

Changing dynamics of early marriage in rural areas of northern Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examines the changes that occurred over time between Christians and Muslim in rural settlements. The study collected data from focus group discussions (FGDs) with married literate adolescent girls and unmarried non-literate adolescent girls. Christian and Muslim faith leaders as well as a government official were interviewed. The study revealed the rising rate of early marriage among Christians who were hitherto known to the delayed marriage of girl-child above 18 years. These changes have been attributed to the rising rate of poverty. This is because most of the rural families in the areas surveyed regardless of their faith; are polygamous because of the nature of their occupation—subsistence farming which relied on manual labour from the family. Cultural beliefs are still adhered to in rural settlements, most parents viewed girl-child as a problem which if left unmarried, may bring shame to the family: teenage pregnancy out of wedlock which is regarded as a taboo. The paper concludes that there is a need for the cultural reorientation and awareness on how rural dwellers view girl-child. Also, it is pertinent to introduce poverty reduction projects in rural areas and the establishment of schools closer to the people as well as imparting sex education.

Keyword: Change, girl-child, early marriage, dynamics, Nigeria.

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1. Introduction

What the international organisations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) tend to turn blind eyes or feign ignorance on the issue of early marriage and underage motherhood is the growing number of girl-child that become mother out of wedlock in religion that hitherto abhors early marriage and unplanned pregnancy. This category of girls is not often given much attention in the mainstream research and literature. Most of the adolescent wrongly believe that the silence is akin to the approval of pre-marital sex and child-bearing out of wedlock among children below 18 years, that is why early marriage and unplanned pregnancy is still on the rise.

What is apparent is that most of the adolescent, both girls and boys, perceive that prohibition of underage marriage is only on marriage, not on the entire sexual activities that lead to unplanned pregnancy and its related consequences on girl-child in particular. In developing country like Nigeria, most of the data from Demographic Health Survey (DHS) and research of the United Nations agencies like World Health Organization, UNICEF and UNFPA does not capture the reality on ground because most of the studies were carried in urban centres that accessible by roads, availability of healthcare facilities and neglected the significant majority of the population who are rural dwellers. Other factors of early marriage, often neglected in the demographic literature, are monotheist religions of the Middle Eastern origin, in particular, Christianity and Islam. Both give a high value to marriage and to the chastity of women, and may, therefore, have an effect on age at first marriage (Garenne, 2004).

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to examine the changes in the phenomenon of early marriage among Christians and Muslim in rural areas of Nigeria. The research attempts to answer the question, what accounts for the changes among dwellers in Northern Nigeria. In an attempt to answer the research question, the paper interrogated related literature and adopted the qualitative technique of data collection. The researcher conducted four in-depth interview (IDI) with faith leaders from Christian and Islam. Five FGDs with unmarried non-literate adolescents, married unmarried literate adolescent girls and unmarried literate adolescent girls in Chikun Local Government Area of Kaduna State were conducted. Chikun Local Government Area was selected based on the composition of inhabitants; a mixture of Christians and Muslim population and part of the Local Government is urban and remaining is rural. Therefore, it gives a picture of urban and rural living pattern and behaviour of heterogeneous settlement.

2. Dynamics of early marriage: Interrogating the literature

Age at marriage appears often stable for long periods of time, and at the same time is susceptible to rapid changes in modernisation, and in particular with prolonged schooling and new attitudes towards partnership. Age at marriage is also quite responsive to economic crises, and in periods of economic hardship, marriage is often delayed by a few years, though these effects tend to not last for long period of time. Patterns of marriage may also differ between urban and areas (Garenne, 2004). What is obvious in most of the rural areas of Africa is that most of the areas are still underdeveloped with a high number of out of school children. This predisposes adolescent to early marriage because schooling is one of the subtle strategies to delay marriage. This has been the major flaws of most DHS of over-concentration on urban centres in data collection.

