



EARLY GIRL-CHILD MARRIAGE PRACTICES AMONG THE MOGHAMO RURAL COMMUNITIES OF CAMEROON

Ngoran Mathew Banlanjo¹,
Valentine Banfegha Ngalim²ⁱ

¹PhD Fellow,
Department of Educational Psychology,
The University of Buea,
Cameroon

²PhD, Head of Department of Philosophy,
Higher Teacher Training College, Bambili,
The University of Bamenda,
Cameroon

Abstract:

The practice of early girl-child marriage continues to be widely prevalent in many parts of the world. The prevalence of the practice in different parts of the world has been attributed to a number of underpinning drivers which could be categorized as cultural, social, economic and even political. As a cultural phenomenon, early girl-child marriage is often driven by cultural belief systems, cultural norms and values systems, culture-specific socio-cultural perceptions and cultural practices native to indigenous cultures in patriarchy. This study was carried out among the rural communities of the Moghamo tribe of North West Cameroon. The aim of the study was to investigate the psychosocial and educational consequences of the practice of early girl-child marriage among the rural communities of the Moghamo tribe. The study employed a qualitative design and Key Informant Interviews and Focused Group Discussions were adopted as methods of data collection. Findings showed that early girl-child marriage practices in rural Moghamo communities are deeply entrenched in cultural belief systems, norms and values, social perceptions and cultural practices of the Moghamo people. The study found that the practice results in negative consequences to the health of the girl-child such as difficult child birth, stress, depression, trauma, physical depreciation due to hard labour, and maternal and child mortality. The study also found that the practice resulted in high rates of school drop-out, inequalities in schooling and education between boys and girls, low rates of literacy among girls in early marriages and an obstruction in the educational aspirations of the girl-child. From a socio-economic perspective, findings showed that girls in early marriages in rural Moghamo villages were more likely to suffer from low self-esteem, low social status, wife battery, husband

ⁱCorrespondence: email dei.filius2000@yahoo.com, valbnga2000@yahoo.com

domination, complete financial and material dependence on husband, poverty and hardship, and lack of opportunities for personal development. The study recommends that the practice be conceptualized as a crisis and that programs designed to address the rate of prevalence and bring about full decline should be sensitive to cultural specificities in driving factors across practicing indigenous cultural communities and such programs should be able to engage the stakeholders in the prevalence of the practice with the hope of transforming them from agents of its prevalence to making them agents of change.

Keywords: early girl-child marriage, Moghamo rural communities, Cameroon

1. Introduction

Early girl-child marriage continues to be prevalent in many rural villages of some of the cultural communities in Cameroon in spite of ongoing global and national efforts to put an end to the practice. The practice of early child marriage has been conceptualized as a harmful traditional practice that adversely affects the life of children (OHCHR, 1995). Girls are often the most affected and disadvantaged by this practice (Liman, S. H., 2016) making the practice to be perceived as gender discriminatory and as reinforcing the inequality gap that often exists between men and women in patriarchal societies (World Vision UK, 2013). In fact, some studies have concluded that the practice, viewed from a patriarchal perspective, has only one purpose which is to entrench and sustain the subjugation of women by men (Breakthrough, 2013).

Although the practice appears to be prevalent in many parts of the world the regions of the world with significantly very high rates of early girl-child marriages are South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Bhattacharyya, 2015; UNICEF, 2005). Within the sub-Saharan sub-region, countries with the highest rates of the practice include Niger, Chad, Mali, Central African Republic, Guinea, Ethiopia and Burkina Faso (UNFPA, 2014). Within the CEMAC zone, countries like Central African Republic and Chad have been noted for significantly high rates of early girl-child marriages. Studies have shown that national rates of prevalence of early marriage practices do not always reflect sub-national rates since the rate of prevalence is not homogenous across sub-national communities and the factors that drive early marriage practices often tend to vary across sub-national communities and from sub-national communities to national levels (Adedokun, O. A., Adeyemi, G. E., & Dauda C., 2011). Within national communities, studies have shown that the practice is more common in rural areas than in urban centers (Davis, Postles & Rosa, 2013).

