

EARLY MARRIAGE: A BARRIER TO EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Early marriage suggest some elements of force and it is increasingly becoming a social menace and if there is no reduction in the spate of growth, statistics shows that by 2050, majority of young girls would have married before the age of 18. This paper focuses on early marriage and the attendant effects on education and leadership which has been a major challenge to African nations and Nigeria in particular. It discusses the reasons for early marriage and the extent to which early marriage is a violation of the rights of the girl child. The study further explores how early marriage contributes to the dearth of leadership that plagues Africa. Methodologically, the paper is based on documentary analysis of relevant records such as books, journals, government publication, magazines, newspapers etcetera. The paper reveals that Nigeria has more primary school children out of school than any other country globally. The study also reveals an eroded value system as one major challenge that has bedevilled the Nigerian society and this includes appreciation for education and more importantly for the girl child. Cost of education is also seen as a barrier to education and therefore early marriage becomes the liberator of poverty stricken parents. The paper concludes that early marriage is associated with a decrease in school enrolment and increase in the number of dropouts and that good education is significantly related to good leadership. The paper suggests that attitudinal change coupled with the proactive legislations by the appropriate quarters will ensure that children, especially the females, are protected. In addition, awareness must be created, using various media to educate the whole community about the consequences of early marriage on girls.

Key Words: Early marriage, Education, Leadership, Human right

Introduction:

“Child marriage happens because adults believe they have the right to impose marriage upon a child. This denies children, particularly girls, their dignity and the opportunity to make choices that are central to their lives, such as when and whom to marry or when to have children. Choices define us and allow us to realize our potential. Child marriage rob girls of this chance.” – Desmond Tutu and Graça Machel

Man, by nature does not want to live in isolation, he thrives on association with others. In congruence with this assertion even the Holy Bible portrays the Almighty God has being relationship oriented when he said "... Let us make man in our image and after our likeness..." (Genesis1:26, King James Version). One of the most important events that young people eagerly await in the course of life is Marriage. As a matter of fact birth, marriage and death are the three events almost everyone will experience in life; however, unlike the other two, marriage is mostly about the choice of the parties concerned. The right to exercise that choice was identified as a principle of law starting from the Roman era and has been established in the international

human right instruments (Bunting, 2012). Globally, more than 700 million women and girls alive today were married before their 18th birthday. Seventeen per cent of them, or 125 million, live in Africa. Over a third of these population got married before they were 15. The worst hit are Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia where the fundamental right has been trampled, with many girls going into marriage without the choice of exercising the right to choose. In South Asia, nearly half of young women and in sub-Saharan Africa more than one third of young women are married by their 18th birthday. The top ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are: Niger, 75 per cent; Chad and Central African Republic, 68 per cent; Bangladesh, 66 per cent; Guinea, 63 per cent; Mozambique, 56 per cent; Mali, 55 per cent; Burkina Faso and South Sudan, 52 per cent; and Malawi, 50 per cent. In terms of absolute numbers, India has the highest number of child marriages followed by Bangladesh while Nigeria comes third in the world (UNFPA, 2013).

Early marriage is associated with a range of consequences such as significantly lower education prospects, health complications such as vesico-vaginal fistulae, a higher likelihood of acquiring HIV/AIDS, and higher levels of infant mortality, high risk pregnancy and social vices for women and girls as well as social exclusion (Schlecht, Rowley & Babirye, 2013). Statistics show that African nations account for 17 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage globally. The prevalence of early marriage varies across the region from less than 10% in Rwanda and Namibia to more than 70% in Niger and Chad. In most instances early marriage brings to an abrupt end the dream of the girl child to acquire an education. Studies have shown that one of the major reasons girls drop out of school is early marriage. The cultural defect of gender inequality also suggests that it is not profitable to invest in a girl child's education which makes it more susceptible for them to fall prey to early marriage (Karei & Erulker, 2010). There are cases of those who were lured into marriage due to abject poverty, while some others are simply too young to make informed decision about who to marry and the consequences of marriage. Culture and traditions also contribute to the continuance of early marriage in many communities (Adekola, Akanbi & Olawole-Isaac, 2015).

