



CHILD MARRIAGE AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN AFRICA: A PERSISTENT BARRIER TO DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Child Marriage and gender inequality remain pervasive issues in Africa, undermining the continent's progress towards development and human rights. This paper explores the complex relationship between Child marriage and gender inequality, examining the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to address the pressing concern. Marriage which is an institution that involves two adults who have a mutual agreement, living together with the consent of both parties and their families. It does not evolve out of force. However, in some parts of Africa marriage comes after the order of tradition that is the parents of both parties reach agreement without seeking the consent of the would be husband and wife, most cases the parents of the bride will just pack the girls load to her husband's house. Child Marriage can be categorized under the marriage of force which can cause a lot of psychological damage to the makeup of a young girl which is deprived of education and adequate care of parents at a tender age. A child according to Universal human Rights is anyone under the age of eighteen while an Adult is someone above the age of eighteen. Gender inequality is what we can argue that it gave birth to child marriage. In some parts of Africa now and then a girl child is not valued as important as the boy child. A girl child faces a lot of discrimination in the society, she is forced into marriage, made to be a mother a tender age which even pose a lot threat to her health and life span. We have a lot of maternal death record in Africa. Historically child marriage has been in existence from time immemorial and can be dated back to the period we can call dark ages in Africa before colonization which means it pre existed before what can call civilization. We should be amazed that the civilization has not changed some of these traditions that affect the lives of women and girl child in our society. The gender inequality which is prevalent in some parts of Africa which one of the primary cause is poverty and so also is the lack of proper and adequate orientation in our society about the girl child, the need for to be educated and the right to be under parents care till she reaches adulthood. Child marriage can only do more harm to the girl child than good. Therefore this paper is going to look at child marriage which results from Gender inequality, the problems that comes from the causes which also lead to the consequences, we are also going to look at the possible solutions.

Keywords: Child, Marriage, gender inequality, Child rights, human Rights, Child education, Poverty.

Introduction

Child marriage in Africa is higher than the global average and if current trends continue, Africa will become the region with the largest number and global share of child marriages by 2050. Although child marriage is prevalent across Africa, prevalence is greatest in West and Central Africa where it is estimated that four out of ten women aged 20 to 24 were married before age 18.2 In some individual countries, the reported prevalence is even higher. For instance, Mali,



which is one of the countries under study, reported a child marriage prevalence rate of 71% in 2006 and 55% in 2010.

Although trends have shown a slow and uneven decline in the overall prevalence of child marriage in Africa, the continent is home to a young and rapidly growing population and without economic growth and social development and increased efforts to end child marriage, the number of girls married by age 18 is expected to rise. This trend is most pronounced amongst poorer households and in rural areas, where child marriage is twice as prevalent as in urban areas and showing little sign of decline. Overwhelmingly, statistics show that although boys are sometimes married as children, child marriage affects girls in far greater numbers.

Reliable statistics on child marriage can be difficult to produce because of the unregistered nature of many child marriages that occur and also because of inadequate birth registration systems that can make it difficult to account for the age of parties to a marriage. In addition, although prevalence rates are an important measure for tracking progress towards the elimination of child marriage, it is important to remember that prevalence rates generally only provide average estimates which do not describe the variability of prevalence between regions or cohorts within a country. Data on the prevalence of child marriage is typically produced from the results of national surveys which collect data on the age at first marriage, most notably the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). This data is then extrapolated to be representative of the broader population. In some cases, this data is also processed to disaggregate for regional, age and other variance.

In 2014, UNICEF compiled a global database of statistics on the prevalence of child marriage, based on DHS, MICS and other nationally representative surveys. Trend forecasts based on the data collected suggest that unless efforts to end child marriage are scaled up significantly, the impact of population growth will mean that prevalence rates will stay roughly the same. Current global prevalence of child marriage is indicated in the table below, showing variance in prevalence by country.

