



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Evaluating the Influence of International Conventions on Child Marriage in Nigeria: Progress towards Achieving SDG Target 5.3 by 2030

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ABSTRACT

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This study provides a critical examination of the impact of international conventions on child marriage in Nigeria. It sheds light on the persistent and overlooked consequences in various overlooked regions in relation to achieving target 5.3 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The study raises two key questions: the extent to which these conventions have influenced policies and legal frameworks regarding child marriage in Nigeria, and how cultural, social, and economic factors intersect with the implementation of these conventions within the Nigerian context. This study employs a qualitative research method, primarily relying on secondary data sources to explore the underlying factors contributing to child marriage. The research delves into relevant documents and literature to identify factors such as family honor, societal norms, gender inequality, and the endorsement of family decisions. The findings highlight how gaps in policy and legal frameworks, combined with inadequate enforcement and a lack of commitment from leaders, worsen the complex challenges linked to child marriage. Additionally, the study argues that child marriage is a reflection of existing social norms and contributes to the perpetuation of a culture of child slavery and sexual exploitation. As the 2030 deadline to eliminate harmful practices like child, early, and forced marriage as well as female genital mutilation approaches, it is crucial to enhance efforts to end child marriage in Nigeria. The findings emphasize the importance of comprehensive awareness campaigns, sensitization, and the enactment of laws against child marriage. This underscores the urgent need to reinforce legal and policy enforcement mechanisms to tackle this deeply rooted issue

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1. INTRODUCTION

In various parts of the developing world, the profound repercussions of child marriage persist and are overlooked. Countless young brides are deprived of fundamental rights encompassing healthcare, education, and economic prospects. According to Parsons et al. (2015), this practice stands as a blatant violation of human rights, posing a significant threat to the well-being of adolescent girls, including heightened health risks related to pregnancies, impeding educational advancement, hindering holistic growth, and constraining empowerment. These health risks have been recorded as the primary factors contributing to mortality among girls aged 15 to 19 years old. (Neal et al., 2016). Additionally, early marriage exposes girls to the transmission of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and other sexual infections (Nour, 2006). For these girls, marriage signifies the end of educational pursuits and also

means forfeiting prospects for vocational or career development, thus curtailing their life opportunities (Parsons et al., 2015).

Child marriage, which is a widespread practice, leads to a vicious cycle of poverty, inequality, and insecurity among women and girls, creating significant challenges to both national and global development (Deane, 2021). Embraced within the framework guiding the rights of individuals, the Rights of the Child Convention (CRC) and the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women Convention (CEDAW) explicitly prohibit this practice (Daly, Stern, & Leviner, 2022). Additionally, global directives such as the International Development Conference on Population in 1994 (ICPD) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action have unequivocally urged nations to eradicate child marriage and enforce legislation ensuring the autonomy of individuals to give free and complete consent (UN Women, 2019). Although there have been significant efforts made to address the issue, child marriage remains prevalent, especially in developing countries' impoverished and rural regions (Elnakib et al., 2021). Various studies have established a nexus between this persistent practice and local customs (Adebowale, 2018; Bolarinwa, Ahinkorah, Okyere, Seidu, & Olagunju, 2022; Mobolaji, Fatusi, & Adedini, 2020), parental perceptions of safeguarding their daughters' future (Greene, Siddiqi, & Abularrage, 2023), as well as socioeconomic factors such as poverty or conflict (Nwokolo, 2010). On a continental scale, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa also known as the Maputo Protocol mandates nations to establish a minimum marriage age for women at 18 years (Ileyemi, 2023). Still, the prevalence of child marriage often reflects the result of constrained options available to people. The rate of child marriage in Africa is significantly high, with roughly 40% of girls getting married or being in a union before they reach 18 years of age. It is concerning to note that approximately 1 in 6 girls in this region are married off before they turn 15 (Mabemba, 2023).

Nigeria enacted the Child Rights Act in 2003 to ensure the protection and advancement of children's rights. However, child marriage remains a major issue in Nigeria, with alarming statistics: 43% of girls are married before 18, and 16% before 15. Nigeria is ranked 10th globally in child marriage prevalence and has the third-highest number of women married before 18, after India and Bangladesh (Adeyemi, Gidado, Adeyemi, & Lukman, 2023). According to UNICEF statistics, the Northwest and Northeast regions have prevalence rates of 68% and 76% respectively, in contrast to the Southeast and Southwest regions where the rates are much lower at 6% and 8%, respectively (Anozie et al., 2018).

