

CHECKING EARLY GIRL-CHILD MARRIAGE THROUGH CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS STUDIES FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Child marriage is very common in Nigeria especially in the northern part and poor rural areas where most girls got married between 12 and 17 years, and were committed to arranged marriage without their consent. Poverty, ignorance and social cultural norms are the major factors leading to girls marrying early. Most of these girls as a result of immaturity were forced or deceived into marriage because their parents see marriage as a cultural rite that protects their daughters from sexual assault. The girls were also seen as economic burden and should be married off to enhance their families' standard of living. Child marriage infringes upon the right, freedom and damages the health and autonomy of young girls. Child early marriage denied them educational opportunities which hindered development, leads to poverty and has a serious negative impact on their health and decision-making capacities as they were compelled to remain in a loveless and violent marriage. This paper examined Christian Religious Studies as an indispensable instrument for checking early child marriage, because it influences people's character, ethical standard, moral behaviour and standard of judgment. It also emphasizes on the common good of all which will definitely promote national development. A number of recommendations were made which include the stoppage of early child marriage before 18 years for them to acquire the skills that will enable them live good lives and contribute to national development.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Religion and National Development

Introduction

Marriage is a thing of Joy and calls for celebration all over the world. Sadly, early child marriage does not give room for such celebration, because the imposition of a husband upon a girl cuts short the childhood of that girl, tempers with her fundamental human right and deprives her of education which is the cure for ignorance and backwardness in life. According to Saxena (2020), early marriage has profound physical, intellectual, Psychological and emotional impacts cutting off educational opportunity and chances of personal growth. It leads to premature pregnancy and child bearing, infant mortality, over population and a life time of domestic violence and sexual abuse over which they have no control. The three most important things that happen to someone in his or her life time are Birth, marriage and death and only marriage one has the right to make choice. It is unfortunate that some girls' rights are violated by deceiving or forcing them to marry at a very early age before 18 years without their consent. This paper discusses the types of marriage, purpose of marriage, causes and impact of early girl child marriage. In order to create the awareness of the dangers of early girl child marriage and suggests ways it can be curbed, to enhance the wellbeing of a girl child. This awareness will make parents to stop forcing their adolescent girls to get married and maintain gender equality. Anderson (2023) states that these harmful practices can only be checked

by the Christian religious studies which emphasize on common good of everybody and will hinder them from tempering with their right and freedom by allowing them to be matured and develop their full potentials before getting married to someone they love. Common good is also a pivot for national development because it shuns partiality, discrimination and promotes the common good of every individual.

Definition of Terms

Christianity: According to Madu (2020), is a monotheistic religion based on the belief in God and the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, based on the Bible the sacred scripture.

Religion: According to Madu (2020), Religion means man's recognition of the existence of power beyond himself, who created the universe, sustains, preserves and provides for the universe. Christian Religion is a monotheistic system of beliefs and practices based on the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus as embedded in the New Testament and emphasize the role of Jesus as saviour (Okobia and Osajie, 2016)

Marriage: Marriage according to Chiegboka (2020) is sacred because it is an institution that is both natural to man and divinely established by God from every foundation of human grace. Okobia (2023) defines marriage as an institution under which a man and a woman become legally united on a permanent basis.

Early Marriage: Early marriage or child marriage according to Saxena, (2009) is the marriage between two people in which one or both parties are younger than 18 years of age. The universal declaration of Human Rights recognizes the right to "free and full" consent to a marriage, acknowledging that consent cannot be free and full when one of the individuals involved is not mature to, make any decision about a life partner. However, in Nigeria especially in the northern part and poor rural areas, girls are often committed to arranged marriages without their knowledge or consent. Such an arrangement can occur as early as infancy or before 18 years which is a violation of their human right.

National Development: According to Ogude (2020) National development is the capacity of the country to raise the standard of living of its residents. It can be achieved by providing individuals with basic livelihood requirements and supplying them with employment, etc. Development is a process that creates growth, brings in progress and positive change. Development is a healthy sign. Two aspects of development are

- Economic growth or increase in people's income.
- Social progress includes literacy, health and the provision of public services.

