

Religion and Time of Marriage

The role of faith leaders in advancing the cause of adolescent girls

Key Findings



In some regions in Northern Nigeria, the incidence of girl-child marriage is as high as **87%**, leaving a high proportion of adolescent girls in the region with very limited choices and opportunities to reach their full potential (AfriDevInfo, 2016)

Introduction

Early marriage is highly prevalent in Northern Nigeria. The significance of religion in Nigeria and the lack of law enforcement on early marriage places religious institutions and leaders in a privileged position to exercise influence on eradicating the practice. In this context, Christian Aid - as part of the Collective Action for Adolescent Girls Initiative (CAAGI) project - commissioned a study that explored how Muslim and Christian faith leaders can advance the cause of adolescent girls in their timing of marriage. CAAGI seeks to improve significantly the choices and opportunities for adolescent girls in Kaduna state to live productive and meaningful lives.

Aim of Study

This study listened to community members, local leaders, faith leaders, and adolescent girls in three areas of Kaduna state to find answers to four critical questions that revolved around the influence faith leaders have on:

- **their congregations and community members**
- **governmental actors**
- **adolescent girls and**
- **other faith leaders**

The study also focused on finding local initiatives already working on early marriage eradication.

Methodology

The mixed-method study took place in 3 of the 23 Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Kaduna state: Chikun (Mixed Christians and Muslims), Makarfi (majority Muslims) and Zangon-Kataf (majority Christians). These are CAAGI target LGAs and were selected to provide a variety of mixed and majority religious contexts to explore the question. A sample of 384 community members were selected for the survey with confidence level of 95% and confidence interval of 5%. All community respondents surveyed were filtered to have at least one married daughter. 24 focus group discussions with adolescent girls, 24 in-depth interviews with faith leaders and 12 key informant interviews with other stakeholders were conducted.

What we found out

The problem of early marriage persists in the study areas



35%

families married off one or more daughters before the age of 18



9.6%

will under no circumstance marry off their underage daughter



32.8%

The main reasons given for marrying an underage daughter were to prevent unwanted pregnancies



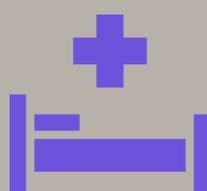
Disempowered

Most girls had no say in their marriage. Most married ones would have liked to have married later and continued their studies or vocational training



Physical violence

girls can be beaten by their families to marry against their will



Health implications

Young brides suffer health complications such as difficulty in pregnancy and labour, and *Vesico Vaginal Fistula* infections

The problem of early marriage exists in the study areas, and the consequences are faced not only by the girls, but their families and society at large.

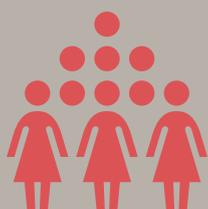
What we found out

Faith leaders are key to ending early marriage



9 of 10

people have been 'greatly' or 'fairly' influenced by messages from faith leaders in timing the marriage of their daughters



70%

found it compulsory for girls or their representatives to consult faith leaders to officiate in a girl's marriage



66%

said that faith leaders would not mind solemnizing a marriage even if the prospective bride is under-age



42%

were aware of a situation where faith leaders had advised against a marriage based on age



82%

affirmed that their faith leaders had preached about the negative effects of early marriage



14 years or less

religious and traditional leaders in some cases have married out their girl children before this age

While faith leaders play very important and varied roles in marriage, there are areas to be improved. Data from this research shows that some faith leaders are sometimes 'pro-early marriage.'

What we found out

A Child Act exists but is not sufficiently enforced and understood



Since 2003

the Child Rights Act has been in existence in Nigeria and it forbids marriage until the age of 18. This Act is seldom enforced and many States in Nigeria are yet to adopt it



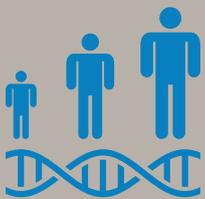
59.6%

of survey respondents did not know the legal age of marriage in Nigeria



No government certificate

in many communities, marriages can be completed without any contact with the government or any official certificate. Official authorities might find it hard to detect underage marriage.