Despite the numerous commitments made, child marriage remains prevalent in Nigeria. Consequently, the nation faces a confluence of factors: an expanding child population coupled with a slow decrease in the incidence of early marriage in young children within the country (Mobolaji et al., 2020), and millions of girls are at heightened risk. Should current trends persist unchecked, projections indicate that Nigeria's population of child brides could potentially double (UNICEF, 2014), contributing significantly to the overall count of child brides in Africa by the year 2050. Against this backdrop, this study aims to address the following inquiries: To what degree have international conventions influenced the formulation of policies and legal frameworks regarding child marriage in Nigeria? Additionally, how do cultural, social, and economic factors intersect with the implementation of international conventions in addressing the issue of child marriage within the Nigerian context?

2. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research method, predominantly relying on secondary data sources. This included conducting a thorough examination of pertinent documents such as legislative frameworks, policies, studies, policy briefs, articles, and research materials related to topics like child marriage, interventions, cultural and religious customs, as well as policy and legislative frameworks. Additionally, the review encompassed an exploration of other relevant available documents and literature.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Background to child marriage in Nigeria

In Africa, Nigeria holds the highest number of child brides and is ranked third globally, with more than 3.5 million girls under the age of 18 presently in marriage (Ashi, 2020). The prevalence of early marriage in children in Nigeria varies greatly by region, rates in the Northern zones range from 39.0% to 78%, while rates in the Southern zones are much lower, ranging from 6% to 13% (Isiugo-Abanihe, Oyediran, & Fayehun, 2022). Although the Child Rights Act was passed in Nigeria in 2003, which makes it illegal to marry before the age of 18, 11 states in the North have not yet implemented the Act. Unfortunately, there has been only a 1% decrease in the incidence of girl-child marriage in Nigeria over the past 30 years (Daudu, Osimen, & Ameh, 2024). If this trend continues, it is projected that the number of child brides in Nigeria will double by 2050 (Mobolaji et al., 2020).

Braimah (2014) contends that the practice of betrothing young girls to adult men remains a common occurrence among the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group residing in Nigeria's northern region. The tradition of marrying children at a young age is deeply entrenched in the cultural customs of the northern people of Nigeria, with significant influence from Islam, the predominant religion historically and presently followed in the region. In northern Nigeria, there is a great amount of societal expectation to get married at a young age. This has resulted in concerning statistics that reveal that 48% of Hausa-Fulani girls are married before they turn 15, while 74% are married before they turn 18. (Braimah, 2014; Bolarinwa et al., 2022; Nwokolo, 2010).

This is in line with Adebowale's (2018) findings, which showed that girls from southern ethnic minorities in Nigeria face a twofold higher risk of child marriage compared to Yoruba girls, while girls from northern ethnic minorities face a ninefold higher risk, and girls from a Hausa/Fulani ethnic background face a twenty-fourfold higher risk. The results of the study with previous findings when compared to other major tribes indicate that early child marriage in girls is higher among the Hausa/Fulani people compared with the South. Among two ethnic groups in the Northern parts of Nigeria Kambari and Fulfude with estimates of 74.9% and 74.8%, respectively have the highest rate of girl-child marriages. This contradicts other studies that suggest different ethnic groups have a higher prevalence of early marriage in girls in Nigeria (Braimah, Gberevbie, Chidozie & Osimen, 2024). This is higher than the prevalence rate among the Hausa/Fulani group, contradicting the notion that the latter group has the highest rate of child marriage in Nigeria (Osimen, Fulani, Chidozie & Dada, 2024). The findings demonstrate the diversity in beliefs and practices regarding gender norms among different ethnic groups in Nigeria, even within the same geographic region (Mobolaji et al., 2020).

