

EFFECT OF EARLY MARRIAGE IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY: THE BENUE EXPERIENCE

Luther AnumTimin

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies
Benue State University, Makurdi
Email: luthertimin@gmail.com; 0805068221

&

Tsekeh Jesse Doose

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Nassarawa State University, Keffi
Email: jessetsekeh411@gmail.com; 08061217515

Abstract

The effect of early marriage is still one of the most disturbing and painful problems bedeviling the people of Benue state and generally the Nigerian society in the 21st century. It is still the case today in Benue state and many other regions of Nigeria, especially in poor areas, that some families force their daughters to get married at very early ages. The thrust of this paper is therefore to undertake an assessment of early child marriage in Benue society with a view to making recommendations that could stem the tide. The study adopted the qualitative research design by relying on secondary sources of data collection. The expository and evaluative methods were used for data analysis. The study found out that many factors are responsible for early marriage including poverty, ignorance, chauvinism, etc. The study also discovered that the effects of early marriage are severe on the individuals concerned, the family and the society at large. The study recommended, inter alia, that there should be adequate awareness, poverty alleviation, and implementation of relevant legislations towards curbing early marriage. The study concluded that the marriage of a person less than 18 years is illegal and should be discouraged on all fronts.

Keywords: Child, Early, Marriage, Nigerian society

Introduction

Early marriage, also referred to as child marriage, is defined 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. While more women are marrying in their thirties in developed countries, overall, 20 to 50 percent of women are married by the age of 18 in the developing world with the highest percentages in West

African within Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Afolabi and Abatan, 1). The context of early marriage in this zone must be understood within an environment of poverty, gender inequality, and cultural taboos against premarital sex for girls, religious beliefs and patriarchal predisposition for controlling female sexuality. It is also true that culture differs in every society and they have some basic norms and beliefs that guide the people (2). Jain, Bisen, Sing & Jain refers to child marriage as any marriage carried out below the age of eighteen (18yrs) years before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and child bearing (2).

The Benue society is plagued with a number of challenging issues, one of such issues is early child marriage. Child marriage represents a fundamental breach of human rights. However, a number of Benue societies accept and practice it. The Benue society recognizably places expectation on females to marry and become submissive to their husbands, and in some cases drop their personal interests and ambitions. Child marriage as a phenomenon is today getting renewed attention among policy makers worldwide due to the realization of the dangers involved in it. This, also, is in part because child marriage remains highly prevalent despite efforts by many governments of developing countries to discourage and even outlaw the practice. Obviously child marriage is a violation of the rights of the girl children who are forced to marry early, and it profoundly affects their lives through substantially lower education prospects, economic prospects, health complications, higher likelihood of acquiring HIV/AIDS, higher levels of infant mortality with early pregnancies, and higher risks of violence.

The Concept Early (Child) Marriage

Early marriage, also referred to as child marriage, has been variously defined. Some of these definitions are culture-dependent or conditioned by demographic differences. In the case of Nigeria, Alabi, Bahah and Alabi defined 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” (78). Drawing a contrast, UNICEF reports that “while more women are marrying in their thirties in developed countries, overall, 20 to 50 percent of women are married by the age of 18 in the developing world with the highest percentages in West African within Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia” (43). In the same connection, Usugh notes that approximately 40% of women aged 20-24 worldwide who were married before the age of 18 live in Sub Saharan Africa, thus resulting in early marriage being largely sub-Saharan African phenomena (2).

The female section of the population has however faced societal prejudices from discrimination because of their gender as well as stigmatization as a result of failure to meet societal standards and customs. One of these prejudices is the expectation within the society that females must become married in order to gain audience in their society. It is estimated that more than 20-50 % of females in developing nations particularly in the sub-Saharan region of Africa go into marriage before the age of 18. The above phenomenon today is known as girl child marriage (Jain, Bisen, Sing & Jain, 13). Child marriage is an ancient tradition which could be defined as any marriage that occurs when the girl is not physically, mentally or physiologically ready to bear the pressures of marriage and child bearing. Scholars have emphasized that the human rights of the girl-child is violated through early marriage as globally, international bodies recognize 18 years as the legal age of marriage (Gage, 2). This is because child marriages are most times carried out without the valid consent of one or two of the parties. Although more emphasis has been given to girls as the experience for boys is, less likely to be exploitative or physically harmful as it is for girls. The imposition of a marriage partner on children or adolescents who are in no way ready for married life, and whose marriage will deprive them of freedom, opportunity for personal development, and other rights including health and well-being, education, and participation in civic life, nullifies the meaning of the convention on the rights of the child's core protections for those concerned.

