



Commentary

Early marriage and teenage pregnancy: The unspoken consequences of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Early marriage and its sad consequences to the girl child and socio-economic development of the nation has been an age-long issue being advocated against in many parts of Nigeria. At the onset of COVID-19, the teeming efforts to curb this issue almost got jeopardized with harsh economic situations in many households due to the lockdown and the willingness to marry off their girls to reduce this burden. Closure of schools and cases of sexual gender based violence also impacted the prevalence of early marriage during the pandemic in Nigeria. We also argue in this commentary that the pandemic has so much impacted on programs aimed at ending early marriage in the nation. Therefore, if serious and concerted efforts are not taken by relevant stakeholders, more girls will be at risk of early marriage and teenage pregnancy with their related health consequences. They will also be left behind in fulfilling their potentials and their aspirations cut off with early marriage, thus sustainable development cannot be achieved.

1. Introduction

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on many aspects of life continue to be felt around the globe. The pandemic has impacted on socioeconomic, social, cultural, educational and health aspects of people's life. One of the socioeconomic impacts is early marriage and teenage pregnancy. Early marriage, which is also known as child marriage, is defined by UNICEF as the marriage of a girl or a boy before the age of 18. According to the UN, 15 million girls are married as children each year [1]. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 40% of girls marry before the age of 18 and 15 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are African [1]. Regardless of where in the world she lives, child marriage deprives a girl of a future in which she can reach her full potential and furthers a dangerous cycle of oppression and harm [2]. Every year, millions of girls are married around the world before their 18th birthday [3]. Recent projections from UNFPA/UNICEF show the impact of COVID-19 could potentially result in an additional 13 million child

marriages taking place between 2020 and 2030 that could otherwise have been averted [2]. With many countries of the world imposing COVID-19 preventive measures such as school closures, internal lockdowns and temporary closure of borders. The COVID-19 pandemic is profoundly affecting the everyday lives of girls: their physical and mental health, their education and economic circumstances of their families and communities [3].

According to UNICEF in 2013 an estimated 44% of girls in Nigeria are married before their 18th birthday and the country, also, records the 11th highest rate of child marriage. Apart from its micro consequences on fertility, health, and wellbeing, child marriage has far-reaching macroeconomic and sustainability consequences for Nigeria; as an outcome of child marriage, births increase, and the population explosion undermines the government's ability to effectively plan and mobilize resources for sustainable development [4].

We therefore, in this paper aim to discuss the prevalence of early marriage in Nigeria and the impact of the pandemic on this serious

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socio-economic and health issue.

2. Discussion

Unfortunately, in Nigeria, structure and culture are intertwined, and the ambiguity of the Nigerian Constitution encourages the practice of child marriage [5]. Many factors have been associated with early marriage in Nigeria. Poverty and underdevelopment have been identified as enablers of this deplorable practice, and child marriage is more than twice as likely to occur in rural areas and over three times more common among the poorest demographic: 80% of young women from the poorest families marry in childhood as compared to 10% from the richest [5]. Nigeria's constitution bans child marriages, yet also protects religious freedom [5]. According to Sharia law, an individual reaches adulthood at puberty and can be contracted into marriage – advantageous for poor families in rural areas and reducing family responsibilities for the short-term [5]. Cultural norms in northern Nigeria associate a girl's virginity with family honor and suggest early marriages prevent sexual assault, out-of-wedlock pregnancies and family dishonour dominant in patriarchal societies like the Nigerian Islamic Hausa-Fulani tribe that practices Sharia law [5].

The practice of early marriage is found to be prevalent in Nigeria even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Nigeria has the largest number of child brides in West and Central Africa, at 22 million, accounting for 40% of all child brides in the region, with 18% married by age 15 and 44% married by age 18⁵. Early marriages are common among the North-West Region of Nigeria with more cases in the South-South on the rise as well [6]. Nigeria's child marriage is most prevalent in the North, where the poverty rate is highest, averaging 77%, where child marriage is most prevalent [5]. In Northeastern and Northwestern Nigeria where child marriage is most prevalent, poor educational outcomes, a high rate of out-of-school girls, poverty, insecurity and an anti-Western insurgency encourage the practice [5].

