

## Traditional and Religious Leaders Knowledge of Medical and Health Consequences of Early Marriage in Sokoto State Nigeria

**Dr Ahmad Yahaya Maigemu | Professor Suleman Khalid**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto

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### Abstract:

Traditional and religious leaders play a key role in addressing many vital social problems including girl child marriage. A girl child marriage is a marriage conducted before the age of 18. This study identifies traditional and religious leader's knowledge of medical and health consequences of early marriage in Sokoto state, Nigeria. The study is purely qualitative and employed In Depth Interview (IDI) to interrogate traditional and religious leader's knowledge on medical and health implication of girl child marriage. Interviews were conducted with a total of 48 respondents made up of 18 religious leaders and 30 traditional leaders. The study found out that early marriage has both medical and health consequences to girl child. The study recommend that there is a need to develop methods to protect girls at risk of child marriage and to address the concerns of girls and women who are already married by ensuring the fulfillment of their right to a full education and providing that with life skills based training to ensure that they can earn a livelihood.

**Keywords:** Medical, Health, Consequences, Girl Child, Marriage

### Background and Related Literature:

Marriage of most girls at a young age has deeply rooted in traditions and religion of most countries around the world. This is even where the law states, clearly, the illegality of marrying girls below certain age, largely due to lack of adequate knowledge and respect for the law (African Population Conference, 2007). Even though, the phenomenon of child marriage differs across societies and cultures but it mostly occurs when a young girl is married to an adult. While the practice is most common in sub-Saharan African and South Asia, child marriage occurs in all regions, including developed countries. Although its practice has decreased somewhat in recent decades,

it remains common in although not only confined to, rural areas and among the most poverty stricken (UNFPA, 2005). Within many countries, there are regions with high ratio of girls married before the age of 15 (Population Council, 2011).

Marriage before the age of 18 is a reality for many young women. According to UNICEF'S (2001) estimates, over 64 million women aged 20-24 years were married or in union before the age of 18. In many parts of the world parents encourage the marriage of their daughters while they are still children in hopes that the marriage will benefit the children both financially and socially and relieve financial burdens on the family (Otoo-oryortey and

Pobi, 2003). In actuality, child marriage is a violation of human rights compromising girl's development and often resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, with little education and poor vocational training reinforcing the gendered nature of poverty. (Otoo-oryortey and Pobi, 2003).

Globally, according to UNICEF, 36% of women aged 20-24 were married or in a union, forced or consensual, before they had reached 18. In the United States, child marriage is still permissible in some states, with parental or judicial consent. An estimated 14 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 give birth each year. They are twice more likely to die during pregnancy or child birth than women in their early 20s.

In developed countries 90 percent of birth among adolescents aged 15-19 occur in marriage. Girls are often pressured to have children soon after getting married, despite being children themselves. Early pregnancy is filled with risks. Young mothers face higher risks during pregnancies including complications such as heavy bleeding, fistula, anemia and eclampsia which contribute to higher mortality rates of both mother and child. At a young age, a girl has not developed fully and her body may strain under the effort of child birth, which can result in obstructed labour and obstetric fistula (Iyabode, 2010).

The age at which children are married also varies between countries but marriage before the age of 15 is not uncommon. And in some areas of West African and in Ethiopia girls are sometimes married as early as age 7 (UNFPA, 2005). For instance, a study by the National Committee on Harmful Traditional Practices of Ethiopia (NCTPE) estimated the proportion of girls who married before the age of 15 at 57 percent. The same study shows that the practice occurs in its more extreme forms in Northern Ethiopia, where girls are married as young as eight or nine years of age. In some instances, they are even pledged at birth (NCTPE, 2003).

Although early marriage is widely practiced in many parts of the country, rates in Amhara and Tigray region are much higher than the national

average (82 percent in Amhara, 79 percent in Tigray, 64 percent in Benshangul, 64 percent in Gambella and 46 percent in Afar) (NCTPE, 2003). A study conducted in Amhara region also shows that 14 percent of women were married before age 10, 39 percent before age 15, and 56 percent before age 18 (Population Council, 2004 Cited in Pathfinder International, 2006).