Child Marriage in Benue

Early child marriage is a common practice in most developing countries. In Benue state and most parts of Nigeria, many girl and boy-children are married off against their will. With these young girls married off, their educational pursuits are terminated and dreams aborted.

To an average Benue person, early marriage is just a "custom", a "tradition", part of people's "culture". As a matter of fact, early marriage is a thing of pride to an average Benue person. A Benue parent is happy and proud when his or her son or daughter gets married early. It is assumed that they can be privileged to see their grandchildren and take care of them as they are still yet younger. Although the emergence of civilization is wiping away this believe.

Marriage is a union ordained by God and is the only remarkable event in a human life that is associated with choice. The choice to be married and stay married which is a personal decision, is thwarted since they are forced into marriages at early age without their approval. This is glaring as a 2017 UNICEF report states that about 17% of Nigerian young girls are married before 15 years and 43% are married before they attain 18 years. And this is in stark contradiction to, and contravention of the constitution of the Federal

Republic of Nigeria Section 23 which states that; “a person under the age of 18years is incapable of contracting a valid marriage; and in the event such marriage holds, it should be proclaimed null and void”.

The negative effects of this menace of early marriage are legion and ugly. Unfortunately, even with the modernity and civilization of the 21st century the practice does not seem to be abating among the cultural norms of the tribes in Benue state. Notably, the 21st century globally is an age when every person, regardless of age, gender and social status, can act to follow their dreams with full support from their societies. Sadly, in Benue many young girls do not have a voice in the matter – they are raised to believe that they are made for serving their husbands, without a chance to get proper education and profession. Their health is often severely damaged by early pregnancy, especially as there is usually no proper healthcare around in rural areas. Thus, the dreams of many girls to become amazing professionals are simply dashed when they are forcefully married to some man they barely know, can actually cause harm to them. The young brides are socially disadvantaged since they have no education, no good healthcare provision, no skill of socializing with other people and no future of their own. There is therefore need for a clarion call on all and sundry to put hands on deck towards curbing the tide of this monster.

Factors Responsible for Early Marriage in Benue State

Various causes have been pointed at by scholars as either remotely or immediately being responsible for the prevalence of early marriage. In Benue, the following factors are largely accountable for early marriage:

Financial Challenges

Poverty is a critical contributing factor to early girl-child marriage in Benue State. The crippling poverty in Benue State is most felt in the rural areas where most people are struggling to barely survive. Most parents who earn very little to maintain normal lives and support a young daughter choose to force her into marriage. Girls suffer from it because they often get married against their will at the age of 10 or even younger. On the one hand, where the parents of the child are faced with acute financial challenges, their young girls may be seen as expensive and a burden on the family. This can lead to the parents marrying her off to an older man at a very young age in order to reduce the financial burden on the family. On the other hand, marrying off the girl child could be seen as a way of increasing the wealth of the family. In traditional society in Benue which includes the Tiv/Idoma and Igede people, the bride’s family usually receives various items and cash from the family of the groom (Ayenge, 18). Thus, poor families tend to marry off their girls earlier in order to receive bride-wealth which is considered a source of income to the family.

Family alliances

Kanyi (2008) is of the opinion that conventionally, marriage is a union between two families and some parents lure their girl-children into marriage in order to consolidate family alliances. According to findings by Malhotra (2017), some marriages in Tivland and in fact all of Africa are seen as a means of strengthening the relationships between families or settling disputes. Such female children are quickly forced into marriage so as to prevent them from eloping or getting pregnant at their parents' home. According to a report by Maiangwa & Amao(2015), in some cases the children are betrothed even before birth.

