countries. In the northern Nigeria for example has the highest rate of early marriage. Nearly about 48% of girls were married by age 15. Globally, around 40% of women are married under 18 years old.

Poverty, cultural beliefs and societal conflicts have been the major factors leading to and resulting from girls marrying early. Most of these young girls are implored, forced or deceived into marriage. It has been compellingly argued that the conditions child brides find themselves in are incompatible with certain laws.

Child marriage infringes upon the rights and freedoms, and damages the health and autonomy, of young girls. Child early marriage affects the girls' school enrolment which affects the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It adds to the poverty increases in any nation. Many of these young girls who have become young mothers

experience life-threatening complications during pregnancy and childbirth. These young brides cannot make decision in their marriage or engage in mutual negotiation with their husbands, and therefore they are subjected to emotional disturbances, sexual abuse and domestic violence, and as a result many have suffered psychosocial trauma and sometimes many abscond or attempt suicide.

It is should be considered illegal to marry off a child below the age of 18, and therefore government should ensure an effective implementation of Child Right, and effect strong policies to dissuade child early marriage.

Introduction

Child marriage, defined as marriage before 18 years old, is still a global issue which is extremely prevalent in some regions of the world, particularly in the developing countries. Every year 15 million girls are married as children, denied their rights to health, education and opportunity, and robbed of their childhood (WHO, 2015). In the northern Nigeria for example has the highest rate of early marriage. Nearly about 48% of girls were married by age 15 (Ford Foundation, 2013). Globally, around 40% of women are married under 18 years old (UNICEF).

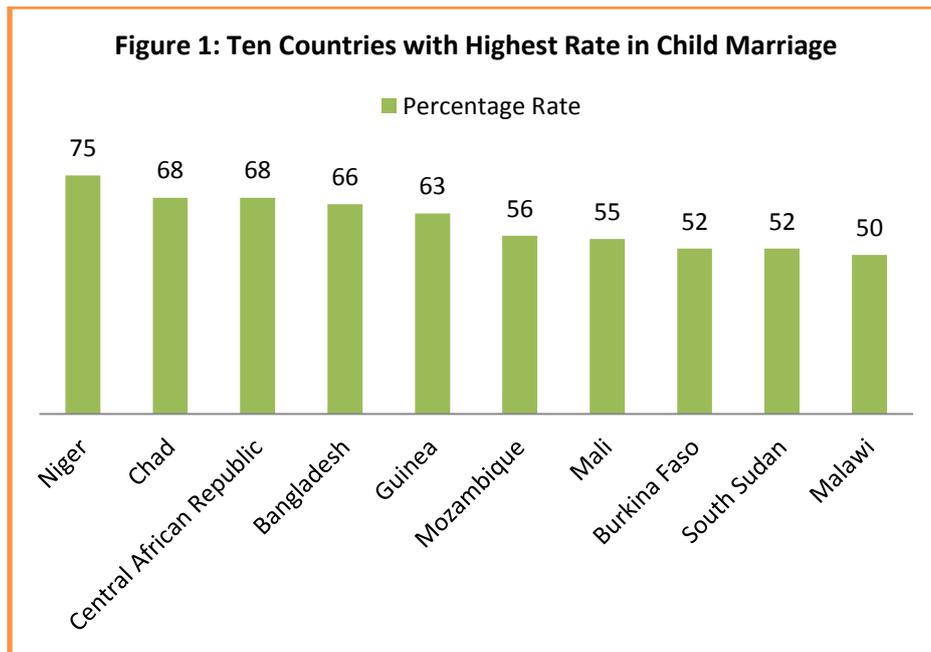
Poverty, cultural beliefs and societal conflicts have been the major factors leading to and resulting from girls marrying early. Though there is also conflicting argument that under Islamic law and certain traditional laws, a woman is of age once she is married, and that which makes it difficult for some countries not to legislate on marriages under Islamic rites and customary law. It has been compellingly argued by human rights actors that the conditions child brides find themselves in is harmful and incompatible with certain laws and

far from universal acceptance. Though there has been an interference recognizing the issue as “sensitive”.

Many countries in the year 2000 signed the International Instrument that contains the Universal set of Standards and Principles of survival, protection and participation of children. The Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC) outlines the human rights to be respected and protected for every child under the age of 18 years and required that these rights are implemented to protect children from abuses and discrimination (UN Report).

Demographics and Prevalence of Early Marriage of Young and Adolescent Girls

More than 700 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthday. That is the equivalent of 10% of the world’s population (WHO, 2015). The rates of child marriage vary, both within and between countries. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, in proportions and numbers, rate the highest in Child Marriage. The 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are: Niger, Chad, Central African Republic, Bangladesh, Guinea, Mozambique, Mali, Burkina Faso, South Sudan, and Malawi. In terms of absolute numbers, because of the size of its population, India has the most child marriages and in 47% of all marriages the bride is a child (UNICEF, 2014).



Source: UNICEF 2014

In Nigeria, 43% of girls are married off before their 18th birthday. 17% are married before they turn 15. The prevalence of child marriage varies widely from one region to another, with figures as high as 76% in the North West region and as low as 10% in the South East (UNFPA, Nigeria: Child marriage country profile, 2012).