3.2 Frameworks and conventions: international, regional and national

Child marriage is a violation of human rights as it undermines various fundamental rights of girls, including their autonomy, development, and the achievement of public health goals. The Human Rights Commission has emphasised that these rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible, interrelated, and interdependent and must be guaranteed by the state (OHCHR, n.d.).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 16(2), which stipulates that marriages should only be consummated with the full and free agreement of the individuals involved, prohibits child marriage as it infringes upon children's basic human rights. Furthermore, it violates Article 16 of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women Convention (CEDAW), which asserts that both the male and female genders have equal rights to be engaged to any person of choice and only get married after giving their full and honest consent (Ahonsi et al., 2019).

The universal declaration of human rights 1948 (UDHR)

As a signatory to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and a member state of the United Nations (UN), Nigeria is bound by Article 16(b) of the UDHR, which emphasizes that marriage can take place with the full and free permission of parties involved. Although the UDHR does not explicitly forbid child marriage, it discourages it by emphasizing the necessity of free and informed consent from the parties involved. Nevertheless, the majority of the time in child marriages, the young bride is not old enough to make a free and informed choice regarding a life mate (Osimen, Daudu & Awogu-Maduagwu, 2023). Furthermore, it stipulates that marriage should involve individuals who have reached the age of adulthood, regardless of gender, indicating that it should apply to both men and women (Melnikas et al., 2020). The pervasive influence of parents and guardians, particularly in contexts of strong religious or traditional norms, frequently leads to

children being coerced or forced into marriage (Osimen, Newo & Fulani, 2024). Some child brides even consent out of a sense of duty or respect. The UDHR is violated by these marriages since consent is not complete and free in any of these situations (Anozie et al., 2018).

The elimination of all forms of discrimination against women convention (CEDAW)

Nigeria, among 189 nations, ratified the UN General Assembly's 1979 adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). To comply with CEDAW, setting a minimum marriage age and mandatory marriage registration are imperative. Article 16(2) of CEDAW explicitly prohibits child marriage, stating that a child's engagement and marriage hold no legal consequences. Member states, including Nigeria, are obligated to uphold and enforce these provisions. To guarantee that both men and women are fully developed and capable of taking on the obligations of marriage, the CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation 21 from 1994 suggests a minimum age of 18. As a result, early marriage to children is outlawed in any nation that ratifies CEDAW. Like the Human Rights Universal Declaration (UDHR), the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women Convention (CEDAW) recognises that consent to marriage must come from both spouses freely and without force (Anozie et al., 2018).

The convention on the rights of the child (CRC)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), established by the United Nations on November 20, 1989, is a landmark legally binding instrument addressing a wide range of human rights issues concerning children. While praised for its comprehensive nature (Woodhouse, 2008), some argue that it lacks explicit provisions on child marriage, focusing more on violations affecting boys, such as child soldiers (Warner, 2011). Nevertheless, certain CRC articles, notably Article 24(3), can be interpreted as advocating for combating child marriage by urging state parties to eliminate harmful customary practices (Anozie et al., 2018).

Nigeria ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on April 16, 1991. The CRC mandates member states to uphold its principles and ensure the fulfilment of children's rights outlined in the text. Consequently, the CRC and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) formed the basis for Nigeria's Child's Rights Bill, which evolved into the Child's Rights Act (CRA) in July 2003 (Brammah, 2014).

While the CRC aims to safeguard children's rights, it has been criticized for shortcomings in protecting girls' rights (Anozie et al., 2018). Article 1 defines a child as under 18, yet fails to explicitly forbid child marriage or set a minimum age for marriage. In some regions, including Northern Nigeria, cultural practices contradicting this definition prevail, leading to child marriage. Additionally, Article 14(2) emphasizes respecting parental rights in guiding children's rights, complicating efforts to prevent child marriage effectively (Brammah, 2014).

The rights and welfare of the child African charter

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), ratified by member states after adoption by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1990 and entering into force in 1999, mandates African nations to combat harmful practices such as child marriage, as delineated in Article 21 (African Union, 1990). The genesis of the ACRWC lies in the perceived inadequacies of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in addressing Africa's unique socio-cultural and economic contexts. Scholars such as Okpalaobi and Ekwueme (2015) argue that the CRC failed to adequately address these challenges (Brammah, et al., 2025). In response, the ACRWC defines a child as any individual below the age of 18 and explicitly prohibits child marriage and betrothal, granting member states the latitude to depart from this norm (Daudu, Osimen, & Shuaibu, 2023). This delineation positions the ACRWC as a more nuanced and comprehensive framework for safeguarding children's rights (Anozie et al., 2018; Okpalaobi & Ekwueme, 2015).