Ignorance

Abdallah (2011) opines that one of the significant causes of early girl-child marriage is ignorance on the part of the parents. This is ignorance in the sense that some parents have the opinion that their daughters are safe from sexual attacks and violence when they are married off early (109). This is compounded by the fact that scores of Tiv population still lack education. This therefore exposes them to a lot of societal superstitions and misinterpretations of marriage. Thereby, making them susceptible to any superstition or misconceptions that have been passed down from generation to generation regarding early-child marriage. According to Atim (2017), the education of parents greatly affects the timing and type of marital union in Benue. Ignorant parents give out their children earlier in marriage than informed parents. Lack of education propels parents to believe that training a girl-child is a waste of resources, that marriage is the only alternative that will protect her without knowing the precautions of the act. They are also made to believe that it is safer, more economical to train a boy because it entails limited resources compared to a girl. Many of them do not know the aftermath of early child marriage due to the fact that they still hold on to their ancient beliefs.

Fear of Unintended Pregnancy

The traditional Benue tribes generally frowns upon pregnancy prior to marriage. As such, most families seek to marry off their girl-children before they get pregnant outside marriage. A report by UNICEF established that unmarried girls are seen as liability to the honor of the family and in order to guarantee chastity and virginity of the bride they are married off early to avoid dishonoring the family (28). Msugh Matthew asserts here that the society has become very sexually-minded. Once children are allowed to mature properly before marriage, there is a tendency of them getting entangled and getting pregnant, thereby bringing shame to the family. In order not to allow girls bring such shame to the family, most families marry out their children early enough in order to prevent them from having sexual knowledge so as to prevent unintended pregnancy.

Gender inequality

It is apparent that in Benue, there are still rural areas with ancient patriarchal beliefs that prefer male to female children (Ayenge, 2018). Often, people are convinced that the boy child is a good luck, while the girl child is not, and she can only be used as a future bride. Such female children are not offered educational opportunities by their parents as their male counterparts. Rather, at an early age they are unceremoniously given out in marriage.

Fear of Witchcraft

This is a major cause of child marriage in Benue. There is the fear that envious family members could through witchcraft prevent a girl who has come of age from getting married. The general belief here is that it is in the nature of witches and wizards to hate the progress of family members. Thus, such witches and wizards who may be family members but scared of their victim's progress might prevent suitors from marrying their daughters. To forestall this, many people give out their daughters in marriage earlier than required. Iorpenda Moses corroborates this by narrating how he gave out his three daughters' into marriage at the ages of 14 and 15 years because of his elder brother who prevented any girl that gets to 18 years from marrying in the family. Upon further inquiry, Iorpenda revealed that his elder brother was childless and so would not want any other person to enjoy the bride price of a matured daughter in the family. Because of this fear, many people in Benue give out their children in marriage at a very tender age.

Displacement

Following the invasion of villages and killing of local farmers in Benue by Fulani herdsmen, victims at the Internally Displaced Persons camps pass through unsavoury situations because of lack of food, clean water, medic and sleeping materials. In the midst of all these, teenage girls displaced by the conflict and settling in IDP camps have been at the receiving end of even more hardship. Many of them are being married off to men old enough to be their fathers because of the ever increasing poverty in the camps (Oche Peter, Oral Interview). In addition to this, *This is Africa* reports that at an IDP camp in Agan, Mercy Toso, 11, was married off to a man of about 40 years of age. Her mother, Ayiga, asserted that she married Mercy off because they did not have money for food, clean water and sleeping materials. Ayiga had lost her husband when the herdsmen attacked their village, leaving them with no one to provide for the family. She had no option than to give her daughter off in marriage for N5000.00 when the opportunity presented itself.

Effects of Early Marriage on the Nigerian Society: The Benue Experience

Child marriage in Benue as in other parts of Nigeria has enormous unpalatable impacts on the victims, their families and the society at large. The following are the major effects of child marriage on the Benue society:

Domestic Violence

Early girl child marriage makes such children susceptible to domestic violence. Most men are impatient when they marry a young girl forgetting the fact that the so called wife is a child that needs to be corrected with love. They unleash their anger at every mistake by the child, thereby causing physiological damage and psychological trauma to the child (Atim, 27). Often times such girls live in fear of the unknown, due to the series of abuses from the husband or his family members. Inflated injuries from violence or physical abuse pose a threat to her existence; it can lead to premature death. It's on record that most girls lose their lives in the name of marriage; for when they run back to their parents they are sent back. As such, they digest all the violence because they are made to believe that marriage is for better, for worse.

