

**THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DYNAMICS OF CHILD MARRIAGES:
A CASE STUDY OF NORTHERN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Child marriage continues to be a norm in Northern Nigeria, with implications for young girls. Efforts to combat child marriage in Northern Nigeria face numerous challenges, and there is still a lack of implementation of national and international laws that forbid child marriages. Northern Nigeria exhibits one of the highest rates of child marriage globally, which has its roots in cultural, economic, and religious customs, with girls as young as 12 being married. The cycle of poverty in that region provides room for this practice, which in turn impacts on the general well-being, health, and educational opportunities, resulting in high rates of maternal and infant mortality, increased vulnerability to domestic violence. Traditional leaders and religious institutions play a crucial role in sustaining or eliminating this vile. However, long-lasting changes necessitate a multipronged strategy that includes education, strict enforcement of current laws, legal reforms, and community involvement in socioeconomic development. Furthermore, addressing the underlying socio-economic factors, such as poverty and lack of access to education, is essential through the involvement of stakeholders at all levels of government, non-governmental organizations, community leaders, and the affected families to ensure a better future for young girls (and in rare cases, young boys too). Qualitative analysis methodology was applied in writing this paper.

Key words: Child Marriage, northern Nigeria, Gender Dynamics, Socio-cultural Factors, Human Rights



Introduction

Background: What is Child Marriage?

As posited by the World Health Organization (2021), “child marriage is a marriage or informal union where at least one of the parties is below 18 years of age.” This practice is recognized globally as a human rights violation owing to its severe consequences on the well-being, health, and development of children, particularly girls (UNICEF, 2020). The legal threshold of 18 years is set based on international human rights standards, reflecting the consensus that children below this age lack the maturity to consent to marriage fully and freely (UNICEF; OHCHR, 2020). The roots of child marriage are deeply entrenched in cultural, economic, and social traditions, perpetuated by poverty, gender inequality, and lack of education, deeply embedded in cultural, economic, and social traditions, perpetuated poverty, gender inequality, and lack of education (BioMed Central, 2020).

The concept is expanded to include situations in which the parties to the marriage are not legally wedded by any law, custom, or tradition by using the terms "formal" and "informal" union or marriage. As such, the concept includes situations in which a man marries a girl under the age of eighteen without performing a traditional marriage ceremony. However, a possible gap is the emphasis on the age factor, with little depth given to other underpinnings, such as poverty, gender inequality, and detrimental customs or cultural practices that encourage child marriage. These definitions also fall short of capturing the variety of viewpoints and experiences held by people and communities affected by child marriage. For instance, although some religious and cultural traditions consider early marriage to be vile, others may see it as a necessary or beneficial practice for their structures and belief systems.

Scope of Northern Nigeria

Child marriage in Northern Nigeria is significantly influenced by cultural, political, and socio-economic dimensions in the region. The region is divided into three geopolitical zones: North-West, North-East,

and North-Central, each with unique characteristics that add to the complexity of the child marriage issue. Northern Nigeria's cultural heritage is primarily Islam-influenced, with the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group being the majority. However, other ethnic groups and minorities, such as Christians, also exist (Crisis Group, 2023).

The economic landscape in Northern Nigeria is burdened with poverty and underdevelopment, agriculture dominates the economy but is hindered by inadequate infrastructure and market access. The Northeast suffers particularly from violent insurgencies and unrest, which has severely impacted local economies, displaced millions, worsened poverty, and facilitated child marriage as a coping mechanism for impoverished families (Crisis Group, 2023). The North West faces banditry and communal conflicts, which are causing destabilization and worsening socio-economic conditions that contribute to child marriage (Crisis Group, 2023).

Northern Nigeria faces high child marriage rates due to the Muslim population, traditionalist communities, and socioeconomic factors, such as poverty, insecurity, and limited education. Despite these efforts, progress remains slow. Moreover, politics in Northern Nigeria is significantly shaped by religious and ethnic affiliations; this diversity influences social and political dynamics, including child marriage practices. (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023).

Legal Angle on Child Marriage

The legal landscape surrounding child marriages in Northern Nigeria is complex and often contradictory. The Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003, which is a federal law sets the legal marriage age at 18 years. Unfortunately, there are disparities in the application of this law, mostly seen in the northern areas where Sharia law frequently supersedes federal law. While some states have embraced the CRA, customary laws in some parts allow marriage to occur as soon as a person reaches puberty, which can happen as early as age 12 or 13 (OHCHR, 2020). The plural nature



of the Nigeria legal system complicates efforts to enforce a uniform legal age for marriage.

The constitutional framework in Nigeria has played a significant, though silent role in the continued practice of child marriage, as there is no universally applicable regulation of marriageable age in Nigeria. Three officially recognized types of marriage are Islamic, statutory, and customary; different laws govern these types of marriages. Each with its own set of implications and effects on the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of the individuals involved. An example of such disparity is seen in how the Child Rights Act sets the marriageable age at 18, while Islamic Shariah Law permits marriage at puberty, which may occur as early as age nine or even younger.

