



ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE AND ITS PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS THROUGH EDUCATION AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

AKEUTOL DAVID

College of Health Sciences, Department of Public Health,
University of Africa, Toru- Orua, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

akeutol.david@uat.edu.ng

+2348130541267

Abstract

Child marriage is a social norm in Nigeria, particularly in the Northern region and poses a public health concern as the resultant health effects on victims, especially girls, are often life threatening. This paper reveals how child marriage poses health challenges to victims and how education and policy implementation can be used as tools to ending the menace. Child marriage is a marriage contracted below the age of 18 years and Nigeria has a law prohibiting child marriage, but its implementation is inconsistent, as some states are yet to domesticate/enforce it. More so, the existing traditional, customary and Islamic laws make it difficult for the Child Right Act (CRA) to be implemented especially in the Northern States where Sharia law is upheld. Poverty, illiteracy of parents/relatives and humanitarian crisis were identified as causes of child marriage; victims of child marriage suffered health problems such as risk of violence, adverse birth outcomes, depression, low self-esteem, psychological disorders including drug abuse and alcohol dependence. Education and policy implementation were identified as keys to ending child marriage in Nigeria. Education- through sending all children to school regardless of gender; policy implementation- implementing the CRA fully in all the states of the federation. Recommendations were made that, the Government health agencies should partner with the National Orientation Agency and media houses to educate the public and create more awareness on the health implications of child marriage in all the states of the federation to end the menace.

Keywords: Child marriage, Girl child, Child Right Act, Health implications, Nigeria

Introduction

Child marriage is a common phenomenon in Nigeria especially among the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group in the North-East. In this region, most parents have no formal education and their customary laws do not condemn it either. The United Nations Population Fund (2013) in Braimah (2014) asserted that the betrothal of female children to adult males is still a regular phenomenon among the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group who occupy the northern part of Nigeria. The domestication of the Child Right Act (CRA) fully across Nigeria is not enforced due to the fact that the Act has not been passed into law in some states, leaving children in such states vulnerable. Many young girls are given out in marriage to older men without their consent in Nigeria for family gains, cementing of family friendship/relationship and other reasons best known to the parents. Chukwuemeka et al. (2018) opined that it is common to find a prevalence of such practices widespread in several parts of the world particularly in Africa, Asia and South America. Child marriage is a social malpractice, it is against the girl child and must be brought to an end for the girl child to have good quality of life and be able to make her own decisions concerning marriage which is a life-long relationship. The case of a former governor and former senator in North-East Nigeria marrying a 14 year old Hausa girl is one of such cases that raises serious concerns about the health and safety of the girl child.

Health, Nutrition and Population Global Practices [HNP GP] (2016) affirmed that measuring child marriage is needed to inform policy in Nigeria. More so, the share of women ages 18-22 who married as children in a survey was 42.1%, which can hinder academic attainment. The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development [FMWASD] (2021) in a conference tagged 'National strategy to end child marriage in Nigeria' stated it as a vision to end child marriage in

Nigeria by the year 2030. According to the United Nations [UN] (2015) Nigeria is seen as the most known country in Africa with vast population and resources with over 200 ethnic groups. Nigeria has the largest economy in Africa with an estimated 2015 Gross Domestic Product of \$521.8 billion yet the country has majority 62% of its citizens living in extreme poverty. Despite the efforts of the Federal government through the funding of many programmes to reduce poverty, increase income and ensure the survival of women, girls and children, there are still attitudes, beliefs and practices hindering government's efforts. One of such practices is the re-occurring child marriage practice. In spite of the Federal Government effort through the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, Human Right Activists and other bodies in bringing child marriage to an end in Nigeria, a little progress has been made.

HNPGP (2016) affirmed that there is a decline in the head count of girls marrying under the age of 15. Nevertheless, a lot of work still needs to be done considering the health/psychosocial implications of such practices on the girl child. Furthermore, it is argued that the persistent practice of early marriage in Nigeria is alarming despite the efforts of the Nigeria's International Human Rights. A greater effort is required to eradicate the persistent challenge of child marriage and proffer a solution as there is justification and legal backing for ending child marriage in Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development [FMWASD], 2021). There is a need for all states to enact the 1999 constitution on child marriage to end this practice in Nigeria as the Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC] (1989) Act 24, 28, 32 in Braimah (2014) states that children have the right to health, education and protection from economic exploitation; there is also the need to educate the populace on the adverse health outcomes of child marriage thereby making child marriage a history in Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to identify and proffer solution to the menace of child marriage and its health implications through education and policy implementation. The study will be guided with specific objectives such as to: discuss child marriage, ascertain the causes of child marriage, unravel the health implications of child marriage, and to discuss the need for education and policy implementation as keys to ending child marriage in Nigeria.