Illiteracy

Bayisenge (2012) rightly notes that in many parts of Benue, illiteracy has refused to abate despite attempts by successive governments to make education accessible to all. It is discovered that once a girl gets married, the parents stop educating her, believing that she does not need education once she is a wife. In most cases, during the marriage the man promises to send the girl to school but does not keep the promise as the girl is turned to baby making factory. This increases the rate of illiteracy among Benue people and kills so many bright people's potential.

Health Risks

There are several health challenges that may occur as a result of early pregnancy. Ayenge (2018: 74) observes that "in most cases child marriage results in many issues one of which is Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF); this is a hole between the female vagina and the bladder, which erupts from a prolonged obstructed labour of a girl-child". The child suffers this after child birth on a long run basis. During the period the girl-child leaks urine or feces sometimes uncontrollably. Often times VVF leads to chronic medical issues like constant infection, kidney diseases and infertility. Ordinarily, the girls face the challenges of severe pain during intercourse due to the fact that their sex organs are not developed enough.

Adedokun, Tochukwu and Adedeji aver that the normal age for pregnancy is at least 18-20 years old, and if one gets pregnant earlier, there is a high risk that she will have to deal with health issues (51). Sometimes it is life-threatening both for the mother and the baby, considering that healthcare in the rural areas is not entirely developed. This partly explains why there is still high rate of mother and child mortality during birth in Benue State. Other complications may also arise due to lack of proper medical care which results in so many health issues in the long run

Social Stigma

Victims of child marriage are often sidelined by their friends and families. They hardly identify or associate in any occasion or ceremonies as they are enclosed to forced life of introvert. The stigma of lack of education, not being able to express one's self among peers, or contribute to discussion or knowledge of the things happening in the community also affects the girl.

The Way Forward

In the light of the foregoing discourse, the following recommendations are necessary to stem the tide of early girl child marriage in Benue State:

Education

Education is central to the enhancement and improvement of the welfare of a nation as it reduces the impacts of poverty, improves health and nutrition, reduces inequality and increases the participation of women in the labour market. The research therefore recommends that Government and relevant authorities should create better programmes and policies that would allow and encourage children and even elderly parents to get educated. Education should be affordable and accessible to both male and female children equally. To buttress this, regular workshops and seminars organized by stakeholders such as government, health bodies, NGOs and religious bodies should be available for parents, intending parents as well as intending couples to enlighten them on the importance, significance of education as means to ensuring stability in marriages and empowering their love ones to prevent abuse and negligence.

Awareness Creation

The prevalence and dangers of child marriage has not received proper attention over the years. Many people claim they do not know the magnitude of the problem. It is therefore necessary to create more awareness on the rate and bad effects of child marriage in Benue. More people need to know about the problem and attempt to take action. The rural inhabitants need to be educated more about the consequences that child marriage can cause, and about the harm it can do to their children.

Stricter Legislations

One must observe that even though laws exist that prohibit child marriage, they are not strict enough and/or are not well executed. There is therefore need for a stricter law against child marriage as well as its execution. The problem should be frequently reported to the authorities who can punish people exploiting children. Maybe all the cases will not be prevented, but if at least some will, this is a victory.

Fighting Poverty

It is a common realization that poverty is one of the biggest problems in Benue, and many people marry their children to strangers because they need money. All relevant authorities must take measures to resolve this issue, and if there is a smaller amount of struggling people in Benue, the child marriage rate will decrease too.

