

Empowering the Unheard: Ending Child Marriage and Amplifying the Voices of Nigerian Girls in Cross River State

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Abstract

This study interrogates the topic- Empowering the Unheard: A Qualitative Investigation into Ending Child Marriage and Amplifying the Voices of Nigerian Girls in Cross River State. Child marriage remains a critical challenge in various regions, including Cross River State, Nigeria, where many girls face premature marriages, curtailing their rights and opportunities. Thus, this qualitative investigation will explore effective strategies for ending child marriage and amplifying the voices of Nigerian girls in the study area. By taking into consideration in-depth interviews, informant observations, focus group discussions, and participatory observation, the study will gather insights from affected girls, community leaders, policymakers, and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). The research will examine the socio-cultural, economic, and legal factors contributing to child marriage, highlighting successful interventions and identifying gaps in current approaches. The findings from the study are expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in empowering, promoting education, and fostering a supportive environment for the growth of the girl child in Cross River State. Finally, this investigation seeks to provide empirical/ sustainable solutions that will prioritize the well-being and rights of Nigerian girls in Cross River State.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Empowerment, Education, Community Engagement, Gender Equality

Introduction

Child marriage is a pervasive issue that affects millions of girls globally, with Nigeria being one of the countries with the highest rates of this practice. In Cross River State, a region characterized by its rich cultural heritage and diverse communities, child marriage remains a significant challenge, often justified by traditional norms and economic circumstances. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021), approximately 43% of girls in Nigeria are married before the age of 18, with varying rates across different states. This alarming statistic underscores the urgent need to address the factors that perpetuate child marriage, which include poverty, lack of education, and gender inequality (World Bank, 2020). The significance of this

study lies in its potential to contribute to the global effort to end child marriage and promote gender equality. Child marriage not only violates the rights of young girls but also has far-reaching implications for their health, education, and economic prospects (Malhotra et al., 2011). Research has shown that girls who marry early are more likely to experience domestic violence, have limited access to healthcare, and face barriers to education, ultimately perpetuating a cycle of poverty and inequality (International Center for Research on Women, 2019). By amplifying the voices of the Nigerian girl child, this study aims to bring attention to their experiences and advocate for their rights, fostering a more equitable society. The purpose of this research is to explore the underlying factors contributing to child marriage in Cross River State and to identify effective strategies for empowering girls to resist this harmful practice. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions, this study will gather insights from various stakeholders, including girls, parents, community leaders, and policymakers. By centering the voices of the girls themselves, the research aims to highlight their aspirations, challenges, and the support systems they need to thrive. This study will focus specifically on Cross River State, examining the socio-cultural, economic, and legal frameworks that influence child marriage in the region. It will address the complexities surrounding this issue, including the interplay of tradition, modernity, and the role of education in empowering girls. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by the girl child in Cross River State and will inform recommendations for effective interventions and policy changes aimed at ending child marriage. This study seeks to empower the unheard voices of Nigerian girls and to highlight the urgent need for collective action to end child marriage in Cross River State. By addressing this critical issue, we can work towards a future where girls are free to pursue their dreams and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Understanding Child Marriage in Nigeria

Child marriage is a complex and multifaceted issue that significantly affects the lives of millions of girls in Nigeria. Defined as a formal marriage or informal union before the age of 18, child marriage is prevalent in many regions of Nigeria, driven by a combination of cultural, economic, and social factors. According to UNICEF (2021), Nigeria has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with approximately 43% of girls married before they reach adulthood. This alarming statistic highlights the urgency of understanding the underlying causes and consequences of child marriage in the country. Cultural norms and traditions play a significant role in the perpetuation of child marriage in Nigeria. In many communities, marrying daughters at a young age is seen as a means to preserve family honor and reduce economic burdens (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). Families may view early marriage as a way to ensure their daughters are provided for, particularly in regions where poverty is prevalent and educational opportunities are limited. Additionally, traditional beliefs about femininity and the roles of women often reinforce the idea that girls should marry early and prioritize family life over education (Mastrorillo et al., 2018). Many families face financial hardships and may see marrying off their daughters as a way to alleviate economic pressures. In some cases, girls are married to older men who can provide

financial support, which can create a cycle of dependency and limit the girls' opportunities for education and personal growth (World Bank, 2020). The economic implications of child marriage extend beyond the individual, affecting community development and contributing to broader societal issues such as poverty and gender inequality.

The health consequences of child marriage are profound and far-reaching. Girls who marry early are at increased risk of experiencing complications during pregnancy and childbirth, which can lead to maternal mortality. The World Health Organization (2018) reports that adolescents face higher risks of obstetric complications, and child brides often lack access to essential healthcare services. Additionally, early marriage is associated with higher rates of domestic violence and mental health issues, further exacerbating the challenges faced by these young women (Gage, 2013). Girls who marry early often drop out of school, limiting their future opportunities and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. According to a study by the International Center for Research on Women (2019), education is one of the most effective tools for preventing child marriage, as it empowers girls to make informed choices about their futures. Efforts to promote girls' education and raise awareness about the importance of delaying marriage are crucial in combating this issue.

