

# Cultural, Religious and Economic Causes of Child Marriage in Sokoto State, North West, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Marriage is a social institution which provides a formal union for a man and a woman, by which they become husband and wife. The inauguration of marriage institution depends on people's own religions, traditions and cultural background. This paper explores the cultural, religious and economic causes of child marriage in Sokoto state, Nigeria with focus on the view of traditional and religious leaders in the state. The study is purely qualitative using specifically in-depth interviews (IDI). Interviews were conducted with a total of 48 respondents made up of 18 religious leaders and 30 traditional leaders. The study find out that the major reason for the practice of early marriage has to do with cultural, religious and moral considerations. Since Islam has its views, positions and legal opinions (fatwa) on early marriage, the issues need to be more widely discussed and debated among the Islamic scholars.

**Keywords:** Cultural, religious, economic causes, child marriage, Sokoto state.

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a social institution which provides a formal union for a man and a woman, by which they become husband and wife. The inauguration of marriage institution depends on people's own religions, traditions and cultural background, but what are generally regarded as marriage institution and they serve the same purpose among which are reproductive purposes, raising children and also to partake in the political and economic developmental activities of their own societies or communities. Generally, there is no clear specification concerning the age at which a girl should be married. There is, however, a drive towards a universal consensus recognizing 18 years of age as the minimum age of marriage. Accordingly, any marriage of a girl conducted before age 18 is deemed to be an exercise in early marriage.

The timing of first marriage is generally early in Africa but varies widely. In sub-Saharan Africa generally marriage occurs at much younger age than in North Africa. For example, 62 percent of women between the ages of fifteen and nineteen in Niger, 50 percent of such women in Guinea. In contrast, few young women in Northern Africa and the Near East married as teenagers. Indeed, 99 percent of women under twenty in Libya and Tunisia, for example, have never married (Rashad et al. 1999).

Nowhere is the phenomenon of girl-child more expressed than among the Hausa – Fulani ethnic group in Northern Nigeria. According to NDHS (2008) the mean age of first marriage for women in the North-West geo-political zone is 14.6 years compared to 19.1 years in South West. A UNFPA (2004) survey indicated that 48 percent of girls in the North West were married by age 15, and by 18 years of age, 78 percent were already married. The marriage age of girls in the rural areas was given as low as 12 to 13 years while that of the boys was between 17 and 20 years (Khalid, 1997). A local survey indicated that 33.5% of the female population in Sokoto state have been married before 15 years with some 12.8% having had a least one pregnancy before that age (Shehu, 1999). This means that over one-third of school age girls in the area were either wives or mothers at a time they should have been in primary or junior secondary school.

Early marriage is now widely recognized as a violation of girl child's basic rights to health, education, and development. Traditional, religious and economic factors continue to fuel the practice of child marriage, despite its strong association with adverse reproductive health outcomes and the lack of education of girls.

## RELATED LITERATURE

Many girls around the world and less often young men are married against their will before the age of 18. Girls who live in the poorest 20% of households are more likely to be married by the time they are 19 than those in the wealthiest 20%. Girls who receive higher education are less likely to be married before age 19 than girls who are not in school. There are a variety of reasons why a family would decide to force a girl into early marriage: to ensure her security (especially during unstable times), because they believe it is a matter of family honor, or because they receive goods or money in exchange. The root causes of child marriage are complex and a variety of socio-economic factors play a role. Poverty, cultural norms, lack of economic opportunities and lack of access to education are all strongly associated with early marriage.

Other factors influencing child marriage rates may include; the state of the country's civil registration system, which provides proof of age for children; the existence of an adequate legislative framework with an accompanying enforcement mechanism to address cases of child marriage and the existence of customary or religious laws that condone the practice.