The prevalence of early girl-child marriage has been imputed to a number of factors which could be categorized into cultural, social and economic and even political factors. The cultural roots of the practice in indigenous communities have often been identified to include belief systems, norms and values, cultural perceptions and inherited cultural practices that are transmitted across generations (Njiei & Asongu, 2014). These cultural root causes of the practice have also been identified as constituting

the complex network of patriarchal structures that drive early girl-child marriage and sustain its prevalence. The economic factor often identified in studies as driving early girl-child marriages in practicing communities is poverty and hardship (Müller, 2014; Ford, 2008). Social factors that have been reported to be significant drivers of the practice in different contexts around the world include food insecurity (World Vision UK, 2013), gender inequalities between men and women in cultural communities (Brundage & Tweedy-Holmes, 2011), humanitarian crisis (IPPF, 2006), and political conflicts (World Vision UK, 2013). This study conceptualizes early girl-child marriage as a cultural practice in traditional communities. The study was carried out among the rural Moghamo villages of Anomafong, Nyenneba and Fumbe in the Batibo sub-Division of the North West Region of Cameroon.

2. Review of Literature

It is quite tricky to delineate the concept of early girl-child marriage. This is partly because the concepts "early" and "child" are fluid concepts whose meanings vary across cultural contexts (Breakthrough, 2013). Moreover, the realities designated by the concepts "child" and "childhood" are complex and signify different things within different indigenous cultural worldviews, developmental theoretical frameworks and legal codes (Müller, 2014). In some indigenous cultures, childhood ends with the onset of puberty, especially with the start of menstruation, which is often interpreted in such contexts as a sign of readiness for adult reproductive roles (Njiei & Asongu, 2014). Developmental theorists such as Freud, Erikson and Nsamenang are not in strict agreement about what constitutes the different stages of childhood. While Freud looks at child development as marked by shifts in erogenous zones, Erikson and Nsamenang perceive it as marked by tasks that an individual must successfully perform in order respectively to overcome sub-stage conflicts or to meet cultural expectations predetermined by one's cultural group. From a legal framework perspective, the minimum age for majority varies across different legal systems and different nations prescribe different minimum ages for marriage (Müller, 2014). Whether these differences in conceptualization of "child" and "childhood" signify chaos or the complexity of the reality designated as well as the diversity of ways in which it can be perceived is still debatable.

These difficulties in having a concept of "child" and "childhood" that is universally applicable have led to efforts to build a consensus on the minimum age of marriage that member states of the United Nations could then incorporate into their national laws. The minimum age of 18 years for both boys and girls is spelt out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), and in the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1996). At the regional level, this consensus has also been enshrined in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC, 1999).

Based on this consensus on the age of 18 as minimum age for marriage for both boys and girls, "early marriage" or "child marriage" (some authors prefer the former

while others prefer the latter and still others use the two interchangeably) has been conceptualized as referring to the phenomenon whereby a young girl or boy who is not yet biologically and psychologically mature for the responsibilities that go with marriage gets married whether with or without his/her consent (Müller, 2014). UNICEF (2017) defines early marriage or child marriage as any marriage or union of individuals who are under the age of 18. The African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child conceptualizes child marriage as the legal or customary union between two people, one or both of whom has not reached the age of 18 years (ACRWC, 1999). With specific reference to early girl-child marriage, Breakthrough (2013) defines it as any marriage that occurs before a girl is legally, physically or emotionally a woman. In a similar manner, UNFPA (2006) defines early girl-child marriage as *“any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing”*.

Studies have identified several drivers of early girl-child marriage practices. These include cultural values, norms, perceptions and practices and traditions in patriarchy such as normative early girl-child marriage (Breakthrough, 2013; World Vision UK, 2013); normative virginity prior to marriage (ICRW, 2013); dowry and bride price payments (Population Council, 2011); girl-child betrothals (Bhattacharyya, 2015); son preference (UNICEF, 2016); the often very low social status of women and girls in patriarchal communities (Bhattacharyya, 2015); the desire to preserve the family’s good name and social standing and to create desired relationships with families of choice, the desire to ensure a girl’s marriageability in her early years to avoid her becoming unmarriageable later in life, and the need to avoid the social disgrace to the family of having an older unmarried daughter (Pathfinder International (2006); cultural belief systems (Njiei & Asongu, 2014). Other factors that have been found to significantly drive early girl-child marriage practices include the non-existence of or weak enforcement of existing girl-child marriage prohibitive laws (Müller, 2014); gender discrimination; lack of more attractive opportunities for the girl-child (Wetheridge & Antonowicz, 2014); humanitarian crisis and social insecurity (Bhattacharyya, 2015; World Vision UK, 2013); poverty (Postles & Rosa, 2013; Ford 2008)); ignorance due to lack of or limited education (UNICEF, 2016; Zakar, 2011).