Concept of Child Marriage

A child is a human being/ individual who is under the age of 18years. In Nigeria, a Child is regarded as a minor, a person/individual who is below the age of adulthood and legal age of responsibility and accountability. Child marriage is recognized as a major development issue which affects girls in many developing countries and the practice has been linked to a number of health risks and lower education attainment. The negative impact of child marriage explains why the practice is prohibited by law, and why the elimination of the child marriage is part of the new Sustainable Development Goals (HNPGP, 2016). Child marriage is any marriage contracted under the age of 18years in Nigeria. FMWASD (2021) defined child marriage as a formal or an informal union before the age of full maturity (usually 18). It is an endemic socio- cultural practice that hampers the health and safety of the girl child. United Nations Children Fund [UNICEF] (2014) in Chukwuemeka et al. (2018) also asserted that child marriage is a custom all over the world, whereby children are given into marriage well before they attain puberty in most cases or even the age to get married as defined by several laws in Nigeria and other countries. World Health Organization [WHO] (2025) defined child marriage as marriage before the age of 18 which applies to both boys and girls but the practice is more common among young girls which often lead to complications during pregnancy and child birth causing death in young girls. It is appalling and a violation of human rights, and robs girls of their education.

Regional Perceptions and Opinions on Child Marriage

The perception and opinion on child marriage vary from one geographical region to the other in Nigeria. A research conducted by the research team of the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development from 2016-2021 revealed that in the North West region most girls were



allowed to make a choice of their marriage partner but not allowed to determine the period they should marry. Girls and women interviewed confessed that their mothers are usually more eager to marry out their daughters especially once they suspect that the girls have started 'Zance' (courtship), this is out of fear that the girl might bring dishonour to the family if left to have a long courtship.

In the North East region, the research team discovered that the practice of arranged marriage still prevails. This is used to foster political, economic and social alliances. Child marriage also prevailed as a result of belief that Islamic religion does not prohibit it and any attempt to prohibit child marriage is seen as a western invasion of a social order that has guided the lives of the people for centuries but Christians in this region are against child marriage. In the North Central region, respondents in this region especially in Kwara State described child marriage as a phenomenon that is gradually phasing out. Respondents in Niger and Kwara States attested that the Child Rights Act has been domesticated and modified to suit local content and that the Niger State government sponsors jingles on girls' education and UNICEF has a conditional cash transfer programme in the state to help drive enrolment and keep children interested in schools.

In the South Eastern region, the survey team found out that the practice of child marriage was steeped in tradition and culture. In Ebonyi State, majority of the respondents affirmed that their major problem was not child marriage but teenage pregnancy and co-habitation of under aged girls. In the South South region, child marriage is not prevalent as the Child Rights Law was passed in 2008 and 2016 in Edo and Bayelsa States respectively. In the South West region, the research team also found out from respondents that there was no known period when Child marriage was most prevalent. Instead when older girls of ages 16 or 17 get pregnant, they are encouraged by their families to move in with the male responsible for the pregnancy and live with him as the mother of his child. In Ekiti State, the Child Rights Act is domesticated and enforced.

Causes of Child Marriage

Child marriages in Nigeria have been linked to a lot of factors which are poverty, illiteracy of parents, practice of polygamy, gender discrimination/inequality, low value of the girl child, social norms and practices, humanitarian crisis and insecurity. The Advocates for Human Right in the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Right (2014) agreed that there are multiple factors that contribute to the prevalence of forced and early marriage, including lack of quality education for girls, systemic and inter- generational poverty and humanitarian crisis resulting from natural disasters or conflicts, and long term practice may lead the community to view the practice as normal because everybody does it. Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey[NDHS](2013) in FMWASD (2021) buttressed that Northern Nigeria has some of the highest rates of child marriage in the world with an estimated 65% among children below the age of 18years with geographical location or cultural landscape, poverty and lack of education identified as key risk and factors for child marriage.