According to the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), 100 million girls will be married before the age of 18 in the coming decade. Most of them will be in sub-Saharan Africa and the Asian subcontinent (Nepal, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh). In Niger for example, 77% of women were married as children. In Bangladesh, 65% of women were married as children. Child marriage also occurs in parts of the Middle East, including Yemen and the rural Maghreb claiming millions of victims annually and hundreds of thousands of injuries or death resulting from abuse or complications from pregnancy and child birth.

In 1999 Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), reported that in 26.5 percent couples, there is an age difference of 15 or more years between husband and wife. It showed that there was a large zonal variation in the mean age of marriage with females in the North marrying on an average of about five years earlier than those in the South as the median age of marriage in the South West and South East was 20.2 years whilst those of the North West was 14.6 years and slightly higher in the North East with 15.0 years.

Similarly, the 2003 NDHS in Nigeria revealed that the timing of marriage varies considerably by region and area of residence. The median age at marriage is lowest among girls in North West and North East regions, at 15.8 and 16.8 years respectively. Rural girls were more likely to marry early compared with urban girls; for example, in the North West, 29 percent of urban girls married by age 15 compared with 65 percent of their rural counterparts who are married at the same age. From these surveys, girls from the Northern part of Nigeria marry at a relatively younger age than their Southern age mates. Likewise rural girls were more

likely to get married earlier than urban girls. This indicates the higher incidence of child marriage is higher in Northern Nigeria than other parts of the country (Iyabode, 2010).

Globally, the age at which girls are married is increasing. But the pace of increase is faster in some countries than in others. In Nigeria, particularly Northern Nigeria, for example, a high proportion of girls are still married during childhood or adolescent. Quoting a survey conducted by Population Council Nigeria office on HIV/AIDS and Early Marriage in Northern Nigeria, Ma'aji (undated) shows that the parentage of girls married by age of 15 is much higher in North than in South. For example, North West alone has 35.8%, North East has 24.9%, North Central has 7.7%, and while South-West has 0.76% South-South has 0.4%.

Furthermore, most of the marriages below 18 years of age in Northern Nigeria are arranged marriage, and most of the victims are less educated, they have no opportunities and skills for income generating activities, and above all lack adequate knowledge of reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and STIs issues. The survey also shows that over 50% of the marriages are at an average of 15 years and some of the risks associated with early marriage comprises of the risks to be HIV positive because of unprotected sex with spouse that are mostly older, maternal, infant mortality and pregnancy problems, susceptibility to health conditions such as VVF, RVF, and limited involvement in decision making processes and limited educational attainment (Ma'aji, Undated)

Another study by UNICEF in six West African countries showed that 44 percent of 20-24 year old women in Niger were married under the age of 15. The need to follow tradition, reinforce ties among or between communities, and protect girls from out-of-wedlock pregnancy was the main reasons given. In the communities studied, all decisions on the timing of marriage and the choice of spouse are made by the fathers (UNICEF, 2001).

According to UNICEF, in 2007 more than 60 million girls aged 20-24 worldwide had married

before their 18th birthday. If current trends continue, an additional 100 million girls – or 25,000-30,000 girls every day -- will become child brides over the next decade. While boys are subjected to early marriage, most child marriages involve girls. For instance, in Mali the ratio of girls ages 15-19 who were married as children compared to boys, is 72:1, and in El Salvador it is six to one. Similarly, an International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) review shows that rates of child marriage are highest in parts of Africa, and in South Asia, where one-half to three-fourths of girls are married before age 18. Niger, Mali and Chad have the highest rates of forced child marriage in the world, ranging from 71 percent to 77 percent. But because of the large populations of countries such as India and Bangladesh, the greatest number of child brides lives in South Asia, where 46 percent of all marriages take place before the girl is 18. (Malhotra, 2010).

#### ***Methodology and Process:***

The study relied heavily on the open-ended tradition of participatory and qualitative research tools, using specifically in-depth interviews (IDI). A one-day training orientation workshop facilitated by the Principal Investigator was organized for the four -member team of research assistants on the research methodology and tools as well as key principles of participatory research using IDI. A study guide to explore themes of the research, especially the knowledge of health and medical consequences on child marriage, was also discussed at the orientation with the view to conceptualizing it to the knowledge of traditional and religious of Sokoto State.