Early girl-child marriage has far reaching psychosocial consequences on the girl-child. Studies on early girl-child marriage have identified the following as limitations of the practice on the wellbeing of the girl-child: disruption of childhood resulting in premature wives (UNICEF, 2016; Wetheridge & Antonowicz, 2014); early pregnancy and early childbirth with severe risks to health (UNICEF 2016; World Vision UK, 2013); loss of education (UNICEF, 2016; Müller, 2014) exposure to poverty (World Vision UK, 2013); hindrance to sustainable development (UNFPA, 2012; Adedokun et al., 2011) and violation of the rights of the girl-child (Breakthrough, 2013).

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design with interviews and Focused Group Discussions as methods of data collection. Data was collected from a sample of thirty respondents purposively selected using Key Informant Interviews. This sample comprised 12 girls who were already married but had not yet reached the age of 18, 8 married women aged between 18 and 25 years old who were married before the age of 18 and 10 elderly members of the community 4 of whom were females and six of them males. In-depth interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis to create an atmosphere of openness, to allow for the possibility of probing, and respondents were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of the responses provided. Two Focused Group Discussions were also held, one with a group of five adult males and the other with 7 women. Data were analyzed using the Atlas.ti version 5.2.

4. Findings

4.1 Drivers of early girl-child marriage in rural Moghamo communities

From the findings obtained in our study, the drivers of early girl-child marriage in these communities include; cultural beliefs, cultural norms and values, cultural practices and socio-cultural perceptions.

4.2 Cultural belief systems

Findings regarding the cultural drivers of early girl-child marriage in the Moghamo community were categorized into belief systems, norms and values, socio-cultural perceptions and cultural practices. The belief systems that were identified as driving early girl-child marriage practices in the Moghamo community included the following: firstly, the belief that a girl-child may not be able to make a right choice of husband if left to make the choice herself sometimes causes parents in the rural Moghamo communities to end daughters into early marriages. There was also the belief that a girl could be bewitched if she refused the choice of husband and time of marriage made for her by her father; this belief caused some girls to accept early forced marriages out of fear of the mystical consequences of disobeying. Moreover, the belief that a girl whose marriage is delayed could be rendered cursed or bewitched by relatives who have an entitlement in her bride price was identified as one of the key beliefs driving early girl-child marriages in rural Moghamo communities. Beneficiaries of a girl's bride price are sometimes a source of pressure for the girl-child to marry as early as possible so as not to delay the expected benefits that her bride price will bring to them. The belief that a girl who delays marriage might end up without a husband as men will start questioning the integrity of such a girl was also found to be a driver of early girl-child marriages in rural Moghamo communities as girls who delay marriage are often suspected of having bad moral upbringing and therefore as being poor marriage materials. Findings also showed that early girl-child marriages in rural Moghamo communities were often driven by the belief that delaying the marriage of a girl-child

exposes her to risk of sexual promiscuity and risk of shameful premarital pregnancy. The fear that a girl-child would become pregnant while still unmarried and so bring disgrace and shame to her family often made some parents opt to give their daughters into early marriages as early as possible to prevent such unwanted cases of premarital pregnancy. Some incidences of early girl-child marriage in rural Moghamo villages were found to be based on the belief that school and education spoils the girl-child (and hence are not fitting for the girl-child). This belief was further corroborated by the belief that the school exposes young girls to social interactions with males (pupils and teachers) and this could result to adventuring into sex with likelihood of premarital pregnancy which is disgraceful. These beliefs were found to have been drivers of some cases of early girl-child marriage in rural Moghamo villages. There was also the belief that a girl-child is not intellectually fitted for education (especially beyond primary school) - that the girl is a liability from an educational point of view - and that sending the girl-child to school or keeping her in school is a waste of resources, hence the belief that the best alternative to schooling is for the girl to marry. This belief encouraged some parents to prematurely terminate the education of their daughters in order to send them to early marriages. Moreover, there was also the belief that a girl who marries while still young, naïve and inexperienced will be a more respectful and submissive wife than one who marries late and has had social experiences and/or relationships with men. These cultural beliefs were found to underpin the early marriage of girls in rural Moghamo villages.