As obtainable in most African countries women do not enjoy parity with men in issues of governance. The history of political transformation in Nigeria for instance is replete with issues of male domination, and women tokenism in participation in public affairs; this is even aggravated with the high incidence of early marriage in the region (Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015). The Girl-child education has a significant influence on society, resulting in healthier, empowered, confident children who are potential leaders (Oruonye, 2015). Therefore the importance of curbing early marriage for development policy and especially education cannot be over emphasised.

Methodology: This study is a desktop research which utilised secondary data from UNICEF, Population Council, Planning Health and other relevant works. This is to provide salient information for the documentary analysis done in order to get a reasonable conclusion.

Statement of the Problem

It is widely acknowledged that early marriage is decreasing, but how rapidly? Comparing the incidence of child marriage amongst women born between 1985 and 1989 and women born between 1955 and 1959, showed that the incidence of early marriage reduced by 14.8 points in South Asia and 14.0 points in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the decline, high levels of child marriage among the poorest have persisted, while declines in the practice have been limited to the richest. However, a growing child population coupled with a rather slow decline in the practice of early marriage in Africa will put more girls at both health and rights risk. The challenge at the moment is that if adequate attention is not given to this menace as deserved, the number of girls married as children will double by 2050 and Africa will become the region with the highest number of child brides in the world (UNICEF, 2014). This is an alarming situation for the future of a region that is still struggling to meet the lowest level of the hierarchy of needs by Abraham Maslow, that is the physiological needs - food, water, warmth and rest.

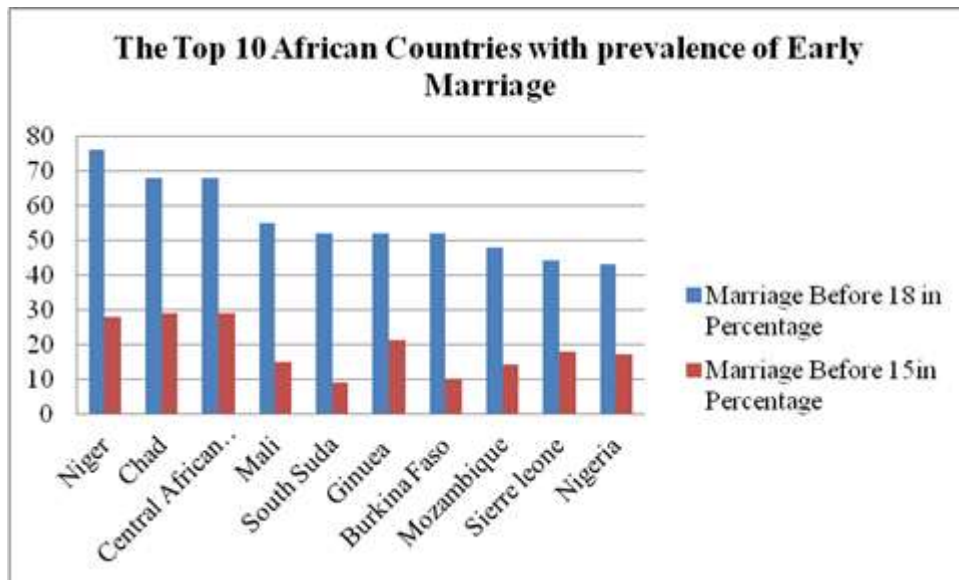


Figure 1: Multiple Bar chart showing the prevalence of early marriage in Africa(Data source: UNICEF, 2014).

