



## Review

# Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Nigeria

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### Abstract

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Child marriage is one of the leading causes of teenage pregnancy. Teenage pregnancy is a situation whereby a female child is pregnant in her teenage. This study reviews the major causes, consequences, and solutions that can be enacted to end child marriage as one of the means to reduce teenage pregnancy to its barest minimum. Gender bias promotes the early marriage of girls. Lack of education, religious hurdles and barriers, myths and misconceptions about early marriage, insecurity, pressures from older members of the family and community, provision for heirs to the throne, hatred for girl-child in a patriarchal society and a kind of disobedience are some of the causes of child marriage. Implications of child marriage and teenage pregnancy include complications during childbirth, termination of the child's education, domestic violence, and reduction in the economy, and lack of basic amenities and care. Quality education is the major key to end child marriage. Enacting legal laws against child marriage will indirectly reduce the rate of teenage pregnancies.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence, Vesico Vagina Fistula (VVF), Teenage pregnancy, Child marriage

## INTRODUCTION

Child Marriage is defined as a formal or an informal union before the age of full maturity, usually, 18 years old, is a multi-faceted sociocultural and endemic harmful practice that adversely impacts the personal development and future opportunities of the Nigerian children. UNICEF defines child marriage as a formal or informal union before the age of 18 years, which is a reality for both boys and girls, especially girls. It is mostly influenced by traditional, cultural, and religious beliefs that have been passed from one generation to another.

Child Marriage is one of the developmental challenges affecting children in Nigeria. Teenage pregnancy is a situation whereby a female person is pregnant in her teenage (Nyakubega, 2009). Teenage pregnancy has attracted a great deal of concern and attention from religious leaders, the general public, policymakers, and social scientists, particularly in the developed and less

developed countries especially in Nigeria (Alabi and Oni, 2017).

Prevention of child marriage in Nigeria (the largest country in Africa), remains a significant social, economic, and health problem. Nigeria still faces the daunting task of harnessing its vast natural and human resources to effectively reduce this harmful practice. There is increased need especially now than ever before to evolve strategies, build structures and institutionalize social, legal, and educational system reforms to facilitate a sustainable National response to end child marriage and all the associated ills.

It's the age of women with world leaders such as Germany's Angela Merkel and Britain's Theresa May, taking the world by storm. However, the story is different in Nigeria, where 43% of girls are married off before their 18th birthday. Early marriage threatens girl's lives and

health, and it limits their prospects. Girls pressed into early marriage often become pregnant while still adolescents, increasing the risk of complications in pregnancy or childbirth.

These complications are one of the leading causes of death among older adolescents in Nigeria. Adolescent fertility in low- and middle- income countries presents a severe impediment and can lead to school dropout, lost productivity, and intergenerational transmission of poverty. Tradition and family pressure have also been identified as the main causes of early girl child marriage and teenage pregnancy (Parasuramanu et al., 2010).

The impacts of child marriage are pervasive, from health risks associated with childhood pregnancy, delivery, and parenting to mental health issues due to isolation and stress. The median age for the first marriage among Nigerian women is 18 and 27 among men. Studies have found that child brides are at greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and confronting reproductive challenges: Girls under age 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than those in their twenties, and girls under 18 are 60 percent more likely to lose their child. Victims of child marriage are more susceptible to domestic violence including marital rape, an act not recognized as a crime in many patriarchal societies – perpetuated freely and without consequence.

Girls are less likely to remain in school, limiting the opportunity to accumulate skills, savings, or endowments, according to Joan Johnson-Freese, thus promoting the cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and child marriage. Ultimately, victims are confined to domestic roles without agency, blocked from opportunities that could translate to improved economic productivity. The cycle further diminishes young women's confidence and reinforces their inability to participate in society. Also, births resulting from child marriages are said to be "too soon, too close, and too many" (Gbadamosi, 2007).

The National Strategic Plan to End Child Marriage in Nigeria 2016 – 2021 aims to highlight the multi-sectoral, multifaceted activities needed to bring about successful elimination of this harmful practice based on the premise of a strengthened coordination platform led by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development.