4.3 Cultural norms and values systems

With respect to the norms and values that drive early girl-child marriage practices in the Moghamo communities, it was found that the cultural expectation on girls to marry and start bearing children as soon as they get into puberty was a key driver of early girl-child marriage in rural Moghamo villages. Furthermore, the cultural expectation for girls to remain virgins until marriage was also found to be one of the main reasons why girls in rural Moghamo villages either marry early or are sent to early marriages by their parents and guardians. Findings also showed that certain incidences of early girl-child marriage in the rural Moghamo villages were based on culturally normative/compulsory marriage of a young girl to the man who impregnates her in cases of premarital pregnancy or compulsory marriage of a young girl to the man she elopes with. In the rural Moghamo villages, an unmarried girl who becomes pregnant must immediately marry the man who impregnated her irrespective of her age and a girl who elopes with a man must marry the man irrespective of her age. Among the Moghamo people, premarital pregnancy is a taboo and constitutes a serious social disgrace for the girl and her family. To avoid the possibility of such disgrace, some families opt to give their daughters (especially flirtatious pubescent girls) into early marriage. Finally, the study found that early girl-child marriage practices in rural Moghamo communities were also often driven by normative bride price payments to a girl's father by the groom prior to marriage and the normative lower social status of women and girls in relation to men and boys in these communities.

4.4 Cultural practices

The cultural practices that were identified as key drivers of early marriage practices included child betrothals of young girls; the practice of forced marriages following incidences of premarital pregnancy and eloping; the practice of giving girls in marriage to creditors in repayment of debts owed; the practice of using marriage as a means to build and consolidate alliances, friendships and networks of social support between families; the practice whereby parents give girls into early marriages to reduce the economic burden on limited family resources and the practice of son preference especially the aspect whereby girls are sometimes given into early marriages in order to raise money from their bride price to pay for their brothers' education or to marry wives for their brothers.

4.5 Socio-cultural perceptions

Culturally-determined social perceptions were also found to drive early girl-child marriage practices. The cultural perception of marriage as an economically less burdensome alternative to the education of the girl-child was identified as one of the reasons why Moghamo parents choose to marry off their daughters at very young ages. Again, the economically motivated perception of girls as means for their families to make income through bride price was found to be a major driver of early girl-child marriages in Moghamo. Anticipation of the wealth that a girl's bride price would bring often made some poor and impatient parents to compel their daughters to marry early. Furthermore, it was found that the perception of marriage as an immediate and best alternative for non-schooling girls or dropouts provided the motive for the early marriage of some girls in the rural Moghamo communities. In addition, it was discovered that the cultural perception of puberty as a signal of a girl-child's readiness for marriage among the rural Moghamo people was a main driver of the practice of early girl-child marriage. Among the rural Moghamo people, there is the negative social perception of late adolescent unmarried girls as sexual deviants, badly brought up girls and bad role models; this perception often serves as a negative reinforcement of the practice of early girl-child marriage as young girls get into early marriages to avoid being tagged as such and parents, out of fear that their daughters could end up thus perceived, make efforts to marry their daughters off as early as they can. Also, among the Moghamo people, there exist a certain restrictive social view of girls and women as meant exclusively for marriage and childbearing. This perceptive definition of the existential vocation and destiny of women and girls is a major reinforcement to the practice of early girl-child marriage among the Moghamo people living in the rural areas of the tribe. Finally, there is also the social perception of women as labour that men can harvest and use for their farms. In rural Moghamo villages where subsistence farming is the sole means of income and livelihood, men sometimes marry not out of love but of need for female labor to cultivate their farms and ensure the local processing, transportation and marketing of cash products like palm oil and cocoa. The need for female labour often results in the formation of polygamous homes. Where the need for female agricultural labour is the driving force for marriage, men sometimes

resort to marrying girls who are young and submissive and whose labour potential can be employed or tapped for a relatively long period before her physical strength wears out.

Other factors that were reported as driving early girl-child marriage practices in the Moghamo rural communities were early parental and family pressure on girls to marry; ignorance of the consequences of early girl-child marriage; girl-child idleness as girls who are neither schooling nor engaged in learning a trade are easily wooed into marriage; poor girl-child academic performance which reinforces the perception of girls as liabilities and also reinforces the perception of marriage as an immediate alternative to education for the girl-child; lack of motivation in parents to educate the girl-child; the preference for the education of boys and the neglect of the education of girls by some families; the proliferation of unproductive educated boys and girls in the community which sometimes discourages parents from investing in the education of the girl-child; and the fear that education will spoil the girl-child and make her unsubmitive to her husband or make her abandon her husband for another man.