Reliable statistics have indicated that most the developing countries lagged behind in universal primary education enrollment due to poverty and cultural beliefs that forbids formal schooling and view it as a medium for the transmission of western culture and ideas. In Nigeria, 30% of children of official primary school aged (6–11 years) are out of school. Approximately 29% of boys of primary school age are out of school compared to 35% of girls of the same age. For children of primary school age in Nigeria, the biggest disparity can be seen between the poorest and the richest children. Nearly 28% of the female youth of secondary school age are out of school compared to 24% of the male youth of the same age. For the youth of secondary school age, the biggest disparity can be seen between the poorest and

the richest youth (Education Profile, 2014). Corroborating further, Carroll (2016) concluded that the complicating factors are tradition and poverty. Traditional societies of almost any sort, muslim or otherwise, are conducive to child marriage. Poverty makes it worse, as desperate families see child marriage as a way to make their plight somewhat more bearable.

It has been observed that whenever the issue of early marriage comes up, it is often equated or link with religion particularly Islam has no specific age for marriage; it only placed emphasis on the onset of menstruation as the maturity for girls. Carroll (2016) submitted that when this problem is discussed in the media, however, perhaps the factor most commonly cited is religion, specifically, Islam. Child marriage is largely an Islamic problem, some people claim. And there are reasons why they say this. You do find the problem of child marriage in most Muslim countries, for example, and its defenders can cite specific interpretations of Islamic law to support their position. However, Carroll has made a blanket conclusion of Carroll, this is because there are predominantly Muslim countries which the cases of underage marriage is rare and witnessing a downward spiral.

Empirical findings from some Muslim countries shows that Islamic injunction regarding the age of marriage has not been enjoying wide currency. In Qatar, the legal age for girls to marry is 16 and the State Department reported underage marriage was 'very rare.' In Kuwait, the minimum age of marriage for a girl is 15, and the Ministry of Justice estimated 2–3% of marriages in 2013 were underage. Algeria sets the minimum age for girls at 19, higher than anywhere in the United States, and only 6% of Algerian girls were married before 18. In Iraq, 24% of women were married by 18, 6% by 15. Thirty-four percent of women in Sudan were married by 18, and 12% of women aged 20–24 were married by 15 (Carroll, 2016).

What accounted for this sudden changes in most Muslim countries is the general changes in economic relations accompanied by globalisation which compelled parents to allow girl-child to seek formal education and most societies are moving from agrarian mode of production to office-based work. Working formal sector required both men and women to possess formal education, therefore, children have to delay marriage and focus on their studies. The average age at marriage for both men and women is generally rising, and more Arab women are staying single longer or not marrying at all. Changing demographic patterns of marriage in the Arab world reflect broader social and economic changes taking place throughout the region. Arab economies have increasingly moved away from an agrarian system, which supported both early marriage and an extended family structure. The majority of the Arab world's population now lives in cities and is involved in the industrial or service sectors. Arab youth are more educated today compared with previous generations, and young Arab women are more likely to work outside their homes in paying jobs. These changes challenge women's traditional roles in the household and society as a whole (Rashad, Osman & Roudi-Fahimi, 2005).

3. Early marriage

The attempt here is not to bring the definition of early or underage marriage from various scholars and organisations but to see the magnitude, trend and prevalence of the phenomenon in Nigeria. In Nigeria, 25 percent of women of reproductive age (WRA) (15–49 years of age) married before age 15 while about 40 percent married before age 18 in 2011 (Save the Children Nigeria, 2016). The prevalence of child marriage increases as one moves from South to Northern Nigeria. The prevalence of child marriage above the national average is virtually the norm in the northern part as one in three WRA married before the age 15 in Borno, Kaduna, Kebbi and the Gombe States; two in every five marry in Jigawa, Kano, Yobe, Bauchi and Sokoto States; and one in every two marries in Katsina and Zamfara States. In almost all the States in the southern part of the country, less than 20 percent (that is one in every five) married before age 15 (Save the Children Nigeria, 2016).