Public Health Implications of Child Marriage

Majority of the Nigerian Population do not see the immediate negative health outcomes associated with child marriage. Most people see it as a cultural norm and do not take into consideration the resultant health outcomes the girl child faces in the marriage. There is a risk of having Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) at child birth, emotional and mental health issues. Global Health Advocacy Incubator [GHAI] (2021) posited that child marriage leads to child sex which leads to early pregnancy and a range of negative health consequences including maternal and fetal mortality. In fact, complications linked to pregnancy and child birth are among the leading causes of death for girls between the ages of 15 and 19. In addition, the girl child is more likely to suffer from intimate partner violence, cancer, heart disease, stroke and a heightened risk of becoming infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Furthermore, child brides are also at an increased risk of developing serious psychiatric disorders such as anti-social personality disorder, major depression and specific phobias, disorders which often push them into taking nicotine, drugs and alcohol



dependence. With these, it can be seen that child marriage poses a serious threat to the health of the girl child and is a public health concern. Okala and Uche (2024) conducted a research on 'The health consequences of child marriage among rural women: Evidence from Igbo-Eze North, South East Nigeria' and findings revealed a significant association between child marriage and adverse physical health outcomes, including heightened rates of maternal mortality, inadequate prenatal care and increased vulnerability to infectious diseases.

More so, mental health assessments indicated a higher prevalence of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among women who experienced child marriage. Reproductive health implications were also observed with a higher incidence of obstetric complications and adverse birth outcomes among this cohort. The heightened rate of maternal mortality among the rural women could be as a result of inadequate health facilities, lack of access to these health facilities, inadequate manpower or high rate of poverty which calls for government attention. Plan International (2025) corroborated that child marriage increases the risk of violence, illness and even death for girls. Child marriage exposes girls to be coerced into early sexual activity when they are not psychologically or physically ready to deal with child birth. According to WHO (2025) complications in pregnancy and child birth are the leading cause of death in girls and 65% of all obstetric fistula occur in girls under 18. Seta (2023) affirmed that child marriages have a more significant impact on women's health because of early pregnancies and the consequences of dropping out of school.

Ending Child Marriage and its Public Health Implications through Policy Implementation and Education

Policy Implementation

According to WHO (2025), Government of nations should enforce 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. The policies should also include mobilisation of 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; providing girls who are already married with options for schooling, employment, livelihood skills, sexual and reproductive health Information and services (including HIV prevention). Helpers Foundation (2024) opined that there should be harmonization of existing relevant policies about ending child marriage to identify gaps and improve on those policies to achieve positive results. UNICEF in 2024 had a high level national dialogue on 'Ending child marriage' hosted by the Government of Nigeria, and at the end of the event, the stakeholders said they were committed to ending child marriage in Nigeria by year 2030 through collective action, deepened collaboration and the deployment of additional policies and resources at federal, state and community levels. Adebambo (2010) identified a number of international Human Rights Conventions and Instruments which Nigeria is signatory to in order to kick against child marriage. Just to mention a few - Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, Articles 19,24,28,29,34 and 36; African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child 1990; and Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, Article 16.

Education

To solve a societal problem such as child marriage in Nigeria, there is a need for the government through its health agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), stakeholders and well-meaning individuals to partner with the National Orientation Agency and media houses to create more awareness on the health implications of child marriage, especially, the girl child and the punishable offence enshrined in the CRA for aiding and abating such a practice. More so, free and equal educational opportunities should be given to both boys and girls in each state of the federation for them to be empowered with knowledge, attitudes and skills that will prepare them for the future. This is already active in some states and a lot still has to be done considering the endemic nature especially in Northern Nigeria. WHO (2025) stated that its guidelines reinforces the interagency technical guidelines on sexuality education, emphasizing that comprehensive sexuality education is key to solving the problem; offering conditional cash transfers or incentives



as a broad strategy to increase educational attainment and reduce child marriage as a part of social protection interventions for girls at higher risk of child marriage; removal of barriers to education and ensure girls' completion of 12 years quality education.

The Domestication/Implementation of the Child Right Act with its Challenges and the Need to Abolish Traditional/Customary Laws that Support Child Marriage

In 2003, Nigeria adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) making Child marriage illegal in Nigeria. However some states in Nigeria are yet to domesticate the act and implementation is low in states that have domesticated it (Helpers Foundation, 2024). Braimah (2014) affirmed that the passing of the CRA 2003 signaled Nigeria's intentions to protect and preserve the rights of the Nigerian child. No person under the age of 18 years is capable of contracting a valid marriage, and accordingly, a marriage so contracted is null and void and of no effect. Whosoever and any contravention of either sections 21 or 22 amounts to a fine of 500,000 Naira (the equivalent of £2 046 or \$3123) or imprisonment for a term of five years or to both a fine and imprisonment. The law however, has been passed but some states have not completely enacted it. Each state had to pass the Bill into their state laws for it to become enforceable in order to guarantee and protect the rights of the child. So children may have no rights in states which are yet to enact the law and consequently if child marriage is practiced in such a state, it is not an offence.