Conclusion

In Benue State as in many states of Nigeria, a lot of 10-12-year-old girls, whose reproductive system is not ready for intimate activities and childbirth yet, are forced by their parents into marriage. They are stopped from going to school and getting an education and are exploited for serving their husband and giving birth to children. The reasons usually adduced to perpetuate and defend the evil menace of child marriage include poverty, unwanted pregnancy, parental pressure, peer pressure and developmental stage among others. More so, it has a negative trend on the girl child which include; emotional and mental distress, intolerance, early widowhood, frustration and hatred for the man. The implications of early marriage on the girl-child that negatively impacts her wellbeing and that of the society include education, lack of economic empowerment and lack of knowledge on reproductive health services which will enable them take informed decisions, enhance their ability to leverage resources and participate in community decision making. It is therefore necessary for all Benue well-meaning sons and daughters to put hands on deck towards curbing this unhealthy practice.

Works Cited

- Abdallah, B.A. "Girl Child Marriage and Women Development in Nigeria: Contemporary Issues", *Journal of Development and Psychology* 14(9): 2011. Print
- Adedokun, G. N. Tochukwu, H. E. and Adedeji, O.O. "Early Childhood Marriage and Early Pregnancy as a Risk to Safe Motherhood", A Report on the Regional Conference on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children in Africa, 19-20 Nov. 2012. Print
- Adekola, P. O., Akanbi, M. A., and Olawole-Isaac, A. "A Qualitative Assessment of the Effects of Child Marriage on Female Education and Entrepreneurship in Northeastern Nigeria," *International Journal of Scientific Research in Multidisciplinary Studies ISROSET*, 2 (1), 7-15, 2016. Print
- Alabi T., Bahah M., Alabi S.O. "The Girl-Child: A Sociological View on the Problems of Girl-Child Education in Nigeria." *European Scientific Journal*, 10 (2) 06-13, 2014. Print
- Atim, G. "Girls not Brides: ending child marriage in Nigeria." *Journal of Gender, Information and Development in Africa (JGIDA)*, 6(1-2), 2017. Print

- Ayenge, J., “Early marriage as a barrier to girl’s education: a developmental challenge in Africa”. *Journal of Gender, Information and Development in Africa* (JGIDA), 6(1-2), 2018. Print
- Bayisenge, J. “Early Marriage as a Barrier to Girl’s Education: A Developmental Challenge in Africa”, *Journal of Social Psychology* 12(6): 2012. Print
- Gage, H. *Understanding the concept of Child Rearing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, McGraw Hill, New York, 2011. Print
- ICRW “How to End Child Marriage: Action Strategies for Prevention and Protection” International Centre for Research on Women: USAID, New Delhi. [Online] 2007. Available: [https://www.icrw.org/publications/how-to-end-child-marriage/] Accessed Feb 2018. Print
- Jain, G., Bisen, V., Sing, S.K. & Jain, P. “Early marriage of girls as a barrier to their education”, *International Journal of Advanced Engineering Technology* 2011. Print
- Kanyi, B. *For Better or for worse*. Longman Publishers, Lagos, Nigeria, 2008. Print
- Maiangwa, B., & Amao, O. B. "Daughters, brides, and supporters of the Jihad: revisiting the gender-based atrocities of Boko Haram in Nigeria." *African Renaissance*, 12(2), 117-144 Jan 2015. Print
- Malhotra, A. “Causes and consequences of child marriage: A perspective.” *International Journal for Research on Women*. 2(2), 35-41, 2017. Print
- This is Africa*. “Nigeria's IDP Camps - Where Child Marriages Take Place”. allAfrica.com. Accessed 20/03/2020. Print
- UNICEF, “The Effects of Traditional and Religious Practices of Child Marriage on Africa’s Socio-Economic Development: A Review of Research, Reports and Toolkits from Africa”. [Online] Oct 2015. Available: [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/31018-doc-5465_ccmc_africa_report.pdf] Accessed March 16, 2018. Print
- Usugh, J. *Future Options Foreclosed: Girls Who Marry Early*. New York, USA: UNICEF, 2014. Print

APPENDIX LIST OF INFORMANTS

S/N	NAME	SEX	AGE	STATUS	PLACE OF INTERVIEW	DATE
1	Iorpenda Moses	M	59	Traditional Healer	Gboko	12/05/2020
2	Msugh Matthew	M	67	Elder	Ushongo	01/06/2020
3	Oche Peter	M	50	Chief	Otukpo	09/06/2020