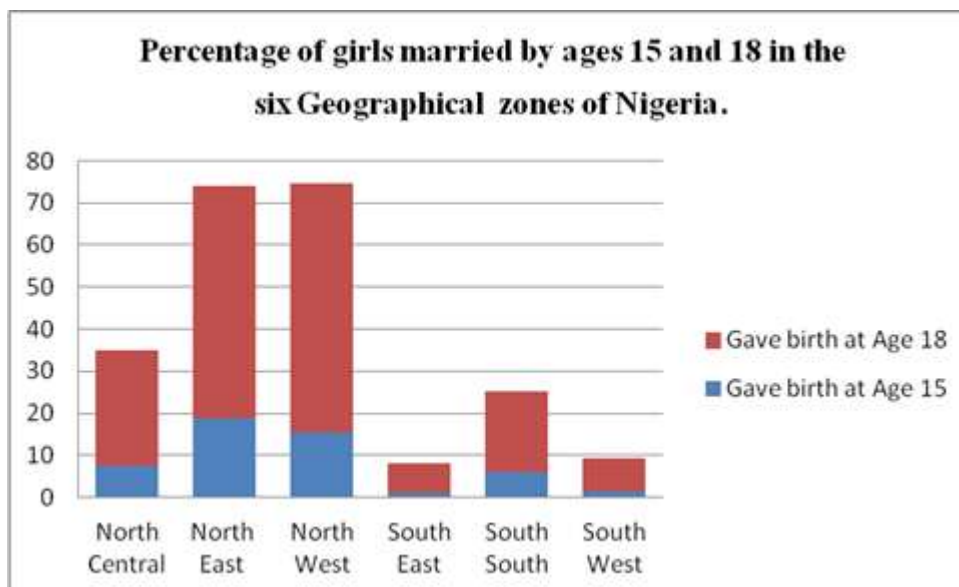


Figure 2: A component Bar chart showing the Percentage of girls married by ages 15 and 18 Data source: Population Council, 2007

Objectives of the Study

This study is saddled with the objective of giving insight on the causes of high incidence of early marriage in Africa as a whole and in Nigeria in particular. Specific objectives include identifying the factors responsible for early marriage. It discusses the relationship between early marriage and Education and subsequently, Leadership. Finally, the study suggests some of the policies that could be adopted in order to reduce the spate of early marriage in Africa as a whole and in Nigeria specifically. Figure 2 shows that early marriage is more prevalent in the North East and North West of Nigeria. Therefore our discussion is centered on these areas with respect to Nigeria

Conceptual Clarification

A marriage is regarded as early, if it is contracted before the age of 18 years. The Nigerian Constitution puts the statutory age of adults at 18. Anyone that has not attained the age of 18 is regarded as a minor; since marriage requires the consent of the individuals involved, minors cannot give consent. According to United Nations Population Fund UNFPA, 2013, more than 140 million girls will become child brides between 2011 and 2020. Whilst studies have shown that early marriage is not only limited to the female folk, there are instances of the male gender being affected with this phenomenon, however, research has shown that this occurrence is not as prevalent as that of young girls, which is said to be four times the incidence of a boy. In this study early Marriage and Child Marriage will be used interchangeably.

Causes of Early Marriage

Early marriage has continued to be a major challenge globally but it is more prevalent in Asia and Africa because of a myriad of factors. Some of these factor include poverty, traditions, lack of education and insecurity.

Poverty: Literature has established that poverty is one of the major factors responsible for the high incidence of early marriage in Africa as a whole and in Nigeria in particular. Many poor families give their daughters in marriage at an early age as a strategy for economic survival; to them, it simply reduces the number of children they have to spend their scare resources to cater for. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa for instance, parents are assured of a "high" bride price for the prospective child bride. Though early marriage is global in dimension, it is more widespread in poorer countries and regions, and within those countries, it tends to be concentrated among the poorest households. Parents in these areas see the girl child as an asset to improve their economic status. In some instances it could mean ties with those that have political influence. A study carried out by Adekola, Akanbi & Olawole (2016) showed the prevalence of child marriage in Northern part of Nigeria with 73 per cent of girls married between 13-19 years. Northeastern geo-political zone of Nigeria is reputed to be the poorest, the most educationally backward and has the highest rate of child marriage in the Country.

Norms, Traditions and Culture : Early marriage is mostly rooted in the norms and culture of the society; for instance cultural traditions of the Hausa-Fulani communities in Northwest Nigeria places emphasis on a girl's virginity, which is closely tied to a family's honour. Parents are disposed to giving their daughters in marriage at a very tender age to ensure they marry as virgins and retain the family honour. In Nigeria, early marriage is still ravaging the North, especially the Northeast and Northwest geo-political zones with over 45 per cent of teenage marriages and the highest level of female illiteracy in the Country. In these regions, girls enter marriage and begin their sexual experience when they are young, sometimes as young as 10 years old (Adebusoye, 2006).