Despite the institutionalization of the ACRWC, the persistence of child marriage in Africa underscores a significant deficit in political resolve to enact legislation and policies aimed at its prevention. Various scholars, including Avogo and Somefun (2019), attribute this persistence to a complex interplay of economic, social, cultural, and religious factors.

The child rights act

Nigeria's legal system encompasses English common law, ethnic customary law, and Islamic law, leading to diverse regulations on child marriage. Harmonizing policies to prevent child marriage is challenging, given the prevalence of Islamic law in the north and customary law in the south (World Bank, 2016; IRBC, 2019; Nwogogu, 2001).

The 1999 Nigerian constitution defines "full age" as eighteen and above, yet Section 29(4)(b) contradicts this by considering any married woman as full age, implicitly accepting early marriage for children. Although the 1990 Marriage Act sets the minimum age for marriage at 21, parental or guardian consent permits girls and boys to marry earlier (Nigeria 1999; ARFH, 2018; Lari-Williams, 2016; Musawah, 2017; Nigeria 1990, Art. 11(1)(b)).

As a signatory to both the Children's African Charter and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Nigeria acknowledged the importance of domesticating these instruments to protect and promote children's rights. This commitment led to the proposal of a Bill of Rights in 1993, which, after a decade of advocacy and parliamentary discussions, culminated in the passing of the Child Rights Act (CRA) in July 2003. The CRA expressly forbids early marriages of children, stating that persons below the minimum age are unable to get married, nullifying any betrothal agreed upon by a person under this age. Additionally, the CRA prohibits parents, guardians, or any other individuals from betrothing a child (Braitham, 2014).

According to Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, "the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities, or legislative bodies" (Adebowale-Tambe, 2019). The federal law adopted in 2003, known as the Child Rights Act, makes child marriage illegal (IRBC, 2019).

Sections 21 to 23 of the CRA 2003 elaborate on this: Section 21 states that individuals below the age of 18 are not capable of entering into a valid marriage. Any marriage contracted under such circumstances is void and holds no legal significance. Section 22 emphasizes that no parent, guardian, or any other party has the authority to engage a child in a betrothal arrangement (Abasilim, Gberville, & Osibanjo, 2019). Any betrothal that violates the conditions specified in subsection (1) of this section is also void. Section 23 covers a range of offences related to child marriage, including marrying a child, being engaged to a child, actively encouraging a child's marriage, or arranging a child's engagement. Committing any of these offences is punishable by a ₦500,000 fine, imprisonment for up to five years, or both upon conviction (Nigeria, 2003).

Twenty-four of Nigeria's 36 states have adopted the CRA as a state law (NHRC). However, 12 states, mostly in Northern Nigeria, where penal codes are primarily based on Sharia law, have yet to adopt the CRA (Sahara Reporters, 2019; Girls Not Brides, n.d.; Daily Trust, 2019). This reluctance is attributed to conflicts with Islamic beliefs, particularly regarding the minimum age of marriage. Islam does not define a specific age for childhood but considers a child's maturity based on signs of adolescence, breast development, and pubic hair growth (Braitham, 2014).

In many northern Nigerian states, opposition to the Child Rights Act (CRA) stems from perceived conflicts between individual rights and religious standards, compounded by age-related discrepancies. While the Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of thought and religious beliefs under Section 38(1), the CRA may be seen as infringing on these rights, despite its explicit aim of safeguarding children's rights (Braitham, 2014). Notably, child marriage remains legally permissible in Nigeria, despite legislative efforts aimed at protecting children's rights. However, the implementation of such laws has been only partial at the state level, encountering resistance in certain regions due to cultural and religious considerations (IRBC, 2019).

Anozie et al. (2018) argue that despite Nigeria's ratification of various regional and global agreements, such as the Human Rights Universal Declaration, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, these agreements either explicitly prohibit or discourage child marriage. Nonetheless, there are shortcomings in these agreements that hinder the effective elimination of child marriage in Nigeria, as they often lack concrete national policies and measures for enforcement (Anozie et al., 2018). For

instance, Braimah (2014) notes that child marriage persists in northern Nigeria, where Shari'a law, based on Islamic principles, conflicts with international and regional instruments protecting children's rights. This is despite Nigeria's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, as well as the passage of the Child Rights Act (CRA) to domesticate these instruments.