He also states that the components of national development are as follows

- Development of rural areas
- Increasing agricultural outputs
- Enlargement of economic knowledge
- Handling of growth in urban areas
- Eradication of poverty

Types of Marriage

Nigeria is made up of different ethnic groups which differ in their marriage systems. The common systems of marriage in Nigeria include:

Traditional or Cultural Marriage: This is the marriage entered into according to native laws and customs. It differs from one area to another. Thus, there are Traditional marriage customs for the Ibos, Yorubas and Hausas etc. This can be either monogamous, where one man marries one wife or polygamous, where one man marries more than one wife.

Marriage under the Ordinance: This is also called court marriage because it is contracted in the court of law before a court registrar. It is a monogamous form of marriage which does not allow any of them to enter into a second marriage unless at the death or official divorce of one.

Church marriage: This is a form of marriage under ordinance and it is contracted in a church. Christian performs church marriage and it is a monogamous form of marriage.

Moslem or Islamic Marriage: This is contracted in the ways stipulated by Islam. It permits a man to have as many as four wives.

The Purpose of Marriage

Marriage was established by God in the Garden of Eden for the good of mankind for the following purposes:

To have a companion of like nature, God ordained marriage for the purpose of partnership. He created a companion for Adam because it is not good for him to be alone. Early marriage does not give room for companionship because both of them are incompatible as a result of age differences and the girl's immaturity and lack of experience.

To have a suitable helper that is able to assist in all spheres of the man's life. In the girl child marriage, she cannot assist very well because of lack of skill, illiteracy and non productivity.

To generate love: In marriage two people learn to love each other because without love living together will be difficult. As a result of forcing the girl into a marriage she did not plan for, loving the husband will be difficult because the man will be using undue advantage on her which hinders her from developing love for him.

To procreate: Marriage was ordained by God for the purpose of reproduction. Early marriage makes the girl to give birth to more than enough children that she can take care of and constitute a major risk to the survival and future health of both mother and child.

To build an institution upon which society can be built: The home is the smallest unit of society and it is responsible for the values, culture and beliefs of the society at large. As a result of the girls

inexperience, the children cannot have a good informal education where all the societal norms and values will be inculcated.

To curb immorality in society (1 Cor. 7:2) "Nevertheless to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife and let every woman have her own husband" Sexual pleasures is only permitted within the context of marriage. In early child marriage, the girl is always abused sexually because her organs are not fully matured for constant sex.

Early Marriage and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

UNICEF (2010) states that a child is a human being that is below the age of eighteen years and suggested the following:

He/she should be free from discrimination on any ground, including sex, religion and marriage.

In all actions concerning children the best interest of the child shall be considered

He/she should be given maximum support for survival and development

He/she should be given the right to express his views freely i,n all matters affecting him in accordance with age and maturity.

The right to protection from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury, abuse and maltreatment
He/she should be given the right to access health services and to be protected from harmful traditional practices.

The right to education on the basis of equal opportunity for bdth boys and girls

The right to protection from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, abduction, sale or trafficking

Richard and Sunder (2023) state that a number of human rights, rules and regulations laid down to be applied to marriage, covering issues of age, consent, equality within marriage and the personal and property right of women are thus: ,

Men and women of full age have the right to marry and found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.""

Marriage should be entered into only with free and full consent of the intending parties and no marriage shall be entered into without the full and free consent of both parties and such consent should be expressed by them.

The minimum age of marriage shall be eighteen years and no marriage shall be legally entered into by any person under this age. Therefore, the betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect if contracted below this age.

The Causes of Girl-Child Early Marriage

The causes of early child marriage are thus: poverty, girls' protection and social cultural norms.

Poverty: Molobe (2020) opines that some families take, decision to marry off their daughters either to lessen their economic burden or as a way to get connected to richer family that may be of financial help to them. In this case, the girls are implored or forced into marriage. In most communities where some families cannot afford to provide for their family needs, their next option is to give away their young daughters to rich men in marriage irrespective of their age so that they will receive financial assistance from the husband. More some men postpone their marriage because of lack of resources, as such some parents encourage their young daughters to marry whenever any suitor comes to ask for their hands in marriage to avoid late marriage or difficulty in getting married when they are ready.