However, poverty, protection of girl's family honor and the provision of stability during unstable social periods are considered as significant factors in deterring a girl's risk of becoming married while still a child. Jenson and Thornton (2003) noted that strong correlations between a woman's age at marriage and the level of education she achieves, the age at which she give birth to her first child and the age of her husband. Women who married at younger ages were more likely to believe that it is sometimes acceptable for a husband to beat his wife and were more likely to experience domestic violence themselves. The age gap between partners is thought to contribute to these abusive power dynamics and to increase the risk of untimely widowhood, although Westoff (2003) notes that older husbands may be better provides for the household. Protection from HIV/AIDS is another reason for child marriage. Parents seek to marry off their girls to protect their health and their honor, and men often seek younger women as wives as a means of avoid infection.

Child marriage has many causes: cultural, social, economic, and religious. In many cases, a mixture of these causes results in the betrothal of children without their consent. Some of the widely reported factors directly or indirectly associated with child marriage, according to Forward (2013) are:

- a. Poverty: poor families sell their children into marriage either to settle debts or to make some money and escape the cycle of poverty. Child marriage fosters poverty, however, as it ensures that girls who marry young will not be properly educated or take part in the workforce.
- b. Protecting the girls sexuality: in certain cultures, marrying a girl young presumes that the girl's sexuality, therefore, the girls family's honour will be protected but ensuring that the girl marries as a virgin. The imposition of family honour on a girls individuality, in essence robbing the girl of her honour and dignity, undermines the credibility of family honour and instead underscores the presumed protection's actual aim: to control the girl.
- c. Gender discrimination: child marriage is a product of cultures that devalue women and girls and discriminate against them. The discrimination, according to a UNICEF report on "Child Marriage and the Law" 'often manifests itself in the form of domestic violence, marital rape, and deprivation of food, lack of access to information, education health care, and general impediments to mobility'.
- d. Inadequate laws: many countries such as Pakistan have laws against child marriage. The laws are not enforced. In Afghamstan a new law was written into the country's code enabling Shiite, or Hazara communities to impose their own form of family law-including permitting child marriage.

e. Trafficking: poor families are tempted to sell their girls not just into marriage but into prostitution as the transaction enables large sums of money to change hands.

Similarly, in explaining reasons for child marriage, Forward (2013) added that poverty and economic transactions as well as the idea of morality and honour are also part of the reasons why child marriage occur. Stressing that poverty is a critical factor contributing to child marriage and a common reason why parents may encourage a child to marry. Where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older is believed to benefit the child and her family both financially and socially. In communities where child marriage is practiced, marriage is regarded as a transaction, often representing a significant economic activity for a family. A daughter may be the only commodity a family has left to be traded and sometimes girls can be used as currency or to settle debts. A girl's marriage may also take place as a preserved means of creating stability. In uncertain times, poor harvest conditions or war, a family may believe it is necessary to ensure the economical safety of their daughter and family through marriage. In the context of poverty, the practice of paying bride price can encourage early marriage. Young girls, a resource with which their parents can attain greater wealth, are married off at young age, for the bride price and also as a way for parents to lessen their economic burdens.

The dominant notions of morality and honour are important factors encouraging the practice of child marriage. These are influenced greatly by the importance placed on maintaining family honour and the high value placed on girl's virginity. It is considered that shame would be cast on a family if a girl was not a virgin when she marries. Therefore, in order to ensure that a girl's virtue remained intact, girls may be married earlier, in order to ensure their virginity. Young girls may also be encouraged to marry older men, due to the perceptions that an older husband will be able to act as a guardian against behaviour deemed immoral and inappropriate.

## 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 theme of the research, especially the cultural sensitivity of early marriage issues, was also discussed at the orientation with the view to conceptualizing it to the socio-economic and cultural realities of Sokoto State. A short trial was undertaken as part of the workshop. The key informants to be interviewed across the state will include traditional rulers, notable Muslim scholars, and academicians with specialization in Arabic and Islamic Studies in each location. They are expected to share their experiences, express opinions on the plight 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 will be purposively selected taking into cognizance the rural/urban as well as sectarian divide of (especially the ulema) population.