3.3 Challenges and gaps in addressing child marriage

Mobolaji et al. (2020) maintain that there has been limited advancement in decreasing the prevalence of early marriage in children in sub-Saharan Africa. According to Lo Forte, Plesons, Branson, and Chandra-Mouli's (2019) research findings, it was identified that across eight case studies, the most common challenges of most departments and ministries of the government, civil societies and donors as well as private sectors is the lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities of involved stakeholders. It is imperative to establish the diverse roles and responsibilities of these stakeholders at the outset, along with how their complementary contributions will be included. Research shows that efforts to eliminate child marriage through single-sector initiatives have proven unsuccessful and that cooperation between key ministries and departments, civil societies, and other stakeholders is necessary to guarantee that interventions are beneficial to teenage females.

According to Wodon (2015), it is important to recognise that simply enacting legal prohibitions on child marriages may not be sufficient to bring about a change in deeply ingrained cultural patterns. In a similar vein, Grijns & Horii (2018) assert that the legal framework fails to adequately protect child brides. For example, the 1999 law on Human Rights excludes all married children from its protective scope even after the law defines children under 18 as being unmarried. Consequently, these children are stripped of their rights including the right to socialize with their peers, quality education, access to information and proper resting as guaranteed by the law on Human Rights. In a study conducted in a Muslim-majority area in Indonesia, it was observed that both religious and civil courts have the authority to grant dispensations for underage marriages (Chukwudi, Osimen, Dele-Dada & Ahmed, 2024). Even if one or both of the marrying spouses are younger than the formal marriage age sixteen for females and Nineteen for males, petitioners can nonetheless lawfully register their marriages under these dispensations. In this context, the onset of puberty is considered a sufficient indicator of readiness for marriage, as girls are primarily destined to become mothers and housewives.

Early marriage in children is a widespread practice in Nigeria that violates the human rights of girls and has tarnished the image of the nation's human rights record. The Nigerian Constitution and various international and regional agreements have established a range of human rights protections that apply to all individuals in the country, including children and girls (Anozie et al., 2018). Child marriage contravenes numerous international human rights standards, notably those about the freedom to willingly enter into marriage and the preservation of bodily and sexual autonomy. This understanding traces its roots back to the Human Rights Universal Declaration of 1948, which enshrined the principle of unfettered and informed consent for marriage, acknowledging that the notion of permission cannot truly be considered "free and complete" if the individuals involved lacks the necessary maturity to make a well-informed decision, as is evident in instances of child marriage (Sabbe et al., 2013).

Taylor et al. (2019) emphasise that although child marriage tends to be prevalent in economically disadvantaged regions with limited healthcare access, enhancing the availability and quality of services alone cannot effectively diminish this practice. Achieving a reduction in child marriage necessitates the cultivation of a more comprehensive supportive context (Chukwudi, et al., 2024). The sluggish rate of progress in eradicating child marriage is a source of significant concern for multiple reasons. Foremost, child marriage represents a fundamental infringement upon the basic human rights of girls. This includes their entitlement to physical and mental health and well-being, access to education, equality, and protection from discrimination. Furthermore, child marriage violates the human rights of children to live free from aggression and exploitation, including practices akin to slavery and servitude. The persistence of child marriage undermines these crucial rights that are vital for the holistic development and empowerment of girls (Petroni et al., 2017).

Table 1: Prevalence of child marriage in the top 20 countries with the highest rates

S/N	Countries	Prevalence Rates (%)
1.	Niger	76
2	Central African Republic	68
3	Chad	67
4	Bangladesh	59
5	Mali	54
6	Mozambique	53
7	Burkina Faso	52
8	South Sudan	52
9	Guinea	47
10	Somalia	45
11	Nigeria	43
12	Malawi	42
13	Eritrea	41
14	Ethiopia	40
15	Madagascar	40
16	Nepal	40
17	Uganda	39
18	Democratic Republic of the Congo	37
19	Mauritania	37
20	Sierra Leone	34

Source: 2020 UNICEF global database, and other national surveys based on Multiple Cluster Surveys Indicator (MICS), and Health and Demographic Surveys (DHS)

The prevalence rate refers to the percentage of women 20–24 years old who were first married or in a union before they were 18 years old.

