

GIRL CHILD MARRIAGE: THE OPINION OF IN-SCHOOL YOUNG GIRLS ON THE PREFERRED AGE FOR MARRIAGE IN PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIAEnvuladu E.A.*¹, Umaru R.J.², Iorapuu N.O.², Osagie I.A.³, Mohammed A.³ and Okoh E.O.³¹Department of Community Medicine, University of Jos, Nigeria.²Department of Social Science Education, University of Jos, Nigeria.³Department of Community Medicine, Jos University Teaching Hospital, Plateau State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Marriage for the girl child at the age lower than the legally stipulated 18 years is usually a force marriage and done without her consent, it is therefore a violation of human right and a discrimination against women. This study was aimed at assessing the opinion of young girls on their preferred age for marriage. It was a cross sectional study conducted among 4768 secondary school girls from 21 public schools in the three senatorial zones in Plateau State. The findings showed that the preferred age of marriage for most of the girls was between the ages of 19-25years (77.1%) and 91% said it is because early marriage will have an adverse effect on their education while 94.5% said it will have an adverse effect on their health. Place of residence and parental educational status was found to be statistically associated with the preferred age of marriage. This study concluded that young girls in this study preferred to get married after the age of 18years and this in addition to other reasons is because they want to be allowed to obtain education and have healthy lives

KEY WORDS: Girl child, marriage, in-school, senatorial zones, Plateau State.**INTRODUCTION**

Female children getting married at the age lower than 18 years is not new in Nigeria especially in the northern part of the country which has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world where the age of marriage could be even lower than 12 years despite the child's Right Act which sets the legal age of marriage at 18years.^[1] Marriage for the girl child at the age lower than the legally stipulated 18 years is usually a forced marriage and done without her consent.^[1] It is a violation of human right and a discrimination against women since the girl child is not given equal right as the boy to fully develop, freely choose a man of her choice and enter into marriage at the right age.^[2,3,4]

Early marriage for whatever reason whether poverty, ignorance, culture or lack of education is a violation of human rights as such a violation of the right of the girl child^{5,6}. It has been associated with negative outcomes, some of which are the adverse effect on the developmental growth of the girl child, the education and general health of the girl child. It contributes to the higher poverty rate among females, which may become a circle of poverty for the next generation, the negative effects extends also to the children and the society at large.^[7]

The questions raised by many is whether any girl will choose to marry at an early age knowing the negative outcome it will have on her and when alternatives are given to her.

There is an assumption that once a girl is married she has become a woman and this has been debated among Legislators in Nigeria forgetting that even when it is presumed that during marriage the girl would have given her consent, consent that is not free and full when one partner is immature is a violation of human right as recognized by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR).^[8]

Sadly, there are quite a number of persons who do not know that child marriage is a violation of human right and have no idea of the consequences of child marriage and see it as a way of life and deviation from it will be going against the cultural values.^[9]

Although several bodies are working to ensure behavioural change on child marriage, it is important that decisions taken concerning them should not be done without them.^[10] The opinion of these girls is therefore very important in informing any meaning decision that will be taken concerning child marriage in Nigeria. This study therefore aimed at assessing the opinion of girls in

public secondary schools across the three senatorial zones in Plateau state on their preferred age for marriage.

METHODOLOGY

A cross sectional study design was used for the study, using the formula for calculating sample size in a cross sectional study, a minimum sample size of 380 was calculated but a total of 4768 girls who gave consent were included in the study. The study population comprised of secondary school girls across the three senatorial zones in Plateau State namely; Northern, Central and Southern senatorial zones to ensure the entire state was captured in the study. A list of the number of public secondary schools across the senatorial zones was obtained; there were 154 public secondary schools in the Northern zone, 115 in the Central zone and 129 in the Southern zone. The inclusion criteria for the schools were public schools with girls while boys schools alone were excluded from the study. From the list of the public schools, 7 schools were selected from each of the Senatorial zones across the state through a simple random sampling technique by balloting giving a

total of 21 schools. In each of the school selected a cluster sampling technique was used to include all the females who gave their informed verbal consent for the study.

Permission was obtained from the State Ministry of Education, the zonal education officers and the principals of all the schools taking part in the study.