The practice of early marriage is also strongly adhered to as a way of protecting the girl child from sexual assault and pre-marital pregnancies. The prevalence of this phenomenon in Northwest Nigeria could also be attributed to religion. The Islamic religion asserts that a girl child is fully mature for marriage and should be married off before or on reaching puberty, which is evidenced in the commencement of the menstrual period. It is believed that early marriage for a girl child maximizes her childbearing potential (Fayokun, 2015). In

certain places in Africa where the custom is to give their daughters at age 9 or 10, a girl reaching her 15th or 16th birthday may be considered past the marriageable age. This result in parents being worried about their daughters not getting married at all if they do not succumb to societal expectations. In addition, dowry and bridal gifts to the bride's family are sometimes determined by the age of the bride (Lukuba, 2015). Circumcision has been on a steady decline in Africa but it is still a contribution to early marriage. Circumcised girl- children become negative influences on their uncircumcised peers and perceive themselves as adults and as a result of this become rude to teachers and often reject schools as institutions for "children" by exhibiting abnormal behaviours of frequent absenteeism and reduced academic performance which leads them to drop out of school and eventually early marriage is conceived (Okorie, 2017).

This cultural challenge, sometimes transcends location; a good instance is the case of Amina Hassan; a social activist who now promotes literacy in the Shuwa Arab community in Lagos State. Amina Hassan and her two older sisters lived with their uncle at Ajegunle Lagos State. Despite the higher level of exposure in Lagos State and a significantly better standard of living, their uncle gave her sisters out in marriage at an early age of 16 years inspite of the very good academic performance they have exhibited in their secondary schools. Years after, he re-enacted the same scenario with Amina, but unlike many others she was extremely determined to have an education and nothing was going to deter her. She ran from the arranged marriage and eventually obtained a Bachelors and Masters degree. She established the Shuwa Arab Development Initiative (SADI), a non-governmental organisation (NGO), after graduating from the university in 2009, to try and right the wrongs of the past and save other girls from the ordeal of girl marriage (The Nations Newspaper, 2016).

Only a few girls have the type of courage Amina Hassan displayed in the pursuit of her dreams and it was probably easier for her because she was in an environment that has a better knowledge of the importance of education and the danger of forced and early marriage.

Limited or no education : Studies have shown that Little or no schooling strongly correlates with being married at a young age. Conversely, attending school and having higher levels of education protect girls from the possibility of early marriage. In Mali for example, 86 percent of married girls have received no education, and nine out of 10 married girls cannot read (Lukuba, 2015). In many countries, education of the boy is given more focus and encouragement than that of the girl. This can be attributed to the patriarchal nature of the African society where a woman's most important role is considered to be that of a wife, mother and homemaker. It is apparent that when poor families want to send their daughters to school, they often lack access to nearby, quality schools and the ability to pay school fees. It is considered economically more rewarding to spend limited resources on educating sons than daughters. Though studies have showed a positive change in the median age of marriage in Nigeria, the North East and North West of Nigeria still parades the highest number of girl children who are not enrolled in school and those who drop out to get married (NDHS, 2008).

Insecurity: When families live in unsafe regions, parents may genuinely believe that giving their daughters in marriage is the best way to protect them from danger. In conflict prone areas, a girl child may be given in marriage to a figure of authority who in turn have a pact of protection with the family. In Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and some other places, girls have been abducted or recruited by armed groups and made into wives of combatants . In war-torn and famine afflicted South Sudan, families are sometimes forced to "sell" their daughters into early marriage as a means of escaping the destructive effects of war, famine etcetera. A mouth less to feed and receipt of bride price or wealth may increase their chances of survival but the practice has a crippling effect on the girl child's well-being (Plan International, 2017).

The aftermath of the mayhem continually unleashed by the Boko Haram terrorist group in Nigeria has resulted in the displacement of over 1.5 million people (Oyewole, 2016). One case amongst many that made the group globally unpopular was the abduction of the Chibok girls. The incessant attacks by this group has given rise to the incidence of early marriage in two folds, one, by parents who may feel their daughters are in a better position if married off to individuals who has better capacity to protect them. Two, is the forced marriage to some of these under aged girls by the terrorists themselves.