The key actors for this include but are not limited to various MDAs such as health, education, internal affairs, budget and planning; traditional and religious bodies, civil society organizations, foreign and National donors, and implementing partners. Key to effective results is the necessary support of the three executive arms of Government to ensure the necessary governance, conducive policy environment, and a sensitized judiciary for enforcement of punitive laws and regulations if Nigeria is to indeed make headway in advancing gender equality and for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Due to the increasing rate of child marriage which

is one of the leading causes of teenage pregnancy, this report, therefore, reviews the emergence, causes, and effects of child marriage.

## Teenage

Teenage is often used interchangeably with adolescence. Alabi and Oni (2017) described this period as the second decade of life. He observed that it is the most important and sensitive period of one's life when a person is in the second genital stage of psychological development.

According to Stephen et al. (2017), female teenagers face a wide range of issues every day relating to their psychological, physiological, emotional, and socio-cultural concerns. Turner and Helms (1993) reported that the teen years fall between the ages of 13 and 19 years. Onuzulike (2002) described the teen years as a bridge between life as a child, and life as an adult, which allows the individual to drop childhood behaviors and learn the adult life-style.

There are several views and opinions among authors and researchers on the specific age at which it begins or ends. In the view of Adesomowo (1988), teen years start at either 11 or 12 years and lasts to 19 years when the character of a person takes the permanent form. According to Nwosu (2005), adolescents include all persons aged 13 to 19 years who constitute about 20 percent of the world population.

This period, they opined, marks the onset of puberty and biological maturity. It is a crucial period in the life of an individual because many key social, economic and demographic events occur that set the stage for adult life, While Ukekwe (2001) described it as the most important period in human life, which if not properly handled, could lead to the most disastrous consequences in later life, especially among females.

## Concept of Teenage Pregnancy

Teenage or adolescent pregnancy, defined as pregnancy before the age of 20, is a reality for 7.3 million girls in developing countries every year (Williamson 2013). The teenage pregnancy prevalence among females (25-49 years) in Mozambique is 35%, placing Mozambique among the top 10 countries in the world concerning teenage pregnancy (Pires and Baatsen, 2016).

Teenage pregnancy is closely associated with child marriage. In urban areas and particularly in the south of the country, there has been a rise in teenage pregnancies out of wedlock. The largest numbers of teenage pregnancies are found in Nampula (107,553 girls) and Zambezia (81,126 girls) provinces. In total, more than 439,453 women aged 20-24 had their first child before their 18th birthday, 85,257 of which were aged less than 15 at their first childbirth. The proportion

of girls married and pregnant in adolescence decreased slightly between 1997 and 2011 (Loaiza and Liang, 2013).

Generally, studies related to the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy acknowledge that it is associated with poor social and economic conditions. Poverty, low education, being from an ethnic minority, lack of access to SRH information and services: all increase the likelihood for adolescent girls to become pregnant (Williamson, 2013).

Social and cultural norms and values at family and community level play a role. For example, parent/ child closeness or connectedness, parental supervision or regulation of children's activities, and parents' values against teen intercourse (or unprotected intercourse) influence young people's risk for teenage pregnancy (Miller, 2001).

In Mozambique, girls from urban areas are significantly more likely to get pregnant before the age of 15 than girls from rural areas, although they are more likely to have access to information through radio and other means, which is found to reduce the likelihood of getting pregnant before the age of 15 (Loaiza and Liang, 2013).

As with child marriage, early pregnancy can have immediate and lasting consequences for a girl's health, education, and income-earning potential, which is often passed on to her children. Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death among girls aged 15-19 (Williamson 2013). In Mozambique and especially in the Northern region, it was found that adolescent mothers' children are significantly more malnourished than children of mothers in other age groups at the national level (Loaiza and Liang, 2013).