A semi structured self –administered questionnaire, which was pre-tested among secondary school girls in a public school in Jos North LGA, was used to obtain information from the girls.

Data cleaning was done and the questionnaires that were not properly filled or incomplete were discarded. The data was analyzed using SPSS version 20 statistical software. Chi square test was used to determine significant associations between some socio-demographic characteristics and the choice of the preferred age for marriage. A p-value of less than or equal to 0.05 was considered significant.

RESULTS

Table 1: Socio-Demographics of Secondary School Girls

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHICS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
SENATORIAL ZONES		
Northern zone	1116	27.8%
Central zone	1921	47.9%
Southern zone	976	24.3%
Age group		
< 18yrs	3575	89.1%
19-25yrs	438	10.9%
Marital status		
Married	74	1.8%
Single	3939	98.2%
Present class		
JSS 1	241	6.0%
JSS 2	329	8.2%
JSS 3	916	22.8%
SS 1	1212	30.2%
SS 2	743	18.5%
SS 3	572	14.3%
Residence		
Urban	1809	45.1%
Rural	2204	54.9%
Religion		
Christianity	3610	90%
Islam	403	10%

N=4013

Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of parents N=4013

Socio-demographics	Frequency	Percentage
Father's Educational status		
None	423	10.6%
Primary	631	15.7%
Secondary	2127	53.1%
Tertiary	832	20.6%
Father's employment		
Civil servants	1986	49.5%

Farmers	1192	29.7%
Traders/ business	713	17.8%
Not employed	122	3.0%
Mother's education		
None	981	24.5%
Primary	1649	41.1%
Secondary	1225	30.5%
Tertiary	158	3.9%

Table 3: Respondent's preferred age for marriage

	Frequency	Percent
Preferred age for marriage		
<18yrs	377	9.4%
19-25yrs	3099	77.1%
26-32yrs	481	12.0%
>33	56	1.4%
Total	4013	100%
Does early marriage have any adverse effect on education		
Yes	3650	91%
No	363	9%
Total	4013	100%
Does marriage have any adverse effect of Health		
Yes	3794	94.5%
No	219	5.5%
Total	4013	100%

Table 4: Determinants of preferred age for marriage

Variables	preferred age for marriage		total	p-value
	<18yrs	>18yrs		
Senatorial zone				
Northern Zone	57(5.1%)	1059(94.9%)	1116(100%)	0.000
Central Zone	203(10.6%)	1718(89.4%)	1921(100%)	
Southern Zone	117(12%)	859(88%)	976(100%)	
Residential Area				
Urban	136(7.6%)	1673(92.4%)	1809(100%)	0.000
Rural	240(10.9%)	1964(89.1%)	2204(100%)	
Father's Education				
None	45(10.7%)	378(89.3%)	423(100%)	0.005
Primary	59(9.4%)	572(90.6%)	631(100%)	
Secondary	172(8.1%)	1955(91.9%)	2127(100%)	
Tertiary	81(9.7%)	751(90.3%)	832(100%)	
Father's Employment				
Employed	172(8.7%)	1814(91.3%)	1986(100%)	0.172
Not employed	12(9.8%)	110(90.2%)	122(100%)	
Farmers	111(9.3%)	1081(90.7%)	1192(100%)	
Traders	82(11.5%)	631(88.5%)	713(100%)	
Mother's Education				
None	85(8.7%)	896(91.3%)	981(100%)	0.204
Primary	144(8.7%)	1505(91.3%)	1649(100%)	
Secondary	129(10.5%)	1096(89.5%)	1225(100%)	
Tertiary	19(12%)	139(88%)	158(100%)	

Out of the 4768 questionnaires that were administered, only 4013 were properly filled and analyzed giving a response rate of 84.2%. The girls were within the ages of 10 to 25years, 89% of them were less than 18 years and

only about 11% were between 19 and 25 years. Their mean age was 15.7+/- 2.7. Overall, 27.8% were from the Northern senatorial zone, 47.9% from the central senatorial zone and 24.3% from the Southern senatorial

zone. Majority (30.2%) were in senior secondary class 1(SS1), 45.1% resided in the urban areas while 54.9% resided in the rural areas.