3.4 Case study: Becheve's child brides

The incidence of child marriage in Nigeria is not limited to Northern regions alone. Research indicates that all regions exhibit varying prevalence rates (Northwest at 68%, Northeast at 57%, Northcentral at 39%, South-South at 21.5%, Southwest at 8%, and Southeast at 16%). According to (Mukoro, 2022) the term "money wife" is an archaic and disturbing tradition that is particularly associated with a community in Cross River State. This tradition involves the distressing act of parents or guardians selling a young girl, some as young as four years old, in exchange for goods, and money, serving as collateral for loans, or even to repay debts, including those incurred before the child's birth. This customary practice is observed across 17 communities of the Becheve ethnic group, including Katele, Amana, Ogbakoko, Belinge, Ranch, Ikwette (old and new), Imale, Ekor, Kalumo, Yindive, Makambe, Apambu, Belegete, Kajinga, Mangbe, Mbunu, and Agusor (Obung, 2020; Asishana, 2022). Within these

communities, the phenomenon of "money marriage" unfolds when a young girl is offered to secure a loan from another family by her close relatives or as collateral by her parents. Remarkably, Becheve girls are not merely sold into marriage during infancy; some are traded before their birth and subsequently wedded once the groom fulfils the payment (Odey & Sanya, 2018). The "money-wife" in this tradition remains entirely subject to her husband's control, and even in the event of his passing, her liberation is not granted. Instead, she is transferred to his next of kin as a property of the creditor's family thus she is considered as their "money-wife". This perpetuates an unending cycle whereby, upon her death, the money-husband retains the unrestricted privilege to return to her home and select another money-wife without encountering any form of constraint or inquiry (Obung, 2020). These girls become victims of various types of gendered violence, such as rape at a young age, forceful labour, enduring trauma, and early pregnancy (Asishana, 2022).

Within this tradition, the girl is cut off from family ties hence she is considered a money wife, rendering any return to her family impossible, regardless of the abuse, mistreatment, or torment she might endure from her husband or his relatives (Mukoro, 2022; Obung, 2020). Additionally, entrenched in this practice is the provision that if the money-wife flees and marries another man, any offspring from that union is regarded as belonging to the original money-husband, as per customary norms where the child is seen as the man's possession. Consequently, these girls are subjected to sexual slavery alongside being tasked with various menial chores (Odey & Sanya, 2018).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Various studies have identified several underlying factors contributing to child marriage, such as family honour, societal norms, gender inequality, and endorsement of family decisions (Elnakib et al., 2021; Petit & Zalk, 2019), prevalent across different regions and on a global scale. Consequently, the practice of the Becheve money-wife is deeply rooted in cultural customs and traditions, further exacerbated by poverty and the ineffective implementation and enforcement of laws, as supported by Syed, Faraday, and Abebe's study (2019). Notably, this practice stands distinct from others, as possessing a money wife is regarded as a symbol of status within the community (Odey & Sanya, 2018). The underlying motive for this practice thrives in the gaps and insufficiencies evident in policy and legal frameworks, coupled with the deficient application of policies and execution of laws. This multifaceted challenge is escalated by of lack of commitment and dedication from leaders, alongside prevalent poverty and the inadequate safeguarding of child and gender rights through law enforcement agencies.

This study highlights that despite the presence of laws and constitutional provisions in Cross River State aligning with major national and international instruments against child marriages, there exists a disparity between these legal frameworks and their practical implementation. In Nigeria, most civil or statutory marriages are subject to legal responsibilities. However, customary marriages and religious and civil marriages are the three types of marriages recognised by law. This discrepancy poses challenges in enforcing the legal minimum age for marriages condoned by customs, such as in the case of the Becheve community. The repercussions for fleeing such marriages include neglect and social exclusion from the family, and in extreme cases, even death. Lacking state support and protection, these girls are compelled to endure their distressing circumstances without recourse.