This is a sensitive issue that needs to be handled with alacrity by the Nigerian Government and all stakeholders. Braimah (2014) affirmed that Nigeria operates a tripartite legal system with civil, customary and Islamic laws operating simultaneously; in relation to marriage the federal government has no control over customary and Islamic marriages but only marriages conducted in a civil manner. What this means is that according to Part 1, section 61 of the 1999 constitution, when a person marries a child under Islamic law in Northern Nigeria and is consequently in contravention of the CRA, such a person cannot be prosecuted because the federal government would be interfering with an Islamic marriage and would be violating the Islamic laws. There is therefore, the need for the Federal, State and Local Government; all its traditional/community leaders and custodians of cultures/customs to have a dialogue on ending child marriage completely in Nigeria since the health implications on the victims are life-threatening and overwhelming. Those who give out their children in marriage should rather consider the health and well-being of their children rather than what they stand to gain from it.

Conclusion

Child marriage is a menace and takes place in all ethnic groups in Nigeria but prevalent in Northern Nigeria as the customary and Islamic laws encourage such practices. It takes different forms including betrothal at birth. Different authors agreed that child marriage occurs as a result of poverty, illiteracy of parents, gender discrimination among others and the health implications are partner violence, pregnancy complications, adverse birth outcomes, depression among others which are life-threatening. The paper also identified tools such as education of the girl child and policy implementation-the CRA 2003 across the 36 states as key to ending child marriage and its public health implications in Nigeria.

Suggestions

The following suggestions were made:

1. The various state governments and non-governmental organizations should partner to provide free education and free educational materials to children, in that way, more parents would send their children to school and child marriage will be history in Nigeria.
2. The Federal Government as the highest level of Government should give monetary incentives to states that have enacted the CRA and are fully implementing it so as to motivate the states that are yet to enact it, to do so.
3. The health agencies at the federal, state and local levels should partner with the National Orientation Agency and media platforms/houses to create more awareness



and enlightenment on the health implications of child marriage to discourage the act by parents and the society at large.

4. The Government should organise free skill acquisition programmes for people especially in the rural areas and in the north where child marriage is prevalent to help reduce poverty.
5. Health personnels/workers, students in the health discipline in higher institutions of learning should from time to time include 'health implications of child marriage as a health talk in the hospitals, health centres, communities and markets during community service/community health campaigns to create more awareness and help end the practice in Nigeria.

References

- Adebambo, A. V. (2010). *Cultural influence on child marriage. Focus on Northern Nigerians resident in Ogun State, Nigeria*. A project submitted to the Department of Home Science and Management (Child development and family studies), College of Food Science and Human Ecology, University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria.
- Braimah, T. S. (2014). Child marriage in Northern Nigeria: Section 61 of Part 1 of the 1999 Constitution and the Protection of Children against child marriage. *Human Rights Law Journal*, 24(8), 2-12.
- Chukwuemeka, B., Ugwu, H. N. & Momoh, A. R. (2018). Early child marriage in Nigeria; causes, effects and remedies. *Social Science Research Journal*, 4(3), 12-23.
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Article 19, 24, 28, 32. United Nations.
- Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (2021). National strategy to end child marriage in Nigeria 2016-2021. FMWASD.
- Health, Nutrition and Population Global Practices [HNPGP] (2016). Knowledge Brief- Basic profile of child marriage in Nigeria. World Bank Group.
- Helpers Foundation (2024). *17 ways to end Child marriage in Nigeria*. Helpers Foundation.
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR] (2014). Preventing and Eliminating Child, Early and Forced marriage. 19, U.N.Doc.
- Okala, A. U & Uche, I. B. (2024). The health consequences of child marriage among rural women: Evidence from Igbo-Eze North, South East Iberia. *Global Health Economics and Sustainability*, 2(3), 2840.
- Plan International (2025). *Serious health consequences of child marriage*. Desiree Bultenbos Canada. plancanada.ca
- Seta, R. A. (2023). Child marriage and it's impact on health: A study of perceptions and attitudes in Nepal. *Journal of Global Health Reports*, 7, e 2023073.
- United Nations Population Fund (2013). Early marriage in Nigeria. <http://Nigeria.unfpa.org/Nigeria-child>
- United Nations Children Fund (2015). *UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage in Nigeria*. UNICEF.
- United Nations Children Fund (2015). A profile of child marriage in Africa. UNICEF, New York.
- United Nations Children Fund (2014). A profile of child marriage in Africa. UNICEF, New York.
- World Health Organization [WHO] (2025). WHO guidelines on preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes among adolescents in low and middle income countries. Department of Sexual and Reproductive Health Research.
- World Health Organization (2025). *Child marriages*. WHO Departmental Update.