Eroded Values: The African nation is blessed with immense natural and human resources which in most instances has been underutilized. This situation has culminated in social vices and grossly eroded value system. The average Nigerian youth for instance, is one given to fashion and is prone to request for products that are made outside Nigeria. However, some go the extra length of involving themselves in criminal activities to get funds to satisfy their greed and wantonness. The society has also become numb to requesting for the source of wealth, rather young girls are given in marriage to some of these men by parents who see it as a feather added to their social status by being in-laws to a wealthy man. The decay in the society has affected the very fabric of our morals as a nation and has contributed to early marriage (Solomon, 2014)

Early Marriage and its Effect on the Education of the Girl Child

Research has shown that early marriage is not the major reason for the low literacy level of the girl-child/women, however it is one of the main contributors to the phenomenon. Education is believed to be pivotal to state and national development which could be employed to achieve political, economic and social developments. Education is the process through which individuals are made functional members of their society (Ocho, 2005). Education is the key to ending poverty which has been identified as a major cause of early marriage. Though there has been considerable increase in the girl child's enrolment in basic education, fewer than half of countries with data have achieved gender parity at the primary and secondary levels (UNESCO, 2015). Statistics shows that the majority of the out of school children are girls, 15 million school-age girls worldwide will never go to school (UNESCO, 2015). Education is a lever to attaining a range of rights, skills for work and empowerment, especially for girls and women. Literacy can address social inequality that has been an issue particularly in Africa (UNESCO, 2015).

The empirical study carried out by Marcos, Kwame, & Mairead, (2017) affirms that early marriage is a significant source of inequality, though its impact has decreased over time: girls born to early married mothers are between 6 percent and 11 percent more likely to never attend school and 1.6 percent and 1.7 percent to start school late, and 3.3 percent and 5.1 percent less likely to complete primary school, whereas boys are between 5.2 percent and 8.8 percent more likely to never attend school and 1 percent and 1.9 percent to start school late, and 2.3 percent and 5.5 percent less likely to complete primary school.

It has been established in literature that the girl child has a great impact on her society and not a "tool" or "thing" to be sold to ameliorate the situation of her parents; the girl-child education empowers her to become a self-sufficient adult capable of taking decisions and controlling her life (Okorie, 2017). A major importance in the education of the girl child is that it makes her realise her potentials, it gives her the needed confidence to envision lofty dreams and achieve same. It equally equips her to be productive and impact her society positively. Girl-child education also decreases maternal mortality. This is because women with formal education tend to have better knowledge about health care practices. For every boy newly infected with HIV in Africa, there are between three and six girls newly infected (DFID, 2005). A popular African maxim says "If we educate a boy, we educate one person; if we educate a girl, we educate a family and a whole nation." An educated woman is a solution provider, a mentor and can give her life for her children's well being by pressing for the rights of her children. Early marriage therefore denies the girl-child of these important benefits inherent in her education, whilst it is argued that some do resume their education after marriage. Majority resign to fate and never return to school, especially if their husbands are not supportive (Santosh, 2016).

For every girl child that drops out of school to get married, there is a ripple effect on the society as whole, and by extension, the future generation. Research has shown that children of young, uneducated mothers are less likely to have a good start on their education, excel in class or even continue beyond the minimum schooling. The daughters of these young mothers are likely to fall victim to early marriage and so the vicious circle continues (Ingrid, 2009).

Early marriage and Leadership Abilities of the Girl Child

There is an assertion in literature that leaders are born with 30 percent leadership traits, and 70 percent must be developed. 80 percent of women in Africa are living in rural, hard to reach communities and 70 percent are living in poverty (Wilson Centre, 2018). Africa is widely known to be a patriarchal society where men dominate decision making processes. This factor reflects in elective political posts, for instance, the erstwhile president of Liberia, Ellen Sirleaf, remains the only elected female President in Africa, though we have others who became presidents by appointment and by constitutional rights. Africa's development as a whole needs the active involvement of women in leadership position, this starts from waging war against early marriage, where young girls are left with very low self esteem by being treated as a "commodity". In order to discover women with leadership traits, there is need to encourage young girls to acquire formal or informal education and by taking more active roles in their communities (Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015). Early marriage has been a major hindrance to seeing the girl child aspire to her leadership potentials. Therefore if a change in the status quo is to be achieved; then the challenge must be dealt with from the root, that is, the cultural, economic and political norms that hinders girl children from becoming the leaders they were born to be must be intentionally addressed. Girls are victims of harmful cultural practices, such as Early marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and are denied access to education; this affects their zest for life and they tend to live under the shadow of a man, who make decisions on their behalf (Banda & Agyapong, 2016). Women usually are tasked with time consuming household responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water, and childcare, leaving little time to participate in activities that will bring her leadership capacity to fore in different spheres of the economy. In the event of meagre resources, the girl child is sacrificed for the educational advancement of the boy child, he is also not expected to get involved in house chores and therefore has more time to focus on his education and leadership growth (Plan International, 2016).