Child

Child means a person under the age of 18 years, even if the laws of a particular country set an earlier legal age for adulthood or allow for majority to be attained at an earlier age. The term child includes both girls and boys. As contemplated in the Maputo Protocol, marriage implies a union between a man and woman entered into with the free and full consent of both parties and in which both parties enjoy equal rights. However, for purposes of this report, the terms marriage and “union” shall mean any of the diverse forms of interpersonal union, whether formal or informal and whether formalised or recognized under any system of law, custom, society or religion, which are established to form a familial bond. This wide definition is deliberate and is intended to include rather than exclude the significant proportion of unions that are not legally constituted or recognized by the laws of a country concerned. (Gambia Report,1998)

Child Marriage

Child marriage is a marriage in which at least one of the parties is or was a child less than 18 years at the time of the marriage. The term child marriage is often used interchangeably with



the terms forced marriage and early marriage but in this report, child marriage should be understood as distinct from forced or early marriage. Forced marriage refers to a marriage in which either or both of the parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent. Although many child marriages are also forced marriages, forced marriages include marriages that are not child marriages, such as where a widow is forced to marry a relative of her deceased husband. Early Marriage refers to a marriage in which even though one of the parties to the marriage may not have reached the minimum marriageable age, majority status will nevertheless be conferred at marriage through a legal process of emancipation. (Human Rights, 2014)

There is a sense in which any child marriage is also a forced marriage, in that children are not normally accorded the legal ability to give their full and free consent to marriage. It is for this reason that the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) states that the 'betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect.' (Oyorley & S Pobi, 2003) This is not to deny that children do exercise autonomy and may genuinely want to enter into marriages of their own accord, nor to deny that there are differing degrees of social and family pressure to marry, not all of which should necessarily be characterised as coercive. Nevertheless, it is a premise of this report that child marriage is legally problematic and is both a cause and consequence of various social ills. Although boys are sometimes married as children, this is comparatively less common and for that reason, this report focuses predominantly on the marriage of girls. (Oyorley & S Pobi, 2003) Child marriage is driven by factors such as poverty, cultural and social norms and lack of education. It leads to severe consequences, including early pregnancy, health complications, and limited economic opportunities.

Child marriage is not only a violation of human rights but also a significant hindrance to Africa's development. Its persistence on our continent has hindered Africa's efforts to achieve six of the eight Millennium Development Goals: to eliminate extreme poverty, to achieve universal primary education, to promote gender equality to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, and to combat HIV/AIDS.

Increasingly, child marriage is being viewed as a symptom of the profound gender inequality that exists in Africa. In one sense, it is a manifestation of gender inequality, which constitutes discrimination based on sex and gender. This is reflected by the overwhelmingly disproportionate prevalence of child marriage amongst girls. However, in another sense child marriage is a practice that reinforces gender inequality and the social constructions that entrench patriarchy and discrimination. Gender inequality lies at the root of child marriage and must therefore shape our perspectives and inform our approaches to ending it. (Girls Not Brides, 2016)

Gender Inequality

Gender Inequality is perpetuated through child marriage as girls are disproportionately affected and denied their rights to education, autonomy, and self determination. These rights however are prima facie.

Child marriage is overwhelmingly a phenomenon of younger girls being married to older men. As such, none of the other social, cultural and economic factors of child marriage can be



understood without reference to the inferior status accorded to girls and women in all the societies under consideration. Gender inequality is a cause, a result and an exacerbating factor of child marriage. Africa is an enormously diverse continent, with substantial variation in the cultural beliefs and practices often apparent even in very small areas. It is therefore a grave fallacy to speak of any single 'African' culture. Nevertheless, fallacy to speak of any single 'African' culture.

Many groups believe in strongly differentiated gender roles and family relations between men and women that tend to disadvantage women. These beliefs may have origins in traditional practices, in colonial-era laws and customs, and in the two most widespread religions in the region, Islam and Christianity. Discriminatory formal and informal laws, social norms and cultural and religious practices directly and indirectly influence women's social and economic roles, making girls more vulnerable to child marriage than boys. In many societies, women are excluded from decisions about themselves, their families and the community. Control of land and property, together with formal family headship, typically pass through the male line. Accordingly, greater social value is generally ascribed to boys, resulting in the underinvestment of girls' health, education and development. These social inequalities systematically render girls subservient and vulnerable and put them at risk of child marriage and other social harms. (Gambia Report, 1998)