When she is mature

the general community thinking is that a girl should marry when she is 'mature' (having her first period). This conflicts with the minimum legal age of marriage



How old am I

some community members did not know how old they were, let alone use 'age' as a reference for marrying their daughters



Little organised collaboration

in the communities and with the government to actively address timing of marriage among adolescent girls

The Child Rights Act though in existence is seldom enforced and clearly understood by the communities, and many states in Nigeria are yet to adopt it.

Influence of faith actors

The story of a faith actor who took action and intervened in stopping an early marriage

"This girl got pregnant and her parents sent her packing, that she should go and meet the boy [to marry]. She now came to me and told me: 'see the problem I am into'. Being a priest, I sat down thinking, I went to the parents and told them the implications of sending this little girl to go get married.

The parents listened to me and gave it a second thought. I pleaded with the parents to go bring their daughter back and they did."

Details of this story are in the full report

Physical maturity and poverty emerged as the main causes of early marriage, which points to the need to include health, sexual and reproductive education and vocational training and livelihood options in early marriage programmes. More governmental involvement is needed, including a stronger Child's Act enforcement.

Recommendations

Programme recommendations



Faith dimension

needs to be integrated in early marriage interventions happening in countries with strong religious identities such as Nigeria



Faith leaders

should be targeted to drive change in early marriage interventions. Many community members identified how they could help curtail early marriage, using messages in sermons, community conversations with parents, guardians and traditional rulers, mass mobilization, not marrying under-age girls, and empowerment and schooling programmes for girls.



Sexual and reproductive education

as well as vocational training and livelihood options should be included in early marriage programmes. Unwanted pregnancy, fear of sexual relationships before marriage and poverty were found to be the most entrenched reasons for marrying girls early.



Health risks

is probably the recommended approach for early marriage programmes, especially in the most conservative areas. Even the most conservative voices may agree that 'maturity' of the girl is necessary to reduce exposure to maternal health problems, including death.



Tailor programmes

to specifically meet the needed for the 3 categories of faith leaders– proactive, passive and promotive identified in this study

This study is expected to contribute to the body of knowledge and inform future programmes which will adopt the strategy of working with faith actors to empower the adolescent girl and change behaviours towards improving her opportunities.

Recommendations

Policy recommendations



The Child Right Act

in place since 2003, is a good document for advocacy against early marriage. However, a lot still needs to be done to ensure it is adopted in all the states and strongly implemented.



Legal age of marriage

needs to be enforced by the Nigerian government at the state and down to the community level.



Proper documentation

with government and official authorities should be done before and after marriage rites. This will allow easy discovery of underage marriage by the relevant authorities.



Develop programmes

This should be done by the Nigerian government and aimed at addressing early marriage and liaise with faith leaders. These should link up 'age' and 'maturity' so that communities connect with the law.



Punishment

and sanctions should be given to popular figures and politicians who marry a girl child, or give away their daughters for marriage at an early age.

If all these recommendations are taken into consideration and the laws are enforced, early marriage of adolescent girls is likely to drastically reduce as the law will be able to hold all offenders to book.

Under 18 brides

The story of young girls who have been married and divorced before the age of 18

“Four of the girls aged 12-14 were to be married in 6 weeks, and the youngest (12 years old) was to be married as a second wife... Amongst the girls was a lady aged 18 years that had been divorced thrice. She had been married at 10, and in all the marriages she was always an additional wife. The physical maturity of the girls was what determined their eligibility for marriage regardless of actual age. The community norm was that the man able to pay the sum of 40-50,000 [naira, around 23 GBP] to the father of the girl would be the husband, regardless of the age of the man or girls. In fact, the divorcee married at 10 years was the daughter of the village head”.

Details of this story are in the full report

**To read the full report, please visit
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