Legal Framework and Policies

Child marriage remains a critical issue in Nigeria, despite the existence of various legal frameworks and policies aimed at protecting the rights of children, particularly girls. The legal landscape surrounding child marriage in Nigeria is complex, influenced by a mix of statutory laws, customary practices, and religious beliefs. Nigeria's Constitution provides a foundation for the protection of children's rights. The Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003 is a significant piece of legislation that explicitly prohibits child marriage, defining a child as anyone under the age of 18 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2003). The CRA aims to align Nigeria's laws with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, promoting the best interests of the child and safeguarding their rights to education, health, and protection from harmful practices. Despite the existence of national laws, customary and religious laws often prevail in many communities, leading to a conflict between formal legal frameworks and traditional practices. In some regions, customary laws permit marriage at younger ages, especially in rural areas where cultural traditions are deeply rooted (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). Additionally, Islamic law, which is practiced in several northern states, often allows for the marriage of girls at puberty, further complicating the legal landscape (UNICEF, 2021).

The National Policy on the Girl Child, established in 2000, aims to promote the rights and well-being of girls in Nigeria. This policy emphasizes the importance of education, health, and protection from harmful practices, including child marriage (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 2000). However, the effectiveness of this policy has been hindered by inadequate funding, lack of awareness, and insufficient implementation at the local level. In 2016,

Nigeria launched the National Strategic Plan of Action to End Child Marriage, which aims to reduce the prevalence of child marriage through various interventions, including community awareness campaigns, educational initiatives, and legal reforms (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 2016). This plan recognizes the need for a multi-sectoral approach to address the root causes of child marriage and promote gender equality.

Despite the existence of these legal frameworks and policies, several challenges hinder the effective prevention of child marriage in Nigeria. One significant barrier is the lack of enforcement of existing laws. Many communities remain unaware of the Child Rights Act, and law enforcement agencies often lack the resources and training to address cases of child marriage (Mastrorillo et al., 2018). Additionally, the influence of cultural norms and practices can undermine legal protections, as families may prioritize tradition over statutory laws. Though the legal framework and policies addressing child marriage in Nigeria reflect a commitment to protecting the rights of children, significant gaps remain in enforcement and implementation.

The Situation in Cross River State

Child marriage is a pressing issue in Cross River State, Nigeria, where cultural, economic, and social factors converge to perpetuate this harmful practice. Despite national laws prohibiting child marriage, the prevalence of this issue in Cross River reflects broader trends seen across Nigeria, influenced by local customs and socio-economic conditions. Cross River State has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Nigeria. According to the National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2018, approximately 30% of women aged 20-24 in Cross River were married before the age of 18 (National Population Commission, 2019). This statistic highlights the urgency of addressing child marriage in the region, where young girls are often married off to older men, limiting their opportunities for education and personal development.

Cultural beliefs play a significant role in the persistence of child marriage in Cross River State. Traditional practices often prioritize early marriage as a means of securing family honor and reducing the economic burden on families (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). In many communities, there is a strong belief that girls should marry early to ensure their safety and security, which often outweighs the perceived benefits of education.

Economic factors also contribute to the prevalence of child marriage in Cross River. Families facing financial difficulties may see marrying off their daughters as a way to alleviate economic burdens. This practice can be especially pronounced in rural areas, where poverty rates are higher and educational opportunities are limited (World Bank, 2020). The dowry received from early marriages can provide immediate financial relief for struggling families, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Education is a crucial factor in combating child marriage. In Cross River State, many girls lack access to quality education due to inadequate infrastructure and socio-cultural barriers. According to a report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021), girls who are not

educated are significantly more likely to marry early. The lack of educational opportunities not only limits girls' prospects but also reinforces the perception that marriage is their primary role in society.

The Cross River State government has recognized the need to address child marriage and has initiated various programs aimed at raising awareness and promoting girls' education. The state has implemented community sensitization programs to educate families about the dangers of child marriage and the benefits of keeping girls in school (Cross River State Ministry of Women Affairs, 2022). Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also working to combat child marriage in Cross River State. Organizations such as Girls Not Brides and the International Center for Research on Women are actively involved in advocacy, education, and community engagement to change perceptions around child marriage and promote girls' rights (Girls Not Brides, 2021).

Empowerment Strategies for Victims

Child marriage is a significant challenge in Cross River State, Nigeria, affecting the rights, health, and prospects of young girls. To combat this issue, it is essential to implement empowerment strategies that support victims of child marriage and help prevent further occurrences. One of the most effective strategies for empowering victims of child marriage is ensuring access to quality education. Education equips girls with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions about their lives and futures. Programs that provide scholarships, school supplies, and transportation can help facilitate girls' return to school after early marriage (Mastrorillo et al., 2018). Additionally, community awareness campaigns can emphasize the importance of education for girls, challenging cultural norms that prioritize early marriage over schooling (UNICEF, 2021).

