

# The Effect of Underage Marriages in the Growth of Girl-Child in Northwest Nigeria

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**Abstract**— Early child marriage is defined as the marriage of individuals before the age of 18 years which is a persistent and deeply rooted practice in northwestern Nigeria with significant implications for the health, education, and overall well-being of young girls. In Northwestern Nigeria, this practice is particularly prevalent and driven by a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, religious, and educational factors. Despite global efforts to eradicate early child marriage, it remains a formidable barrier to gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women in the northwestern Nigeria.

This paper presents a socio-cultural analysis of the root causes of early child marriage in Northwestern Nigeria. Drawing on Social Norms Theory, Gender Inequality Theory, Economic Theory, Health and Developmental Theories, and Legal and Policy Frameworks, the research paper explores the underlying drivers that perpetuate this harmful tradition. The findings highlight how established and very difficult to change are cultural and religious beliefs, economic pressures, gender inequality, and educational barriers contribute to the persistence of early child marriage.

The research paper also examines the adverse health outcomes and developmental disruptions experienced by young brides as well as lack of implementation of the existing legal and policy frameworks contribute to the prevalence of the early child marriages in northwestern Nigeria. By understanding these root causes, the paper proposes targeted interventions and policy recommendations to address early child marriage in Northwestern Nigeria at the same time emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive approaches, economic empowerment, and stronger legal enforcement.

Ultimately, this research underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that address the multi-dimensional factors sustaining early child marriage. The paper calls for a concerted effort at both community and policy levels to empower girls, educate communities, and

enforce laws, paving the way for a future where all girls can achieve their full potential free from the constraints of early marriage.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Early child marriage is defined as marriage before the age of 18 years and is a widespread issue across many regions in the world with profound implications for the health, education, and well-being of young girls. Globally, efforts to eradicate this practice are ongoing but the issue still persists particularly in regions Africa and Northwestern Nigeria.

This paper deeply dive into the socio-cultural roots of early child marriage in Northwestern Nigeria with a focus on the intersection of cultural, economic, religious, and educational factors contributing to the issue. By understanding these underlying causes, the aim of the paper is to inform targeted interventions and policy recommendations.

## II. SOCIAL NORMS IN THE NORTHWEST NIGERIA

The continuation and preservation of early child marriage in Northwestern Nigeria is driven by social norms that dictate what acceptable behavior is. These norms, deeply rooted into cultural traditions and religious practices which most of the times pressure families to marry off daughters at a very young age most of the time below the age of 18 years.

Additionally, early child marriage is intertwined with beliefs about family honor, purity, and social order which are preserved and the practice continued through socialization and conformity pressures within the community.

### III. GENDER DOMINANCE IN NORTHWEST NIGERIA

In Northwestern Nigeria, the dominance of men and other gender groups such as elders and religious structures and gender discrimination significantly contribute to early child marriage and its preservation through decades. Girls are often valued primarily for their roles as wives and mothers, reinforcing the cycle of early marriage.

Economic dependence on male relatives by females and limited access to resources make underage girls vulnerable to early marriage often as a means of financial security. Moreover, financial motivations, including the dowry system, bride price, bride clothes and the efforts to alleviation of economic burdens of families are central to the practice of early child marriage in communities affected by economic meltdown and poverty.

### IV. LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

The role of laws and policies in combating early child marriage including international conventions and national laws, is crucial in setting the legal age for marriage and protecting girls' rights. Although there are international and national laws related to early child marriage and involvement of minors in sexual activities, the laws and policies are proven not to be effective enough to combat early child marriage, this is mostly due to religious, cultural and economic factors influencing child marriage in northwest of Nigeria.

### V. FINDINGS

Early child marriage affects millions of girls worldwide, with the highest rates in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa including Nigeria and Northwestern Nigeria. Understanding the global context provides insight into the commonalities and differences across regions.

Sub-Saharan Africa and Nigeria including Northwestern Nigeria has some of the highest rates of early child marriage, driven by a complex mix of religious, cultural, economic, and social factors.

Additionally, cultural traditions and religious practices in Northwestern Nigeria reinforce the practice of early child marriage. The desire to maintain family honor and fulfill religious obligations are significant factors.

Further research indicates that poverty and economic hardship compel families to marry off daughters early, viewing it as a strategy to reduce financial burdens and secure economic benefits. Apart from poverty, educational disparities and the prioritization of marriage over education for girls further entrench early child marriage. The lack of educational opportunities perpetuates gender inequality and limits girls' future prospects.

Research have proved that the health risks associated with early marriage including complications during pregnancy and limited access to healthcare, are more prevalent among underage girls compared to adults who make independent decision to get married and to select their spouses as compared to young brides who are married before adulthood.

### VI. CONCLUSIONS

The socio-cultural analysis of early child marriage in Northwestern Nigeria reveals a integration of many contributing factors such as religious and cultural influence, literacy, poverty and gender roles as major contributing factors in sustaining the early child marriages in Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria and Northwest of Nigeria. Addressing these requires a multifaceted approach and programs that will address the issues by directly targeting cultural, religious economic, educational, and legal dimensions.

### VII. CALL TO ACTION

To reduce the prevalence of early child marriage in Northwestern Nigeria, concerted efforts are needed at both the community and policy levels. Empowering girls, educating religious, community leaders and community members, and enforcing and reinforcing laws the existing laws are key steps towards ending this practice considered to be harmful to the wellbeing and development of young girls in northwest Nigeria.

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