COVID-19 has made an already difficult situation for millions of girls even worse. Shuttered schools, isolation from friends and support networks, and rising poverty have added fuel to a fire the world was already struggling to put out [7]. While the actual number of girls that have been married since the beginning of the crisis is unknown, pre-COVID data can be used to predict the impact of the pandemic on child marriage in the near future [7]. Women and girls have greatly been affected with the fact that statistics shows increase in rate of pregnancy during the pandemic period, owing largely to the fact that everyone was on lockdown and had nothing doing [8]. Covid-19 prevention measures such as school closures and internal lockdowns have their effects regarding the practice of early marriage. COVID-19-related school closures have interrupted the education of approximately 1.6 billion children worldwide [9]. According to UNICEF, school closures increase marriage risk by 25% per year and 2% of girls will never return to school, bringing the risk of marriage due to school closures and dropout to 27.5%. Many Fulani girls in Nigeria did not return to school after lockdown - and many had been married off in the meantime [9]. Rabi, 16, is still attending secondary school in Gusau, Nigeria, but four of her close friends have been married off during the pandemic, and her mother believes she should follow suit [9]. In A country like Nigeria, COVID-19 related loss of income also has its impact. According to UNICEF, loss of household income increases the probability of marriage by 3% in countries where bride price is common.

Efforts by organizations to end child marriage in Nigeria and the rest of the world have also been affected by the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating many of the complex factors that drive child marriage while simultaneously disrupting the work of the many organizations working at a community level around the world to end the practice [10]. Since 2011, the proportion of girls married before legal adulthood has fallen by 15% overall, but now this progress is under threat as a result of the pandemic, UNICEF reports. Disruptions to the work on ending child marriage have been widespread as lockdowns and

social distancing measures affect programming [11]. In all four countries in Eastern and Southern Africa –Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda and Zambia – which are implementing The Global Programme to End Child Marriage (GPECM), emerging evidence shows that adolescent girls are being severely impacted by the pandemic and are experiencing increases in violence, child marriage and teenage pregnancies, driven partially by school closures and limited access to sexual and reproductive health services [11].

3. Conclusion

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on all facets of life. However, its effects on early marriage especially in Nigeria is worsened by socio-economic and cultural factors including the strict precautionary measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus such as lockdown and closure of schools, for nearly a year. Thus, the economic aftermath may remain with the vulnerable individual and triggers so many aspects of their existence. At present, early marriage and teen pregnancy is on the rise, and will continue to rise in Nigeria until policy makers and communities work together and take real actions to reverse this sad trend.

4. Recommendations

To avert the long-term effects of early marriage which is heightened by the pandemic, there is a need for concerted efforts involving parents, victims, community leaders, faith-based organizations, government, international bodies and other relevant stakeholders. Also, the government must act fast to implement social support programs and projects that will alleviate poverty in Nigeria, such as providing soft loan to vulnerable parents who have a tendency of marrying off their teenage daughter or ward. Priority must be placed on providing targeted access to basic and affordable education for girls, constant power supply and gadgets that can support online learning is a necessity, as we work towards eradicating the practice of early marriage in Nigeria even beyond COVID-19 and girls attaining their full potentials which contributes to sustainable development.

Contributing authors

Shuaibu Saidu Musa, Don Eliseo Lucero-Priso III conceived the idea. Shuaibu Saidu Musa, Goodness Ogeyi Odey, Samar Muhammad Alhaj, Muhammad Kabir Musa, Blessing Abai Sunday and Suleiman Maimuna Muhammad assisted in writing and drafting the manuscript. Don Eliseo Lucero-Priso III proofread the manuscript with important intellectual additions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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