Causes of Early Marriage of Young and Adolescent Girls

The early marriage of young of and adolescent girls as persists across countries is caused by poverty, ignorance, social and cultural norms, societal conflicts and wars. As a result of poverty and economic need, some families take decision to marry off their daughters either to lessen their economic burden or as a way to get connected to richer family that may be of economic benefit to them. In this case most of these young girls are implored, forced or deceived into marriage. In most communities where families could not afford or continue to provide for their children welfare consider the next option to give away their young daughters to another family in form of marriage. The family in-law or husband to the daughter is well

accepted most especially for their wealth and riches as they are expected to provide for the daughter and the daughter's family.

Ignorance sometimes plays a major role as one of the causes of child marriage. In this situation, some parents feel that it is better and safer to give away their young daughter in marriage to avoid the shame of the daughter getting pregnant out of wedlock. Some societies believe that early marriage will protect young girls from sexual attacks and violence and see it as a way to protect their daughters (UNFPA, 2013).

Social and cultural norms are still one of the major barriers for the persisting early marriage of adolescent girls. In some case the culture and traditional beliefs demand that a daughter should be given out for a marriage under certain agreement with another family. Parents arrange these marriages and young girls have no choice. Also, social pressure within the community or families prevails and a girl child is married off because other young girls are getting married and a family will not allow their own child to be left out. Also, some society give preference to boy's education and girls are discriminated and given the choice to marriage.

Many regions are experiencing conflicts and wars, and families are displaced while poverty increases leading to young daughters either married off at their adolescence or the young girls have the option to get married. In most conflict regions these young girls are either forced or abducted by terrorist who marries them. Nigeria for example, over the recent years of terrorist attack, has witnessed various abduction of girl child who have been married and held captive by the abductors, and others being sold away for marriage.

Impact of Early Marriage on Children and Society

Child marriage is an institution that infringes upon the rights and freedoms, and damages the health and autonomy, of young girls. It is should be considered illegal to marry off a child

below the age of 18. If a husband consummates a marriage with a child, it should be considered rape.

Child brides are neither physically or emotionally ready to get married. Many of these young girls who have become young mothers experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth. The most common disorder as a result of pregnancy complications is the condition known as fistulas, a condition causing continuous leakage of urine from the bladder into the vagina and urinary incontinence. More so, these young brides have less access to reproductive education and health services or are denied the use of contraceptive and therefore could not control childbearing and they are more likely to die in childbirth than those who married between the ages of 20 – 24 (UNICEF, WHO). According to the UN, Pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of mortality for girls aged 15 to 19 worldwide, accounting for 70,000 deaths each year (UNICEF, State of the World's Children, 2009).

Likewise Infants born to mothers under the age of 18 are 60% more likely to die in their first year than to mothers over the age of 19. The babies are more vulnerable to complications associated with premature labour common in teenage pregnancy. If the babies survive, they are more likely to suffer from low birth weight, malnutrition, and late physical and cognitive development (UNICEF).

There is no doubt that these young wives cannot make decision in their marriage or engage in mutual negotiation with their adult husbands, and therefore they are subjected to emotional disturbances, sexual abuse and domestic violence (Population Council Report, 2003). Violence and abuse can lead to post-traumatic stress and depression, and as a result many have suffered psychosocial trauma and sometimes may attempt to commit suicide. Cases have also revealed serious refusal of the bride to continue with the marriage. There is a case in Nigeria of which a 14-year old child bride killed her 35-years old husband through food

poisoning as a result of traumatic effect. The child bride alleged that it was a forced marriage to a man she did not love and didn't want to have relationship with (Vanguard Newspaper Nigeria, 2014). Meanwhile the child bride lack the resources or legal and social support to leave an abusive marriage.

Child early marriage affects the girls' school enrolment. Many of these young brides could not continue their education when got married. In some instances, child brides are often pulled out of school and denied further education and so can lack the skills to help lift their families out of poverty Moreover, their children are also more likely to be illiterate which affects the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The child brides are often isolated from their peers and therefore it widens gender inequality, and in situations where child marriage often results in separation from family and friends and lack of freedom to participate in community activities, it can have major consequences on girls' mental and physical well-being (UNICEF, 2011).

Recommendation and Way Forward

According to World Health Organization (WHO), young girls who marry later and delay pregnancy beyond their adolescence have more chances to stay healthier, to better their education and build a better life for themselves and their families.

Government and International community's engagements and commitments should ensure the supporting and enforcing legislation to increase the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18 years; providing equal access to quality primary and secondary education for both girls and boys; and mobilizing girls, boys, parents and leaders to change practices that discriminate against girls and to create social, economic, and civic opportunities for girls and young women.

Though before this recent debate, members of the civil society has made some improvements to address the factors leading to and resulting from girls marrying early, by implementing programs to increase girls' school enrolment, and awarding scholarships for girls.

The International agencies, CSOs, and youths should all join hands to advocate for an effective implementation of Child Right, and strong policies to dissuade child early marriage.

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