5. Consequences of early girl-child marriage among rural Moghamo communities

5.1 Socio-economic consequences

The study found that girls in early marriages in the rural Moghamo villages were almost entirely dependent on their husbands for their every need and since most of the husbands were themselves poor, and without steady sources of income, the girls were more likely to remain poor and to have low living standards. The statistics also show that women who get into early marriages in the rural Moghamo communities very less likely to receive financial support from their family of origin. The only activity from which the girls in early marriages could derive income for themselves was subsistence farming but unfortunately, the proceeds were strictly controlled by their husbands. The girls reported that they had very little or no part to play in the management of family economic resources and that they had very few or no opportunities to generate income independently of their husbands. Other economic setbacks which girls in early marriage in rural Moghamo villages said they were suffering from included poverty and hardship, unemployment, lack of income generating skills, and female labour exploitation by men.

The findings from the study also showed that there exist gross social inequalities between husbands and wives in early marriages as husbands were reported to have a higher social status compared to their wives and to perceive their wives as inferiors and expected them to submit obediently to their authority. The low social status of child-wives was further demonstrated by the fact that the decisions for them to marry were mostly taken by their fathers and while in their husbands' homes, the husbands took practically all the decisions in the marital home and the cultural community did not allow women and girls to enjoy equal rights with men and boys. Also, a significant number of child-wives reported that their husbands do not show them respect. Other social set-backs that were found to be suffered by girls in early marriages as a result of

having married early were restriction to domestic roles, socialisolation, low self-esteem and lack of social prestige, gender inequality and husband domination, risk of exposure to domestic violence, risk of early widowhood, risk of being a role model in the negative sense and lack of access to opportunities for personal development.

5.2 Health consequences

The study found that early girl-child marriage has several consequences on the health of the girl-child in the rural Moghamo communities. These consequences on health include risk of complicated delivery, stress, depression, trauma, physical depreciation due to hard labour and maternal and child mortality.

5.3 Educational consequences

The study found that none of the child-wives interviewed in the Moghamo community was schooling. A significant majority of child-wives interviewed (over 90%) indicated willingness to go back to school but reported that they were not able to do so either due to lack of money or because their husbands would not allow it. Findings from the study showed that all the girls interviewed had attempted schooling but most had ended schooling after completing primary level while the rest were drop outs. Findings showed that girls in Moghamo rural communities tend to be discriminated against in matters of education as many parents tend to invest more in the education of boys and less in that of girls. Some of the educational consequences that girls in early marriages in the rural Moghamo communities were found to suffer were school drop, lack of literacy skills among child-wives, low literacy rates among young girls in early marriages, lack of access to opportunities requiring higher levels of education, restricted opportunities and low prospects for competitiveness, low academic self-concept and low self-esteem, low decision making power, low critical thinking skills, and exposure to risk of manipulation and exploitation.

6. Conclusion

The findings from this study indicate that early girl-child marriage has a wide range of consequence on the life of the girl-child; these consequences contribute in different ways to disadvantaging the life of the girl-child. Due to the many limitations that the practice brings to the girl-child, her health and wellbeing, it constitutes a serious violation of the rights of the girl-child. The setbacks of the practice are not only suffered by girls but by the community since a culture of early girl-child marriage generates an under literate female population, and denies the community the benefits of the potential contributions these girls would have made if they had been allowed to mature, to be educated and to become a strong economic force competing for equal opportunities with men. The grounding of the practice in cultural structures implies that a rapid end to the practice might not be expected but a gradual transformation of mentalities through on-going education and awareness creation of the risks and disadvantages to which the practice exposes girls could help to weaken the practice and

bring about its abandonment. It is necessary that programs designed to end the prevalence of the practice should focus not only on addressing the socio-economic causes and consequences of the practice but also the cultural root causes of the practice; it is important that the impact of such programs be felt at the grass roots of practicing communities if the decline of the practice has to be effectively accelerated. Moreover, such programs should also assist girls already in early marriages in order to mitigate the negative effects to which they are already exposed and which mark them out for vulnerable and disadvantaged positions in life.

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