Girls' Protection/Ignorance: Some parents feel that it is better to give away their young daughters in marriage to avoid the shame of the girl getting pregnant out of wedlock. Nair (1995) states that some societies believe that early marriage will protect young girls, from sexual assault and violence. Nair Further states that some parents reel met their daughter will be better off and safer with a regular male guardian because early marriage is one way to ensure that a wife is protected or placed firmly under her husband's control who she is submissive to. Some parents also see early marriage as a way of preventing pre-marital sex because many societies value virginity before marriage and this can manifest itself in a number of practices designed to protect a girl from unsanctioned sexual activity. They impose strict control upon the girl by secluding her from social interaction outside the family and by telling her what to wear and not to wear.

Social Cultural Norms: Saxena (2009) avers that some social cultural norms encourage early marriage of adolescent girls because in some places their traditional beliefs demand that a daughter should be married off under certain agreement with another family. Parents arrange the marriage without the consent of the girl. Also, social pressure within the community can make a girl to be married off because, other girls are getting married and gender bias of some parents make them to give their girls off for marriage because of their preference to boys' education.

The Role of Christian Religion in Curbing Girl-Child Early Marriage Through the Knowledge of Common Good

Christian Religion is a powerful phenomenon as it influences and permeates every aspect of human life such as religious, political, social, economic and cultural life. It also integrates all aspects of culture, acts as a binding link between different sections of the society and teaches that marriage conducted by God in the Garden of Eden was between man (Adam) and woman (Eve) and not between man and girl or between boy and girl. It also emphasizes on the common good of every individual (Ihuagwu, and Amolo 2020). The common good according to Izuegbu, (2013) refers to all those values and concerns which belong to the entire community and not just to a specific group or individual and contains values which benefit the generality of all not just a few. The three essential elements of the common good of individuals are thus: Respect for a person and his dignity, social wellbeing and development of individuals and communities and peace among men are founded on truth, justice, love and freedom which early child marriage hinders. Therefore, the girl child should

be allowed to be mature before getting married for her own good and societal development.

The Implication of Early Marriage on the girls and the society

Early marriage is one of the most harmful practices as it usually denies girls their educational opportunities, leading to poverty and poor health condition. It hinders their decision-making capacities and reinforces other forms of gender-based violence and problems. It also makes them entirely dependent on their husbands as a result of lack of skills and resources. The loss of adolescence, the forced sexual relations and the denial of freedom and personal development involved in early marriage have serious and emotional effects on the girls, as they are confined, isolated and no one to express their feelings to. As the elders show no interest in the traumas they suffer and whenever they run home to their parents, they are beaten and sent back to their husbands. As such they suffer in silence.

Early Childbearing and Health Risks for Mother and Child

Child brides are not physically or emotionally ready to get married and are highly vulnerable to sexual violence in marriage because whenever they informed their adult husbands of their unwillingness to endure sexual violence, they were ignored. Many of these young girls who have become young mothers experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth. The most common disorder as a result of pregnancy complications is the condition known as fistulas, a condition causing continuous leakage of urine from the bladder into the vagina. More so, these young brides are denied the use of contraceptive and therefore could not control childbearing and are more -likely to die in childbirth than those who married between the ages of 20 - 24. Also, pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of mortality of girls between aged 15 to 19 worldwide (UNICEF, 2010).

(UNICEF, 2010) also states that the infants born by mothers under the age of 18 are more likely to die in their first year than the ones born to mothers over the age of 19. The babies are more vulnerable to complications associated with premature labour common in teenage pregnancy, leading to infant mortality and if the babies survive, they are more likely to suffer from low birth weight, malnutrition, and late physical and cognitive development. These immature mothers have no control over their children and have less ability to make decisions about their nutrition, health care and household management.