Most had parents with secondary school education [father (53.1%), mothers (30.5%)].

Out of the 74 who were married, only 12(16.2%) said they wanted to get married or loved the man they were married to, others were either compelled by their parents or had to marry because parents had no money.

The findings here showed that the preferred age of marriage range from 12 years to 35 years but the mean preferred age for marriage was 23.74+/- 3.5. Most of the girls mentioned ages between 19-25years (77.1%) as preferred age for marriage. Reasons given for 91% was that early marriage will have an adverse effect on their education while 94.5% said it will have an adverse effect on their health.

In assessing the factors that were associated with the choice of a preferred age for marriage among the girls, location and place of residence was found to be significantly associated with their choices, more girls in the Northern senatorial zone which is an urban area compare to the other senatorial zones and those in the urban area preferred to get married after the age of 18 years compare others. There was also a significant association between father's education and the preferred age for marriage as those whose fathers had some form of education preferred to get married after the age of 18years compared to those whose fathers had lower level of education. Both mother's education and father's employment was not found to be statistically associated with the preferred age for marriage among the school girls in this study.

DISCUSSION

Among those who were married in this study, majority did not give consent to be married, which is a demonstration of what is obtainable in many parts of Nigeria where many young girls who get married before the age of 18 years do so without their full consent or are forced to do so.¹¹ Although the Child Rights Act stated that the minimum age for marriage should be 18 years when the girl can give consent herself, not all the states in Nigeria execute the law. Forcing a girl to marry earlier than 18 years is a violation of the fundamental right of the girl and therefore a form of violence against the girl child.

While some people are still debating on when it is ideal for a girl to get married, it is important that we hear from the girls what their opinion on the matter is which is what this study did. Majority of the girls in this study cutting across both the rural and the urban areas think it is better to get married after the age of 18years, with the mean preferred age being 23.7 years. They backed their reason for the choice of this age with the fact that getting

married earlier will affect their education and health adversely. The opinion of these girls on the age for marriage is not different from that of many other young girls. It's been seen from a study that girls themselves usually wish to marry later viewing marriage as an interruption to their education and therefore a loss on their part.^[12]

Apart from ending their education prematurely or not having the opportunity to even go to school at all¹³, most young girls are made to marry men that are much older than them placing them in a position that is difficult for them to negotiate sex and putting them at a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDs. Many also get pregnant and give birth when their bodies are not matured enough and so end up with obstructed labor and subsequently obstetric fistula, a condition that can result to stigma and violence^[14,15,16]

There are a number of factors that can influence the decision of early marriage, one of which is the environment. Early marriage is more prevalent in the rural areas than the urban areas¹¹. As seen in this study, the girls who preferred to get married at less than 18 years were mostly from the southern senatorial zone which is more rural than the other two senatorial zones and a similar reflection was seen among those who reside in the rural area. Ignorance, low socioeconomic status and low educational level are also leading factors that are linked to early marriage, poverty has been associated with teens marriage with reported teen marriage seen more in disadvantage homes.^[17]

Those in the rural senatorial zone and those whose father's had lower educational level preferred marriage at less than 18 years and perhaps since most fathers are the decision makers with little or no contribution from the mothers like in most African countries, the mothers education was not associated with the preferred age for marriage here. Reports from the study conducted in a rural area of Pakistan demonstrated the influence of parental education on child marriage, while parents with little or no education said that girls should be allowed to get married before the age of 18 years, parents with at least secondary school education said the girls should not be allowed to marry before the age of 18 years to enable them have a healthier life and attain a good educational standard concurring with the report of this study.^[18]

If Nigeria is to achieve reduction in maternal mortality and improve child health, then the recommendation of the United Nations on the reduction of child marriage and the voice of the young girls in this study on the preferred age of marriage should be respected.^[19,20,21]

CONCLUSION

The young secondary school girls in this study attested that child marriage is usually without their consent and their mean preferred age for marriage is 23.7 years. Reasons given for the preferred age are that child

marriage has an adverse effect on both their education and their health. Important factors found to be significantly associated with child marriage here is living in the rural area and low educational levels of fathers who are the decision makers in most families.

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