Over the past two decades, uneven progress has been made toward gender equality in global education goals. The most recent UNESCO data show that of 161 countries, 60 percent have achieved gender parity in enrollment at the primary school level, compared to only 38 percent of countries at the secondary level. Major gender imbalances persist, especially in low-income countries, just 20 percent of which have reached gender parity at the primary level, and only 10 percent at the secondary level

Causes of Child Marriage

Poverty

Poverty is a major cause of child marriage and is also a factor that worsens its impact and the consequences of being married at an early age. Poverty is linked to a number of other factors that are strongly associated with child marriage, including lack of access to education and inadequate birth and marriage registration systems that are discussed below. It is a repeated pattern that child marriage tends to be more prevalent in poorer countries and among the poorest sections of any given country. It has also been established that countries with low Gross Domestic Product have a higher prevalence of child marriage. In Mali and Mozambique, two countries in which roughly half of girls are married before , at least three quarters of the population live on less than \$2 a day. The correlation between poverty and child marriage is also evident at the level of sub-national regions, as the regions with high prevalence listed in the previous section are overwhelmingly also the poorest and/or most rural regions of respective countries. For instance, in Mozambique, the prevalence of child marriage is 56.4% in rural areas against 42.4% in urban areas. In DRC, the prevalence is 50% in rural Katanga and Province Orientale against only 18% in urban Kinshasa. The practice of ukuthwala in South Africa is only found in rural areas. This correlation is also evident at the household level, with girls from poorer families being more likely to be married as children. For instance, in the Gambia, poverty and low levels of education are consistently correlated with high rates of child



marriage. Children from the poorest Gambian households are more likely to be married before 18 years of age (with a prevalence rate of 62.7%) than those from richer household (with a prevalence of 28.7%) (Human Rights, 2013).

The mechanism through which poverty promotes child marriage is by exacerbating the vulnerabilities of children and the economic burden of parents to care for them. Economic difficulties can make child marriage seem like an attractive option for parents and possibly even for children themselves. For example, post conflict economic instability in the DRC prevented women from accessing resources, basic services and power and this in turn resulted in the feminization of poverty and in widespread gender discrimination in all areas of development. Findings from several countries studied suggest that teenage girls are sometimes forced to marry older men to ensure the economic prospects of their families and their brothers' education. In this way, although the whole family is affected by poverty, the impact falls disproportionately on girls and women.

Child Education

Child Education is the process by which children or students acquire knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and habits. Here are some of the key points of Child Education;

- Ensuring equal access to Education in future crises.
- Effective early literacy skill development for language learners.
- The economic value of higher teacher quality

Keeping girls in school is one the best ways to prevent child marriage. Child marriage limits girls' access to quality education.

Child marriage and girls' lack of access to quality education are both rooted in gender inequality and the belief that girls and women are worth less than boys and men. Education is a powerful path to gender equality, strengthening girls skills, knowledge and power to challenge discriminatory gender norms. When a girl is married, it stops her formal education and it is almost impossible for a married girl to go back to school. (Wordon et al, 2018)

Child Marriage is a violation of human rights that limits girls in reaching their full potential. The harmful practice is closely associated with deprivations in education, health and access to resources and empowerment. The biggest among these deprivations is the exit from schooling that typically accompanies the marriage of a child. In most countries of the world, marriage and schooling are viewed as incompatible.(Unicef data, 2022)

Education is not only a human right, but also a powerful tool for women's empowerment and a strategic development investment. There is a clear multiplier effect to educating girls; women who are educated are healthier, participate more in the formal labor market, earn more income, have fewer children, and provide better healthcare and education to their children compared to women with little or no education (Klugman et al.[2014](#)).

The benefits of education thus transmit across generations as well as to communities at large. Where girls have greater educational and economic opportunities, they are more likely to pursue those opportunities than to have children in their teenage years. Yet a host of structural, social, and financial barriers prevent girls' enrollment and completion of both primary and secondary schools. (Jennifer Parsons & Jeni Klugman .2015)



Millions of girls around the world are barred from entering and completing their education due to social norms about gender roles that limit women and girls' agency—the choices they are allowed to make about their own lives. What are these norms? Simply put, norms are social expectations and prescriptions reflected in the informal rules, beliefs, and attitudes of a society. For example, analysis of Gallup World Poll data across 11 countries in Europe and Central Asia shows that on average one quarter of men and an equal share of women believe that it is morally wrong for a woman to delay getting married to further her education or to start a career. (Jennifer Parsons & Jeni Klugman .2015)

Child Rights.