Community initiatives can serve as valuable tools in delineating the collective and comprehensive response to early marriage in children by various stakeholders as their roles and effectiveness hinge upon adequate planning and engagement of pertinent stakeholders. This involvement necessitates the inclusion of the community, specifically women and girls, coupled with the availability of essential resources, commitment, and capacity to facilitate successful implementation.

5. CONCLUSION

The issue of child marriage is a reflection of existing social norms and in a bid to justify and perpetuate this preexisting culture child slavery and sexual exploitation serve as means to discriminate against the girl child and to a large extent the female gender in Nigeria. When excuses are made for barbaric acts as such that it is part of a tradition, it is invalid and shows support for these acts in modern times. Man (humans) created traditions, and not the other way around, customs that do not benefit the society at large can be unmade. The ultimate responsibility lies with the

government. For any society to thrive it is expedient that females' rights and individual rights are upheld in high esteem while archaic and oppressive practices must be jettisoned as this practice circumscribes and prevents them from living productive lives and contributing to the development of the society.

A major strategic approach to increasing women's and girls' rights and participation in public life is to curb child marriage as this act will promote and empower them in areas such as quality education, freedom from violence at home and at work as well as good health.

Government officials, international entities, community and religious figures, traditional leaders, healthcare practitioners, school administrators, educators, law enforcement, judiciary members, media professionals, parents, gender advocates, and both young boys and girls should acknowledge and fulfil their distinct responsibilities to collectively bring an end to child marriage. This collaboration is essential for achieving this goal.

In light of this, the report offers the following suggestions to encourage the acceleration and expansion of initiatives aimed at putting an end to early marriage in children. To implement these recommendations at all levels which address laws and regulations, programmatic interventions by institutions, customs, cultures, and behavioural modification, as well as monitoring and evaluation it is assumed that there will be political will, the necessary funds, and persistent leadership.

The focus of any measures to end child marriage must be on girls, in all their diversity. The harmful societal norms that restrict females' options must be changed by families, communities, and other stakeholders.

1. Robust sensitization and awareness creation

Efforts to change attitudes towards child marriage require large-scale campaigns reaching diverse audiences. Communities must understand laws against child marriage, its effects, and protection mechanisms for girls. Education should be user-friendly, translated into local languages, and led by governments with involvement from religious and cultural leaders. Social media and other informative platforms are essential for communication.

To address the gender divide in child marriage, sensitization and awareness creation are crucial for both males and females. Standardized interventions should empower girls and educate men about the negative effects, promoting male responsibility and accountability. Traditional leaders can play a vital role in enforcing laws and policies by leveraging positive aspects of culture. Working with them can create an environment for change and reinforce existing legal frameworks.

Religion can be both a driver and a potential intervention factor in child marriage. Establishing inter-religious task forces can help challenge long-held views and abolish child marriage. Mass media, including social media, plays a significant role in informing change and supporting efforts to end child marriage by strengthening awareness of laws and policies, especially among the general public.

2. Criminalising the Act: strengthening law and policy enforcement mechanisms

Nigeria's laws against child marriage face challenges in enforcement due to corruption, lack of accountability, and insufficient resources for public education and systems. To address this, robust law enforcement mechanisms and systems are needed, along with public education, community surveillance, and incident reporting. Referral, tracking, and handling of cases, including punishment of perpetrators, protection of victims, and ensuring access to health and education, are crucial. Security agencies need appropriate skills and awareness to end child marriage while remaining accountable under a "not harm approach."

Prosecution and judicial systems should be strengthened to increase confidence in reporting and deter perpetrators. Laws criminalizing child marriage should guide prosecution without exemptions based on third-party or judicial consent. Girls reporting child marriages should

be protected until prosecution and reintegrated into the community afterwards. Successful prosecution with punitive measures will deter perpetrators and build community confidence. States should repeal any provision allowing perpetrators to avoid prosecution by marrying their victims.

In addition, improving the ability of regional organisations and Ministries of Women Affairs and Social Development to offer sufficient, prompt, and high-quality services to lessen the effects of child marriage on young girls and boys, including the protection of girl brides and grooms, will help strengthen support services for girls at risk and victims of child marriage. More so, funding from the government and other stakeholders will call for enhanced and more transparent case management and referral mechanisms to address and prevent child marriage on a local and national scale.

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