In most northern states, the deeply rooted culture of child marriage practices sanctioned by Shariah law and customary authorities becomes a setback to implementing the Child Rights Act of 2003 and other national regulations. The law's treatment of children's rights is deficient. One of the most well-known abuses of children's rights in Nigeria is the practice of child marriage, which is also a significant social development issue. (HRW, 2022).

Prevalence of Child Marriages

Nigeria is the ninth African nation with the highest rate of child marriage, according to data released in 2021 by Talk Africana. Several reports have also revealed that child marriage is most prevalent in the Northern part of Nigeria, where rates of child marriage are approximated to 51.1% and 52% of girls married before the age of 18, in the Northeast and Northwest regions respectively (Girls Not Brides, n.d., Allen & Adekola, 2019). In addition, females may marry at the age of 16 and boys at the age of 18, according to Section 61 of Part I of the Northern Nigeria Laws Cap 102 (Laws of Northern Nigeria) 1991.

A study conducted by UNFPA-UNICEF shows that “650 million girls and women have experienced marriage as minors worldwide. An



estimated 44-67.6% of girls in Nigeria marry before their eighteenth birthday” (Adeyemi, 2023; Allen & Adekola, 2019; Mobolaji, 2020; Bolarinwa et al., 2022). According to Save the Children International, “78% of girls in the northern region of Nigeria marry before the age of 18” (Save the Children International, 2021).

The prevalence of child marriage in Nigeria has become a widespread menace eating deep into the fabric of the society; resulting in various social, health, and economic implications for children and their communities.

Religious Perspectives on Child Marriages

Religious beliefs play a significant role in sustaining child marriage practices in Northern Nigeria. Some Islamic interpretations allow marriage at puberty, leading to child marriages (Smith, 2019). Nigeria's diverse religion, encompassing both Christians and Muslims, is one of the world's largest communities. Despite the lack of reliable statistics, it is estimated to be roughly divided in half between the two. “Before the age of 18, more than 3,742,000 Nigerian females get married or enter into a union” (UNICEF, 2019).

Addressing religious perspectives is a key approach to combating child marriages. In the words of Amzat J. (2019) “Religion is a major institution that shapes all aspects of human life. It is a force-dominated species in Africa. Congregations are usually full of people praying for protection (i.e., against calamities) and prosperity (to escape poverty and related socio-economic calamities)”.

Christian Religion: Adebowale, SA. (2018) opined that the effect and impact of Christianity on the prevalence of child marriage are quite low and negligible (in contrast with the significant impact of Islamic religion). The author posits that Christian teachings and doctrines have stern consequences for child marriage, contributing to its low prevalence in Christian-dominated states. His position aligns with data published by UNICEF, which indicates that the rate of child marriage is as low as 10



% in states with a greater Christian population. In addition, all Christian-dominated states have domesticated the Child Rights Act (UNICEF 2021).

Islamic Religion: The dominant religion in Northern Nigerians is Islam, there is strict adherence to Islamic religion, to the point where it has become the cornerstone of their traditions and values. Marriage (Al-Zawaj) is seen in Islam as a partnership that promotes modesty, procreation, and the mutual love and fulfillment of the partners (Holy Quran 4:1, 25:74, 30:21), which justifies child marriages in the context of cultural norms.

This is especially true for Muslims living in the region, it has influenced their perspectives on child marriage, because it is a general notion that Islamic law does not forbid it, making it a custom rather than a crime. Sharia does not support the widespread practice of pressuring young girls under the age of 18 into marriage at the expense of their general well-being, health, and personal growth, especially since marriage is one of the holiest covenants in Islam. However, there are variations in every religion's interpretations, and gaps in knowledge around the northern region, which continue to perpetuate this menace.

Marriage is an institution pleasing to Almighty Allah (SWT), as the Holy Quran expressly provides:

“Among His proofs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves, to have tranquility and contentment with each other, and He placed in your hearts love and care towards your spouses. In this, there are sufficient proofs for people who think.” (Holy Quran 30:21).

Causes of Child Marriage

Child marriage in Nigeria is influenced by a confluence of factors, intricately woven into the socio-economic and cultural framework of the nation.



- 1. Poverty:** The concerning cycle of poverty in Nigeria is a key player in fostering child marriage. Families facing economic hardship often see marrying off their daughters as a way to reduce financial burdens and ensure their daughter's financial security. Girls are sometimes married off in exchange for a bride price, which provides immediate financial relief for the family. In many cases, families believe that marriage will offer their daughters protection and a better life, even if it means foregoing their education and personal development (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Girls Not Brides, 2022).
- 2. Cultural and Religious Practices:** This significantly influences the prevalence of child marriage. In some Nigerian communities, traditional practices endorse early marriage as a means of preserving family honor and controlling girls' sexuality. Additionally, certain interpretations of Islamic law allow for marriage as soon as a girl reaches puberty, which is commonly practiced in northern Nigeria. These cultural and religious norms often supersede national laws that set the legal age of marriage at 18 (BMC Public Health, 2021; Girls Not Brides, 2022).
- 3. Disparity in gender roles:** Gender inequality is a fundamental cause of child marriage. Societal norms and attitudes that prioritize boy's education and undervalue girl's education contribute to the practice. In numerous communities, societal expectations dictate that girls assume conventional roles as wives and mothers, thereby prioritizing these roles over their educational and other life goals. Gender discrimination perpetuates poverty and limits girls' opportunities, making early marriage a seemingly viable alternative (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Girls Not Brides, 2022).
- 4. Ayako Kohno *et al.* (2020)** identify gendered social roles and patriarchal cultural norms as significant factors contributing to the high child marriage rate in Nigerian communities. While women's roles often include childrearing and child care, they do not always hold power over economic and civic issues.