### Quality Assurance Method

Before the commencement of each IDI session, the objective of the researchers' visit was explained to the respondent, i.e. to generate information on the prevalence of early or girl child marriage in the society. Permission was sought from the respondents for the use of tape-recorders and each respondent was encouraged to speak frankly and confidently.

## FINDINGS

The major reason for the practice of early marriage has to do with religious and moral considerations. The respondents are quick to remind one that there is no prescribed minimum or maximum age for marriage in Islam. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) married A'ishat when she was 9 years old. This contrasts sharply with his

marriage to Khadijah, his first wife, who was 15 years older than him. She remained his only wife till her death, when he was 50 years old.

<b>Matrix 2: Religious and Cultural Basis of Early Marriage</b>	
<b>Religious Scholars</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marriage is prescribed in Islam, and religion is of utmost consideration in marriage</li> <li>• Maturity and development of sexual emotions signify preparedness for marriage</li> <li>• Early marriage is a measure of protecting sexual morality</li> </ul>
<b>Traditional Leaders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preservation of sexual modesty for girls</li> <li>• Fear of sexual intimacy before marriage</li> <li>• Prevention of stigma associated with unexpected pregnancy</li> </ul>
<b>Inferences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secular laws limiting age of marriage to 18 is perceived as against Islamic religious principles</li> <li>• Arranged marriage is still prevalent as a child may not be autonomous to choose a partner</li> <li>• There is still a strong moral ground for early marriage</li> </ul>

The attitude towards early marriage appears to have been strongly influenced by the following precepts of the Prophet of Allah:

O people, Jibreel has brought unto me a divine command stating that girls are like fruits from a tree. If they are not plucked in time then they get rotten by the rays of the sun and a slight blow of the wind will result in their falling down from the tree. Similarly, when girls attain maturity, then like other women they develop emotions related to sex and there is no cure for it except her husband. If they are not married prevention of character corruption becomes a remote possibility because, after all, they are human beings and no human is free from vice". (Furoo-e- Kafi, vol 5, pg 337).

Accordingly, no respondent is willing to critique age at marriage in view of its religious implications. Everything is viewed within the prism of Islam. This forms the basis for opposition to any move to stipulate age of marriage among Muslims. The Muslim, particularly urban, scholarly class views the media hype on early marriage as unnecessary and offensive against their value system and designed to blackmail them into accepting The Child Rights Act which they opposed so vehemently.

The whole issue of marriage to minors being raised today particularly in Nigeria, may not be unconnected with The Child Rights Act... The recent furor over marriage over marriage of a girl that is seen in some cultures as not yet ripe for marriage was designed to prepare ground for that act (Islamic Scholar, Urban).

A leading member of Sokoto State Council of Ulama and a specialist in Islamic law (shari'a) has this to say:

The only instrument (apart from some few exceptions as mentioned) which limit the age of marriage to 18 years and above is the Child Rights Act (which) is not yet domesticated into our laws. The provision of Child Rights Act being adopted by the National Assembly and some States does not make it a law for the whole nation. This is because the matter in focus i.e. the age of marriage falls within the ambit of citizen's personal life and they are allowed to be governed by the particular law they accept to be their personal law. Therefore, any law which will attempt to limit the age of marriage to 18 years is inconsistent with the constitution as per as the right of Nigerian Muslim is concerned. (Islamic Scholar, Urban)

In Sokoto State, as in other parts of the Muslim North, early marriage is seen as a way to ensure that girl's sexual activities outside wedlock are strictly restricted.

The factors include the need to protect the girl's chastity especially when you observe one of her friend is exhibiting a behavior deemed by the community as immoral and inappropriate. Therefore to protect your daughter from taking that path, you quickly get her married so that she does not spoil your reputation and that of your family (Islamic Scholar, Urban).

The reason is to protect her chastity and integrity (Islamic Scholar, Rural). First and most important reason is to protect the integrity of the girl from her male counterparts and protect the family name (Islamic Scholar, Rural).