One of the major deficits of data from international NGOs like Save the Children is, they rarely explain factors or reasons that accounted for the difference between States in the same country. Nigeria, a multicultural and multi-religious country, the reasons for the regional disparity between Southern

(predominantly Christians) and Northern (predominantly Muslim) Nigeria is due to religious influence. Islam permits or instructs parents, girls, to marry at the onset of menstruation (menarche) while Christianity has not specified period or age at which a girl should get married. Daniel (n.d.) put it that poverty, cultural beliefs and societal conflicts have been the major factors leading to and resulting from girls marrying early. Most of these young girls are implored, forced or deceived into marriage.

Girls may be married at young ages due to a lack of other alternatives, such as educational or economic opportunities, or girls may be pulled from school to be married. In the Amhara region of Ethiopia, 30 percent of girls who were not in school said that the primary reason was marriage (Erulkar, Mekbib, Simie & Gulema, 2004). After marriage, young girls' access to formal and even non-formal education is severely limited because of domestic burdens, childbearing and social norms that view marriage and schooling as incompatible (Mathur, Greene & Malhotra, 2003).

According to Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey, the results of the univariate analysis showed that generally, 27.2%, 28.8% and 27.1% of the sampled Nigerian female adolescents aged 15–19 years experienced child marriage in 2003, 2008 and 2013, respectively. However, these rates vary among ethnic groups. For instance, among the study cohort, prevalence of child marriage was high among Hausa/Fulani ethnic group—74.2% in 2003, 71.0% in 2008 and 54.8% in 2013—followed by minority ethnic groups, 18.4% in 2003, 19.4% in 2008 and 19.0% in 2013, and Ijaw–Izon ethnic group (15.5% in 2003, 8.9% in 2008 and 9.8% in 2013). The prevalence was less than five percent of a sexually active female adolescent in other ethnic groups all through the survey periods (Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey datasets of 2003, 2008 and 2013).

3.1. Data presentation and analysis

The researcher conducted four IDI with Muslim and Christian faith leader. Two FGD were conducted with non-literate married adolescents' girls, literate marriage adolescents' girls, non-literate unmarried girls and literate married adolescents' girls.

3.2. Early marriage

During IDI with a Christian faith leader regarding the perspective of Christianity on early marriage, he stated, thus, I do not support early marriage because there is the implication. We are trying to discourage early marriage. If a girl is married early, there is a problem. The first problem is that may be the husband may be older than her, he may maltreat her and then divorce her. A boy at least should marry at the age of 25–30 years because you cannot encourage someone to marry while in School. For girls, it is 23–25 years. She has to get at least her first degree. That is how I viewed it (IDI with Pastor of Nasara Baptist Church Kudansa, Chikun, 22 November 2017).

However, a faith leader and a Muslim viewed that maturity of girls is not based on age in the Islamic religion. It is based on the signs. The signs are beginning of the menstruation; it is an indication of maturity. That is why it is advised for girls that approach 12 years to use white clothes and underwear at night when going to bed, so that to see the sign of blood. Parents would then know that she is matured. Another sign is hair in her armpit and enlargement of the breast (IDI with Imam of Mararaban Rido, Chikun, 22 November 2017).

However, a significant majority of the non-literate adolescent girls during FGD were of the view that 18–19 years is the appropriate time of marriage. This is because of the participants are Christian who view early marriage from the perspective of their faith which has no prescribed time for marriage.

In a predominantly Christian village, Juji in Chikun, most of the married adolescents married at the tender age of 14–16. Among the ten participants during FGD with a non-literate married adolescent, eight of them got married before the age of 16. Surprisingly, despite the preaching against early marriage, it persists. A respondent during FGD admitted that their faith leaders are against

early marriage. She narrated that our parent said we should not marry early until we are matured, even pastors advised us not to marry early because it has many side effects such as maternal mortality and force a girl to undergo caesarean section during delivery.

In an exclusively Christian settlement, Romi, the literate marriage adolescents were of the view that the appropriate time for marriage is between the ages of 23–36 to enable her obtain education primarily to the tertiary institution of learning. What influenced the thought of most of the respondents are adolescent within the age bracket of 14–16 who are still in higher schools and have the intention of advancing to university or college.