#### ***Sampling Design and Selection:***

The study relied heavily on the open-ended tradition of participatory and qualitative research tools, using specifically in-depth interviews (IDI). A study guide to explore theme of the research, especially the medical and health consequences of early marriage issues was also discussed with the view to conceptualizing it to the traditional and religious realities of Sokoto State. The key informants interviewed across the state include

traditional rulers, notable Muslim scholars, with specialization in Arabic and Islamic Studies in each location. They are expected to share their experiences, express opinions on the plight of medical and health effect of girl-child in marriage and make useful suggestions.

Interviews were conducted with a total of 48 respondents made up of 18 religious leaders and 30 traditional leaders in 9 Local Government Areas across the **three** Senatorial Districts of the state. In

each of the selected 9 LGAs, respondents were purposively selected taking into cognizance the rural/urban as well as sectarian divide of (especially the *ulema*) population.

**Findings/Results**

The practice of early marriage is now understood to have very harmful effects on the health, psychological, physiological and socio-economic well-being of young girls.

**Matrix 5: Knowledge of Health Consequences of Early Marriage**

<b>Religious Scholars</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young girls are less likely to access any antenatal care services</li> <li>• Early marriage is associated with maternal morbidity and mortality</li> </ul>
<b>Traditional Leaders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young married girls are at greater risk of maternal morbidity and mortality</li> </ul>
<b>Inferences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most respondents are aware of the array of adverse consequences of early marriage</li> <li>• Some respondents are fatalistic about the consequences of early marriage</li> </ul>

One of the respondents revealed that:

Yes, there is the problem of not going for ANC and there is that of young age. But even with the young age if they do go to hospital, the problem can be reduced significantly (Islamic Scholar, Urban).

Yes for sure. When a survey was conducted, it shows that Sokoto state has the highest level of maternal mortality. That is why UNFPA intervened in enlightening people about the dangers of early marriage and the need for pregnant women to attend ANC (Islamic Scholar, Urban).

However, this knowledge is not broadly shared across most of the population.

No, that one is from God, pregnancy related complications are from God, not the age of the mother (Islamic Scholar, Rural).

.....for me a girl should get married at least at the age 13 or 14 and above because at that time even if she has sex with her husband and get pregnant, she will not face problem. .... Our tradition here is that as soon as a girl should be quickly married as soon as she is matured (*Traditional Ruler, Rural*).

You see, that is something that comes from Allah, for example, a woman of 30 years can have complications at child birth not necessarily because she is young (*Traditional ruler, Urban*).

A respondent also said:

No, all those problems are brought by Allah. In fact most of the women that had VVF, they have it not in their first delivery. For some it is even 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> delivery (*Traditional Ruler, Rural*).

**Discussion:**

The respondents are quite familiar with the adverse consequences of early marriage: early marriage



contributes to a series of negative consequences both for young girls and the societies in which they live. Young married girls are at greater risk of reproductive morbidity and mortality. The timing of early marriage almost always disrupts girl's education, reducing their opportunities for future financial independence through work. Young women are often married to men who are much older, and find themselves in new homes with greater responsibilities, without much autonomy and decision-making power, and unable to negotiate sexual experience within marriage. Conditions are thus set for girls-child marriage with all its attendant negative social consequences and health hazards. Yet neither the traditional nor the religious leaders are ready to critique the practice.

### Recommendations:

There is the need to incubate and actively support youth-led groups that raise awareness about children's rights, including the right not to be forced into marriage at an early age.

There is a need to develop methods to protect girls at risk of child marriage and to address the concerns of girls and women who are already married by ensuring the fulfillment of their right to a full education and providing that with life skills based training to ensure that they can earn a livelihood.

Efforts are also required to protect girls who are in union. Decreasing the pressure on young women to conceive through education and advocacy on the dangers of early motherhood should be considered. Outreach efforts should consider focusing on women who were married before age 18 as potentially in need of assistances.

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