Child rights are the human rights of children, with particular attention to the rights of special protection and care afforded to minors. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the UNCRC:

1. Right to life, survival and Development
2. Right to freedom of Expression
3. Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion.
4. Right to freedom from Discrimination.
5. Right to Protection from Abuse and Neglect.
6. Right to Family Environment and Alternative Care.
7. Right to Education.
8. Right to Health and Health Services.
9. Right to Social Security and Child Support.
10. Right to Protection from Exploitation.

Child marriage is an exploitation of right. In almost all places, the child must be 18 years and above to get married. So marrying of a child is like exploiting their rights. In Africa, one of the most common causes of child marriage is the tradition which has been in practice for a long time. When a girl child is born in some parts of Africa, it is seen as someone else property. Most importantly, poor people practice child marriage to get rid of loans, taxes dowry and more. Furthermore, there is put at risk due to contraction of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV and more.

Human Rights

Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that every human being is entitled to regardless of their race, gender, nationality, religion. Or other status. These rights are universal, inherent and inalienable, and are essential for the dignity and well being of all individuals.

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, sets out a broad range of human rights, including:

1. Right to life, liberty and security of person
2. Freedom from discrimination and equality before the law.
3. Freedom of speech, expression, and information
4. Right to Education
5. Right to a fair trial and due process
6. Freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment
7. Right to privacy and family life.



8. Right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.
9. Right to freedom of Assembly and association
10. Right to participate in government and public life.
11. Right to social security and an adequate standard of living
12. Right to protection from slavery and forced labour
13. Right to protection from arbitrary arrest and detention
14. Right to a nationality and freedom of movement
15. Right to seek asylum from persecution.

These are human rights that are protected by the international law and are essential for building a just and equitable society where all individuals can live with dignity and respect. (UDHR)

Solutions and Recommendations

To address Child marriage and gender inequality, we must:

1. Implement comprehensive education programs.
2. Engage communities and challenge harmful norms.
3. Support economic empowerment programs
4. Address poverty and inequality.
5. Free Education to children to a certain age
6. Age of marriage laws
Child rights and protection laws.
Human rights legislation, free and compulsory
Education laws.
7. Anti-trafficking laws, advocacy & research.
8. National gender policies.
Education, Employment and labor policies.
Population policies. Adolescent RH policy,
HIV/AIDS and OVC policies. Policy reform for
Gender responsive budgeting & domestication of
9. Mdgs. Advocacy & research.
10. Gender Unit in the Ministry of Women's
Affairs.
Children's Unit within National Human Rights
Commission. Child protection Units. Global,
Regional and local coalitions & networks.
11. Institutional assessments & information sharing.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have been able to consider a lot of factors that leads to child marriage and the barriers involved that sets limits on the girl child, which can deprive the girl child of her rights. Development of an individual is also the development of the society at large, there is a popular saying that; "if you train a man, you train an individual, if you train a woman you train a Nation"

So also we outlined some solutions and recommendation to make a girl child relevant and stay protected in terms of rights and priviledges.



Child Marriage and gender inequality are deeply entrenched issues in Africa, requiring a multifaceted approach to address. By understanding the causes, consequences, and solutions, we can work towards a future where girls and women are valued, empowered and equal. Every child deserves to be protected, educated, and empowered to reach their full potential. We should all work together to make child marriage a thing of the past. In order to end this social evil, everyone from individuals to world leaders must challenge the traditional norms. Moreover, we must do away with ideas that reinforce that girls are inferior to boys.

We must empower the children, especially girls, to become their own agents of change. To achieve this, they must get access to quality education and allow them to complete their studies so they can lead an independent life later on. Marriage must be sacred union between mature individuals and not an illogical institution which compromises with the future of our children. The problem must be solved at the grassroots level beginning with ending poverty and lack of education.

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