In contrast, during FGD with non-literate adolescents in Romi, despite the awareness and orientation against early marriage, eight out of the ten FGD respondents had a child before they reached 15 years. One of the respondent during the FGD with non-literate married adolescent stated that is not appropriate to get married at the age of 13 or 14 these days but unplanned pregnancy forced us to married at this age.

The upsurge in early marriage among the Christians whose previous studies show it was rare due to growing poverty in Nigeria, particularly in Northern Nigeria. A women leader in Romi during IDI submitted that:

Most of the parents allow their young girls to follow men because the children are plenty and beyond their control and financial responsibility and strength (IDI with women leader in Romi, 24 November 2017).

In tracing the root, sudden changes in the behaviours of young girls toward early marriage in rural areas, a respondent during IDI traced the roots of the problems and attributed it to the raving poverty and young girls engaged in unruly sexual behaviour exchange for gifts to sustain their lives. A community leader during narrated that:

We parents are also contributing to the spoilage of our children. We are not monitoring our girls. We don't follow their menstrual circle and buy sanitary pads for them; so, that they go out and beg some men to buy it for them which they would use it as an excuse to spoil them (IDI with community leader in Romi, 24 November 2017).

Substantiating further, the respondent stated that:

In this era, there is poverty. In the past, parents have plenty children and there was abundant land for farming which has now changed. There is a need for vocation training of our children (IDI with women leader in Romi, 24 November 2017).

Additionally, an Islamic faith leader in Kujama village narrated that:

Most of the early marriage cases in this community were as a result of poverty and lack of home training (IDI with an Islamic faith leader in Kujama, 25 November 2017).

Similarly, during FGD session, seven out of the non-literate married respondents admitted that they were lured and impregnated by men that assisted with money on daily basis for feeding. This is because their parents are unable to cater for their feeding due to the size of the family. However, in a mixed settlement (Christian and Muslim) of Kujama in Chikun LGA, some of the Muslim young girls' delay marriage at least after high school or what is commonly known in Nigeria as secondary school. An Islamic faith leader during IDI observed that:

The changes of attitude and behaviour of Muslims in Kujama village on early marriage has been as a result of leading by example by our Chief Imam who sent his daughters to School. It is a leadership by example and people have been following his footstep in promoting girl-child education and delay marriage before the age of 18 (IDI with an Islamic faith leader in Kujama, 25 November 2017).

In an IDI with another Islamic faith leader in Kujama village, he narrated the rationale behind the changing attitude among Muslims who have to the longstanding belief of marrying their daughters before 18 years. The Islamic cleric stated that:

Here in Kujama and Muslims it is hard to see a girl that got married before finishing her secondary. It is our training that encourages the girls not to follow men and get pregnant. Most people feared that men in this town would spoil the daughters. We do call on the parents of the girls whenever the parents intended to give her out without her consent. We do advise the parents to monitor their daughter and teach them the right behaviour (IDI with an Islamic faith leader in Kujama, 25 November 2017).

During Key Informant Interview (KII) with a representative of Chikun Local Government Council. She gave an account of early marriage among Muslim and Christian in the area and the factors related thereof. The Government Official stated thus:

The mentality that leads to early marriage because they think girls would be following men. Though some of the girls are stubborn, they don't abide by the advice of the parent, that should not be an excuse for early marriage of the decent ones. My religion Christianity does not encourage early marriage but even among the Christians, there are some that married their children before 18 years in this community. Some feared shame of unplanned pregnancy, Christians do allow their girls to marry early in Kujama (KII with government official in Kujama, 25 November 2017).

In the vein, 7 out of the 12 FGD participants who are non-literate were of the view that they abandoned school because of the inability of their parents to afford school fees. Therefore, the parents are left with no option than to allow them to marry in order to reduce the burden of feeding and expenses on the parents.