Another respondent said that:

.... if a girl is grown up and has good body structure, she can be married out even if she does not attain 17 or 18 years, because that may be the best. Second, if a girl is so much associate with male, she can be married out early in order to protect her integrity and protect the family name (Islamic Scholar, Urban).

The fear of initiation of sexual activity before marriage with its attendant risk of pregnancy is thus a reason why girls are married off soon after the onset of puberty.

Arranged marriage is also widely practiced but on the decline as young girls in both rural and urban areas insist on choosing their life partners.

Let me tell you, when I was to marry my second wife, her father did not even consult her and she complied. It is stated in the Risala that a father can give out his daughter for marriage even without her consent. But now things have changed. They (girls) can challenge your decision. You see, I wanted to marry my first daughter to my nephew but she refused because they don't have electricity in their village. So I thought that even if I forced her, it may not work as the marriage can break, so I allowed her to marry person of her choice (Islamic Scholar, Rural).

This tally with the testimony of his urban counterpart;

Honestly, things have greatly changed now, unlike in the past when we heard that, it was parents who choose husband for their daughters or wives for their male children, and there was no any problem. But people are civilized nowadays, it is not normal for parents to be doing that marriage should be based on 'I see I like' because it is a lifelong relationship (Islamic Scholar, Male, Urban).

## DISCUSSION

Socio-cultural factors play a determining role in promoting the practice of early marriage in the state. Most people in the study area seem to be contented with the in-built, male-held definitions of gender in their traditional culture. It is the men, not women, who have the right to participate in public life and monopolize decision-making both at the community and family level. The ideal woman and wife is viewed as submissive, obedient and contented to enjoy reflected status from her husband. Women in this area are valued in terms of their reproductive functions. The sole role of the women is perceived generally to be in the home caring for the young and cooking for the family. Marriage and childbearing remain, therefore, the central most important roles of women. All other roles are secondary. In particular, the low status of women and their limited education hinder their ability to make decisions about reproductive health matters. For many Hausa-Fulani women in the study area, the problems begins from the fact that they are marginally involved in the choice of marriage partner, as they are married off in their early and mid- teens. Once married, the girl-wife is confined within the four walls of the harem and, in most cases, marriage marks the end of her education.

The influence of traditional division of labor along gender also seems to dictate the timing and form of marriage in Hausa society. Indeed, this could be observed in the socialization of children. The most crucial



feature of this socialization for girls was their training into various household management chores both productive (such as grinding, cooking, churning and hawking) and reproductive (child birth and rearing) and many other activities connected with their future roles as wives and mothers. If the girl is not out there marketing some goods for her mother, she is expected to spend most of her time at home, unless otherwise authorized by the parents. By the age of seven or eight, girls will be entrusted with the care of young children, including infants, when the mother is resting. And unlike boys, girls were expected to assume adult responsibilities much earlier. Ideally, a girl should experience her first menstruation in her husband's house and should be married before her sexual potential is fully developed.

This in-built, male-held, definition of gender within the Hausa-Fulani traditional culture directly conditioned early marriage is legitimated and reinforced by the traditional leaders and Muslim scholarly class, the ulema, to whom we now turn.

There is need for service providers in Sokoto State to be extra-sensitive to the religious sensitivity of the environment because Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was reported as saying: '...Marriage is part of my sunnah, anyone who abhors my sunnah is not of me'. It will equally be insensitive to insist that early marriage is strictly 'harmful traditional practice' when the Prophet himself was widely reported to have consummated marriage with A'ishat at the prime age of 9. The research was conducted in the heat of national controversy over minimum marriage age. Sheikh Usman Jos reacted to the furore on 'early marriage' thus:

What baffles me about those going against early marriage is their hypocrisy. Why are they not directing their campaign against early fornication (zina)? Marriage is sunna of the Prophet (pbuh) and age is not a factor. They should go and read what Islam says about marriage and the so-called early marriage and stop acting ignorantly. We are in this country where these advocates against early marriage are promoting the sale and use of condom, as a promotion for what they called a safe way for fornication (zina) and even extra-marital affairs'. (Sunday Trust, 28/07/13)

The controversy that engulfed the nation in the last week of July 2013 at the peak of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan typifies Muslims reaction to early marriage and is worth recounting here. It all began as a barely-noticed move by the Senate to amend a section of the constitution of the Federal Republic with respect to the age at which one can renounce his Nigerian citizenship but snowballed into a full-fledged debate on marriage age and the phenomenon of child marriage. The debate degenerated into name calling, blackmail, threats and counter threats by different political, religious and civil society groups as they vie for contention in this matter.