5. **Knowledge Gap:** Lack of access to informed education for girls (and people in communities where child marriage is prevalent) is both a cause and consequence of child marriage. Education provides the knowledge, skills, and opportunities that can lead to greater economic independence and improved health outcomes for young girls and boys; including their families and the society. In Nigeria, particularly in rural areas, girl's educational opportunities are constrained by economic barriers, safety concerns, and societal attitudes that do not prioritize their education (BMC Public Health, 2021; Girls Not Brides, 2022).
6. **Legal and Policy Gaps:** Despite Nigeria's national laws setting the legal marriage age at 18, enforcement is weak, and child marriage laws are not uniformly implemented across the country. Some states have not domesticated the Child Rights Act of 2003, and customary and religious laws often take precedence over statutory laws. This legal inconsistency creates an environment where child marriage can continue without significant legal repercussions (Girls Not Brides, 2022).
7. **Insecurity and Conflict:** In conflict-affected regions, such as those targeted by Boko Haram, the incidence of child marriage rises. Families often marry off their daughters as a protective strategy, believing this will shield them from violence, abduction, and sexual exploitation. The instability and displacement caused by conflict exacerbate vulnerabilities and reduce access to education and economic opportunities, further driving the practice of child marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2022).

Effects/Challenges of Child Marriage on Health; Education, Child, and Socio-Economic Development

The health consequences of child marriages are profound. It increases the risk of early pregnancy, spousal abuse, and social isolation while having a substantial negative influence on girls' health, educational possibilities, and economic prospects (UNFPA, 2021). Social isolation and its long-term effects are another grave consequence. Early pregnancy poses

significant health risks, including complications, in Northern Nigeria due to inadequate healthcare access (Nour, 2020).

“Child marriage has profound implications for the health and well-being of young girls. It increases the risks of early and unwanted pregnancies and maternal and infant mortality and perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender inequality” (BioMed Central 2020). Studies have shown that girls married before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence and less likely to complete their education, limiting their opportunities for economic independence and personal growth (Walker, 2020).

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, child marriage hinders the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. It contributes to a cycle of poverty and inequality by limiting their capacity to fully enjoy their rights (OHCHR, 2020). Child marriages significantly disrupt education, married girls are forced to drop out of school, further perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Human Rights Watch (2022), believes that “girls who stay in school are less likely to marry early and are more likely to contribute positively to their families and society”. The interplay between poverty and lack of education creates a vicious cycle that perpetuates child marriage (UNICEF, 2021).

Conclusion

Child marriage is a vile practice affecting children, families, and society. The importance of addressing root causes and adopting policies that consider impacted individuals cannot be overemphasized. Child marriages in Nigeria perpetuate poverty, limit education, expose girls to health risks, and hinder their economic and social contributions.

Nigeria's efforts to combat child marriages involve a multifaceted approach, involving cultural sensitivity, promoting girls' rights, strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing education, and fostering economic empowerment. Collaboration among stakeholders, including government, NGOs, and affected families is crucial for sustainable



change. By addressing the underlying socioeconomic factors and ensuring access to education, Nigeria can make significant strides in eradicating child marriage and ensuring a better future for young girls.

By combining the aforementioned strategies, Nigeria can make significant progress in reducing child marriages and promoting the well-being and rights of girls.

Recommendations

To eradicate child marriages in Northern Nigeria, comprehensive strategies involving stakeholders at all levels, including government, NGOs, community leaders, and families is a big step towards this combat. Efforts to eliminate child marriage are aligned with global initiatives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to end the practice by 2030 (UNICEF, 2020). To combat child marriages in Nigeria, a comprehensive approach is needed, especially in areas with high prevalence. Key measures include:

- Campaigning for a monitored and thorough implementation of existing laws against child marriages (Child Rights Act, which sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18).
- Improve access to reproductive health services and education to inform girls about their rights and health, along with establishing support systems including shelters, counseling, and legal aid.
- Drive equipped education through scholarships, incentives, and building more schools, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas, while providing financial support to keep them in school.
- Implement economic empowerment projects such as vocational training and life skills programs to enhance girl's economic and social status; through social protection programs and financial incentives, addressing a key driver of child marriage.
- Raise awareness about the harmful impacts of child marriage through community and religious leaders, local organizations, and education campaigns.



- Involve Indigenous community members in campaigning for a shift in cultural norms and attitudes towards early marriage, complemented by community education programs.
- Strengthen measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, enhance security in conflict-affected regions, and engage men and boys as allies to foster gender equality, working with international organizations, NGOs, and civil society to scale effective interventions.

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