4. Discussion of major findings

The reveals that are is the growth rate of unplanned pregnancy among teenagers in the areas studied. The fear of unplanned pregnancy by parents justified the cultural belief that pregnancy out of wedlock brings shame to the family and religious belief of Muslim girl-child should not be allowed to reach adulthood in her parent's home. For Christians, though Christianity has not specified a particular age at which a girl should get married, there is a decline of delay marriage among the Christian faithful in the areas surveyed which in the past, they withstand economic hardship and broke cultural barriers to enrolled their girl-child into formal education. Most of the girls surveyed feared that, if they stay up to 25–30 years before marriage, men hardly patronise them because they are referred as old partly because fertility goes with the age of the woman and communities in rural Nigeria placed a premium on children. Children serve as labour on the farm which their number means additional labour for the parents to expand their farm.

Apart from cultural and religious factors, the study also found out that ravaging poverty has forced girls to marry early against the teaching of the faith leaders to delay marriage to enable them to acquire primary and secondary or university education. This correlates with the findings of Education Profile Nigeria (2014) which found out that 30% of children of official primary school ages (6–11 years) are out of school. Approximately 29% of boys of primary school age are out of school compared to 35% of girls of the same age. For children of primary school age in Nigeria, the biggest disparity can be seen between the poorest and the richest children. Nearly 28% of the female youth of secondary school age are out of school compared to 24% of the male youth of the same age. For the youth of secondary school age, the biggest disparity can be seen between the poorest and the richest youth.

Connected with the above, the study found out that there is the prevalence of the polygamous practice in rural among Christians and Muslim which led to large family size, hence, more burden on the parents who are mostly subsistence farmers. This is in line with the conclusion of Carroll (2016), the

complicating factors are tradition and poverty. Traditional societies of almost any sort, muslim or otherwise, are conducive to child marriage. Poverty makes it worse, as desperate families see child marriage as a way to make their plight somewhat more bearable. Therefore, most of the Christians and Muslims who are against early marriage, succumbed to the pressure of poverty and allowed their girl-child to marry before the age of 18, that is what social psychologists called cognitive dissonance. Because all the Christian faith leaders interviewed admitted that they preached against early marriage yet the practice persists because of poverty and peers influence that lured young girls into indiscriminate and unprotected premarital sexual intercourse.

5. Conclusion and policy implication

The colonial practice of paying attention to issues in urban and semi-urban centres and neglected the rural dwellers have continued till date (2017). This negligence has left most of the rural population at the mercy of traditional and cultural beliefs that are detrimental to their health and social well-being such as pregnancy-related morbidity, maternal mortality, illiteracy, poverty and high population growth. It is worrisome despite awareness campaign against early marriage by NGOs and government in Nigeria the menace defied the measures; especially among Christians who in the past are known to the delayed marriage of girl-child education, unlike their Muslim counterparts that known for early marriage and against formal education in Northern Nigeria. This happened even with the knowledge of the consequences of early marriage among the married and unmarried adolescents interviewed in the villages. This implies that most of the rural dwellers in Northern Nigeria respect cultural values more than the religious teachings, which undermined the efforts of faith leaders, government and NGOs in population control, reduction in the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STI), VVF, maternal mortality, broken families and out of school girl-child.

The government, faith leaders, civil society organisations and NGOs should embark on cultural reorientation to debunk cultural longstanding belief that if girl-child was allowed to marry above 18 years it may bring shame to the family as a result of unplanned pregnancy or contract STIs can be addressed through sex education to educate children about proper and inappropriate sexual behaviour. Related to orientation and sex education, there is a need to reduce extreme poverty among the rural families to enable the parents to cater for the feeding of children through poverty alleviation programmes. In accordance with some, the sustainable development goals that aimed at reducing extreme hunger and achieve universal basic education, government in Nigeria has to pay serious attention to rural areas because of the government programmes and projects are mostly cited in urban or semi-urban areas which have access to roads and other utility services that are easily accessible and cheaper to execute projects.

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