The Senate Committee on Constitution Review had recommended the deletion of the Constitution Section 29 (4) (b). The section provides that a Nigerian who is of full age can renounce his or her citizenship. Sub-section (a) defined full age as 18 years but sub-section (b) added that any woman who is married is also deemed to be an adult. Most Senators voted for the deletion of subsection (b) since it makes sense that a weighty matter such as renunciation of citizenship should only be undertaken by a person who is old enough to know what he or she is doing.

Shortly after the vote a point of order was raised on the Senate floor. It was pointed out that item 61 under part 1 of the second schedule to the 1999 Constitution bars National Assembly from legislating on any matter that has to do with Islamic and Customary laws. A vote was then retaken and Senators overwhelmingly reversed themselves and voted to retain the qualifier subsection (b) in the Constitution.

What followed next was a storm raised by women and civil society groups, actively fueled by some newspapers and with religious bodies wading into the action. A coalition of women civil society organizations demanded for the immediate removal of Section 29 (4) (b) from the constitution, saying 'it infringes on the rights of the girl child' and added that 'state assemblies that are yet to domesticate the Child Rights Act should do so immediately'. Matters were made worse by the intervention of President of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor who was quoted as saying:

By the grace of God I will personally mobilize Nigerians and lead this street protest against this oppressive and dehumanizing resolution. Why would the Senate after voting recoil simply because a point of order premised

on religious basis was raised. We Christians also have cannon law which frowns at marriage of girls who are not of age. Christianity abhors such marriages. The protest will be soon'. (Sunday Trust, 28/07/13)

These comments drew sharp reactions from a wide section of Muslim communities who viewed it as assault against their religious sensibility. A Muslim cleric who does not appear to subscribe to early marriage exploded as follows:

(From now on) we are going to marry out our children even at 15 and we would as well marry those of 15, and so what? We are far better than those promoting fornication. Even in the so-called developed world, how many underage mothers do they record every day? Uncountable. and, in fact, outside marriage'. (Sunday Trust, 28/07/13)

Indeed, debates and dialogues related to marriage and family matters proved to be the most contentious at both local and national levels. It is these that make the domestication of Child Rights Acts and CEDAW near impossible in most Muslim-dominated states of northern Nigeria. For instance, review of the recordings of the National Assembly hearing on CEDAW revealed that it was provisions over marriage, divorce and family affairs as contained in CEDAW article 16 that form the basis for opposition against CEDAW bill and its subsequent rejection by the National Assembly. For instance, in the National Assembly Debates (vol. 2 no. 52) of 15/05/2007, it was reported that after briefing the house on CEDAW by Honourable Saudatu Sani 'the House went through each article of the convention without any rancor. However when the House reached article 16 there were disagreements and members sought for clarification on the meaning of the word 'equality'.

In Sokoto State, individuals and organizations with community links are particularly advantaged to address gender and girl child marriage issues in a culturally sensitive and integrated manner. The problem is that most development agencies, international NGOs and their local implementation partners failed to take time to understand Muslim communities and in many cases held false assumption about what would work or not work. Muslim scholarly class and Islamic organizations need to be targeted as object of study with the view to engaging them in the course of design and implementation of culturally sensitive development programmes.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Since Islam has its views, positions and legal opinions (fatwa) on early marriage, the issues need to be more widely discussed and debated among the Islamic scholars. They should be made to appreciate the consequences of the practice on the girl child herself, the community and overall national development.

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