Spousal Age Difference: The age differences between the men and the girls and the attendant's poor communication make many early marriages end in separation when the girls realize themselves. Molobe (2010) also states that these young wives cannot make decision in their marriage or engage in mutual negotiation with their adult husbands, and therefore, subjected to emotional disturbances, sexual abuse and domestic violence. Violence and abuse can lead to post-traumatic stress and depression, and as a result many have suffered psychosocial trauma and sometimes may attempt to commit suicide. Cases have also revealed serious refusal of the bride to continue with the marriage by running out of the marriage to become a prostitute because of lack of resources and family support.

Illiteracy: Early marriage affects the girls' school enrolment. Many of these young brides cannot continue their education when they married. In some instances, Child brides are often pulled out of school and denied further education, they lack the skills to help lift their families out of poverty. Moreover, their children are also more likely to be illiterate which affects the attainment of the

Sustainable Development Goals. The child brides are often isolated from their peers and therefore, it widens gender inequality, and in situations where child marriage often results in separation from family and friends and lack of freedom to participate in community activities, it can have major consequences on the girls' mental and physical well-being making them totally dependent on their husbands (UNICEF, 2010).

Challenge Gender Norms that promote the ideas that girls are inferior to boys:

Davis (2023), states that the norms that portray girls to be inferior to boys should be abolished through the collective effort of parents and community leaders, by fighting against early girl child marriage and the discriminatory act of gender inequality.

Ensure all girls have access to quality education:

Ladan (2022) posits that sending all girls to school requires monthly donation to girls who are vulnerable to child marriage as a result of not going to school because of poverty in order to prevent child marriage, because girls without education marry at adolescent stage while those who completed their secondary and higher education marry when they are matured and have right to choose who to marry. The educated girl will educate her girl child and help to prevent child marriage. Also, girls that are well educated should acquire some skills to support herself without depending solely on her husband and contributes her quota to national development.

Provide support for the development of a girl child:

Ageno (2021) avails that when girls are given the opportunity to learn trade or skills to enrich themselves they will gain the confidence and knowledge to fight for their rights. Therefore, creating opportunity to network with others and empower them to take decision on when to marry or give birth. Hence the programs that promote girls development should be funded by individuals and governments through monthly donations continuously, and the girls that are involved in child marriages should be helped through these programs and donations.

Support Anti-child marriage charities and organizations:

Adams (2023) avails that the charity organizations implementing some campaigns to put an end to child marriage should be supported by donating generously to them by individuals in the society.

Support Artists, photographers, activists and journalist who raise the awareness about child marriage:

Adam (2023) posits that individuals should share the work of the artist, activists, photographers, journalists everywhere they go in order to create the awareness of the dangers of the early girl child marriage and to end the suffering of girls and the continuous violations of their human rights.

Support legal systems to protect young girls' rights:

Adebam (2023) posits that government should end girl child marriage through laws and policies that prohibits the practice.

Conclusion

Early marriage is a violation of human right because it deprives the girls their right, good health, freedom, and education they needed for their personal development and effective contribution to the future Wellbeing of their families and society. These illiterate child wives suffer from prolonged domestic violence but cannot to leave the marriage because of lack of resources and family support. Therefore, it should be considered a criminal offence for one to give off her adolescent girl for marriage and the man that marries her should be treated as a rapist because unless some measures are taken to address early marriage, it will continue to be a major hindrance to the achievement of human rights and personal and national development.

Recommendations

Marriage before the age of 18 years should be abolished, and young girls should marry and give birth after 18 years for them to have more chances of staying healthier, to better their education and contribute their quota in the national development.

Government and Christian bodies should mobilize 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.

Government and international bodies should support and enforce laws to stop or reduce the incidence of early marriage and pregnancy and increase the minimum age of marriage for girls to be 18 years and provide equal access to quality primary and secondary education for boys and girls.

Government, the church, health workers and teachers should educate the masses on the negative impact of early marriage on girls and empower them to resist it by telling them the economic, social and health; benefits of delaying marriage.

The government and the church should provide non-formal education programmes for the girls who have lost out on formal education so that it will help them catch up on the intellectual and personal growth offered by schooling because the professional training that will build the capacity of girls and young women to generate income can enable them to postpone marriage.

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