## Causes

According to Aduradola (2013), the causes of child marriage include cultural and social pressure; persecution, forced migration, and slavery; financial challenges; politics and financial relationship and religion. Poverty and economic transactions; notions of morality are major causes of child marriage (Adebambom, 2010).

Underlying causes of early marriage are many and include poverty, parental desire to prevent sexual relations outside marriage and the fear of rape, a lack of educational or employment opportunities for girls, and traditional notions of the primary role of women and girls as wives and mothers (de Alwis, 2008).

In many societies, women and girls are subject to deep-rooted norms, attitudes, and behaviors that assign them a lower status than men and boys within the household, the community, and in society at large. These beliefs deny girls their rights and stifle their ability to play an equal role at home and in the community (Davis et al., 2013).

According to (Jain et al., 2011; Nzenwata, 2018), early marriage can arise due to several reasons such as Religious hurdles and barriers, gender bias promotes the early marriage of girls, lack of education, myths and misconceptions about early marriage, insecurity, pressures from older members of the family and community, provision for heirs to the throne, hatred for girl-child in a patriarchal society and a kind of disobedience.

Parents who are disposed to giving out their under-aged wards in marriage imbibe the fear of their daughters being pregnant out of wedlock and the only available option could be marriage at an early age (Giyani, 2009). Another factor that could make child marriage to flourish is life-threatening conflict and persistent insecurity. When families live in unsafe regions, parents may genuinely believe that marrying their daughters is the best way to protect them from danger (Eboh et al., 2020). The bride price is the money paid by a man marrying a girl to the parents of the girl to get their consent. Bearak (2006), and Nour (2006), opined that in some countries, the younger the bride, the higher the bride price she may fetch. This practice according to Soraya (2006), Boyden (2012), and Showdhury (2004) creates an economic incentive where girls are sought and married early by her family to the highest bidder.

Gaffney-Rhys (2011), has opined that child marriage can also be seen as a means of ensuring a girl's economic security particularly if she lacks family members to provide for her.

## Effect / Consequences

Child marriage has been known to have a lot of adverse effects on a female child. Some of the effects include Klasen and Pieter (2012);

**i. Girl's Child Education:** Child marriage has a direct negative impact on the child's education; child marriage means an automatic termination of the child's education. Most of their husbands do not see the significance of sending them to school and of course the parents are not bothered. According to Klasen and Pieter (2012), child marriage affects female labor force participation in the area of returns when they are actively employed.

**ii. Health implication:** One of the health implications of child marriage is Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF). VVF, commonly known as Obstetric fistula is a hole between the vagina and rectum or bladder that is caused by prolonged obstructed labor leaving a woman incontinent of urine or feces or both. It is a long term consequence of early marriage, where a child that is too young to wed gets pregnant and is physically unable to deliver a baby naturally. Without access to emergency obstetric care or a caesarian section, she and the baby may die. If they survive, she may experience so much internal pelvic damage that results in urine or feces leaks, or both

continuously, without any control.

**iii. Domestic Abuse/Marital Violence:** A girl married at the age of 13 tends to suffer different kinds of abuse such as rape, violence, and what it may from her husband. At that tender age, the child has no idea what marriage means and she's already exposed to what adults experience in marriage.

**iv. Lack of care/social/basic needs:** Most of these children are married into a polygamous home where they lack care, protection, basic needs, and the likes.

## Solution

A female child also deserves the opportunity given to male children at their young age, they deserve to be loved, cared for, and not sent to hell all in the name of marriage. Empowering already married girls with information, skills, and supportive networks; ensuring girl's education; Shifting attitudes via community mobilization and outreach; Enacting and enforcing laws and policies that delay marriage. Involvement of traditional and religious leaders to end child marriage; Mobilizing community members; Working with husbands of young brides, young men, future husbands, boys and brothers; and Publicizing the example of prominent individuals who are positive change agents are possible resolutions to end child marriage which is one of the leading causes of teenage pregnancy.

## CONCLUSION

Child marriage and teenage pregnancy have indeed mitigated the prospect of teenagers. A female child has the same right as a male child and no discrimination whatsoever should be made.

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