Way forward

There is substantial evidence that child marriage is a major factor leading to the halt of the educational pursuit and subsequently the leadership potential of the girl child. As a result of the devastating long term effect of Early marriage, there has been various government policies to curb this menace and establish the rights for girls not to marry early if they do not want to. In 2013, the government of Zambia launched a three-year national campaign to end child marriage. Their strategy involves modifying existing policies to ensure that girls are legally protected from child marriage. In 2014, the government of Egypt developed a national strategy to prevent child marriage and promote young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights. This was accompanied by a five-year implementation plan that relies on partnership by stakeholders which includes the civil society and the private sector. The Egyptian government was able to recognise that improving the status and opportunities of girls and women is essential to achieving its goal to reach middle-income country status by 2025. In Ethiopia, the government also developed a National Strategy on Elimination of Harmful Traditional Practices.

Also in 2014, the African Union launched the first-ever Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa (AU, 2015). The two-year campaign focused on accelerating change across the continent by encouraging AU member states to develop strategies to raise awareness and address the harmful impact of early marriage. The document which is a fifty-year vision for the development of the continent emphasises the need to end child marriage and other harmful practices affecting women and girls (AU, 2015)

Have these policies been able to reduce child marriage significantly? Are these policies adequate to eradicate child marriage or reduce the occurrence to the barest minimum in a short time? In many countries, laws have been adopted to prevent marriage below 18 years of age, but these laws are often not well enforced. Experience have shown that the laws are needed, but they are not enough. The causality among early marriage and education and subsequently leadership is quite high. Early marriage reduces a

girl's education prospects, but a lack of education opportunities or education of low quality together with limited employment prospects for better educated girls are some of the factors that leads to child marriage as well. Malhotra, Warner, McGonagle, & Lee-Rife (2011) opines that interventions are most powerful when they empower girls with information, skills, and support networks; enhance the accessibility and quality of formal schooling for girls; and offer economic support and incentives for girls and their families. For example, in rural Ethiopia the Berhane Hewan program focuses on income earning projects for families sending their daughters to school and a pregnant ewe is presented to the girl and her family at graduation (Erulkar & Muthengi, 2009). Safe and lucrative job opportunities for girls would also likely have a considerable effect on early marriage. In addition, better access to basic infrastructure would help the girls in making judicious use of their time. The span of time spent on domestic chores will be reduced, and their schooling will be facilitated. Most importantly, parents and indeed the entire communities where this practice is prevalent in Africa should be sensitised as to why the girl child must be kept in school or marry later. This is a crucial intervention with proven success (Beaman, Duflo, Pande & Topalova, 2012). It is also important to emphasize that reframing the transition of girls to marriage requires a policy dialogue with religious and community leaders who have a great deal of influence on those issues. The BBC World Service Survey (2005), gives credence to the assertion that most African nations trust their religious leaders. In Nigeria 85 percent of those questioned trusted religious leaders and a similar proportion were willing to give them more power. Meeting with these leaders to critically examine the causes and consequences of early marriage can help in building support for policies against child marriage.

Conclusion:

Efforts have been made in this paper to study the effects of early marriage on female education and leadership in Africa as a whole and in Nigeria in particular. Based on the desk top analysis of secondary data conducted, it is clear that early marriage is still a limitation to the girl child's achievement of her full potential. Education is light and when these young girls are denied, the sometimes grapples in darkness all through life as this study has shown. It was also noted that good and effective leadership ability is borne out of quality education to a reasonable extent. These two variables are mutually non exclusive in the life of a girl child. Therefore we conclude that efforts to put an end to child marriage must be more deliberate and must be treated as an emergency situation in nations where early marriages are more prominent. If child marriage must stop, the approach must be holistic, there is no single tactic best suited for tackling this social challenge. Formulation of policies and laws are not enough, premium must be paid to the enforcement and penalties must be the consequences of any form of aberration. Interventions that will birth actions that are peculiar to each community should be designed. Actions should be multi-dimensional in nature; actions to fulfill or restore the rights of those already married should go hand in hand with preventive actions aimed at unmarried ones.

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