In addition to formal education, life skills training can empower young girls by providing them with essential skills for personal development and decision-making. Programs that focus on health education, financial literacy, and leadership can enhance girls' confidence and ability to advocate for themselves (International Center for Research on Women, 2019). Such training can also prepare them for challenges they may face as they transition out of child marriage. Vocational training programs can equip young women with skills in trades such as sewing, hairdressing, or agriculture, enabling them to generate income and achieve financial independence (World Bank, 2020). By fostering economic self-sufficiency, these programs can reduce the likelihood of future marriages and empower girls to make choices about their lives. Access to microfinance can also play a vital role in empowering victims of child marriage. Microloans can help young women start small businesses, providing them with the resources needed to support themselves and their families (Girls Not Brides, 2021). Financial independence not only enhances their social status but also enables them to invest in their children's education and well-being.

Legal Support and Advocacy

Raising awareness about legal rights is crucial for empowering victims of child marriage. Legal awareness programs can educate young women about their rights under Nigerian law, including the Child Rights Act, which prohibits child marriage (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2003). Knowledge of their rights can empower girls to seek legal recourse and challenge harmful practices within their communities.

Establishing support services, such as counseling and legal aid, can help victims navigate the challenges they face after escaping child marriage. NGOs and community organizations can provide essential resources, including legal representation, psychological support, and reintegration programs (Cross River State Ministry of Women Affairs, 2022). These services are vital for helping survivors rebuild their lives and regain their autonomy.

Engaging the community in advocacy efforts is essential for changing attitudes toward child marriage. Community leaders, religious leaders, and local organizations can play a pivotal role in challenging cultural norms that perpetuate child marriage (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). Mobilizing community members to support girls' education and empowerment can create a more favorable environment for change.

Creating peer support networks can provide victims of child marriage with a sense of belonging and community. These networks can facilitate the sharing of experiences, resources, and coping strategies, helping young women to feel less isolated and more empowered (Mastrorillo et al., 2018). Such networks can also serve as platforms for advocacy and awareness-raising activities.

Amplifying Voices: Community Engagement and Advocacy

Amplifying the voices of victims of child marriage in Cross River State, Nigeria, is crucial for fostering community engagement and advocacy efforts aimed at eradicating this harmful practice. By actively involving victims and their communities in discussions and initiatives, stakeholders can create a supportive environment that promotes awareness, education, and change. Community engagement is essential for building trust between victims, community members, and stakeholders. Establishing relationships with local leaders, parents, and youth can create a safe space for victims to share their experiences and concerns (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). When communities are involved in the dialogue, they are more likely to support initiatives aimed at preventing child marriage and promoting the rights of young girls. Engaging community members in discussions about child marriage empowers them to take ownership of the issue. Local voices can help shape the narrative around child marriage, emphasizing the need for change and encouraging collective action (Mastrorillo et al., 2018). By fostering a sense of community responsibility, stakeholders can mobilize resources and support for victims.

Awareness campaigns that highlight the stories of child marriage victims can significantly amplify their voices. These campaigns can utilize various media platforms, including radio, television, and social media, to reach a broader audience (Girls Not Brides, 2021). By sharing personal testimonies, communities can better understand the impact of child marriage and the importance of preventing it.

Training community leaders and advocates on the issues surrounding child marriage can enhance their ability to address the problem effectively. Workshops and seminars can equip leaders with the knowledge and tools needed to advocate for policy changes and community initiatives (Cross River State Ministry of Women Affairs, 2022). Empowering local champions can lead to more sustainable efforts to combat child marriage. Forming partnerships between NGOs, government agencies, and community organizations can strengthen advocacy efforts. Collaborative initiatives can pool resources and expertise to create more impactful programs aimed at preventing child marriage (UNICEF, 2021). By working together, these entities can ensure that victims' voices are heard and prioritized in decision-making processes.

Amplifying victims' voices through community engagement and advocacy can lead to significant policy changes. When local communities actively participate in discussions about child marriage, they can influence policymakers to prioritize legislation that protects children's rights (World Bank, 2020). This grassroots approach ensures that policies are reflective of the needs and experiences of those affected. Community engagement can also play a vital role in shifting cultural norms surrounding child marriage. By fostering open discussions and raising awareness about the negative consequences of early marriage, communities can begin to challenge traditional beliefs and practices (International Center for Research on Women, 2019). This cultural shift is essential for creating an environment that supports girls' education and empowerment.

Conclusion

Empowering the unheard voices of the Nigerian girl child in Cross River State is a critical step toward ending child marriage and fostering a future where young girls can thrive. By amplifying their experiences and perspectives, we can challenge the societal norms that perpetuate this harmful practice and advocate for their rights.

Effective strategies for empowerment, such as education, community engagement, and advocacy play a vital role in reshaping the narrative around child marriage. These strategies not only provide girls with the tools and resources they need to reclaim their agency but also engage communities in meaningful discussions that promote awareness and cultural change. Furthermore, the collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and community leaders is essential in creating a supportive environment for victims. By prioritizing the voices of young girls and incorporating their insights into policy-making, we can develop more effective interventions that address the root causes of child marriage. The journey toward ending child marriage in Cross River State requires a collective effort that centers the voices of the Nigerian girl child. By empowering these young

women and ensuring their stories are heard, we pave the way for a brighter, more equitable future where every girl has the opportunity to pursue her dreams and live free from the constraints of early marriage.

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