

Impact of Child Marriage on the Girl-Child in Relation to Target 5 (3) of The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT: *Child marriage is a societal quagmire that has been on the front burner at various public discourses in Nigeria for some time. Despite the fact that child marriage and betrothal are prohibited by National legislation, the socio-cultural practice and religious backing of the issue in some sections of Nigeria make it a necessary evil which continues to stare us in the face. This societal ill persists despite local and international attempts (Sustainable Development Goals and Millennium Development Goals) at curbing this menace aimed at the girl child. Early child marriage grossly and negatively affects the education process of the young girl and the economic wellbeing, advancement and development of any country where child marriages are being practised. This paper looks at the impact of early child marriages on the girl child and how this phenomenon grossly affects the girl child while making recommendations to assuage the situation.*

KEYWORDS: child marriage, girl-child, relation, target 5 (3), 2030 sustainable development goals

INTRODUCTION:

It is a harsh life for Nigeria's child brides; besides the trauma of protracted labour on bodies too young to birth a child, the death of the child and severity of injuries sustained during labour, the child bride loses her role as wife and mother. This

loss is nothing compared to the trauma of ostracism and betrayal she suffers by her parents and other family member.¹

Globally, nine in ten girls complete their primary education, but only three in four complete their lower secondary education. In low income countries, despite progress over the last two decades, less than two thirds of girls complete their primary education today, and only one in three completes lower secondary school. Human rights research has demonstrated that the biggest obstacles to girls' education lie beyond the education sector. Indeed, those most frequently identified by governments in their reports under human rights treaties are early marriage, pregnancy and unpaid household work.²

Early marriage, also referred to as child marriage, is defined 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. While more women are marrying in their thirties in developed countries, worldwide, more than 650 million women alive today were married as children. Every year, at least 12 million girls are married before they reach the age of 18. This is 28 girls per minute. One in five girls is married or in a union before reaching the age of 18. In the least developed countries, that number doubles: 40 percent of the girls are married before the age of 18; and 12 percent of girls are married before age 15.³

The context of early marriage in this zone must be understood within an environment of poverty, gender inequality, cultural taboos against premarital sex for girls, religious beliefs and patriarchal predisposition, for the purposes of controlling female sexuality. It is also true that culture differs in every society and they have some basic norms and beliefs that guide the people. In a country like Nigeria, particularly the Northern Nigeria (Hausa - Fulani dominated) early marriage of the girl-child is allowed. Erulkar and Bello⁴ opined that the basis for acceptance of early marriages among Northern region is to preserve the value of virginity, fears about marital sexual activity, to reduce promiscuity of the girl-child, preservation, and other socio-cultural and religious norms. However, due to the ignorance and selfish nature, more often than not they forget the effect it has on the girl-child as well as their community development. It is however unfortunate, disturbing and worrisome that the girl-child has no power to resist the offer.

¹ O Olatunji 'This Marriage Will Kill Me' (2014) The Nation, (Lagos) 2.

² R. Tomaveski 'Post-conflict schooling as Brainwashing in Children and Peace-building: Experiences and Perspectives' World Vision Discussion Papers (2002).

³ UNICEF report, www.ohchr.org accessed on 16 August 2003.

⁴ A.S Erulkar and M. Bello, The experience of Married Adolescent Girl in Nigeria (2007) accessed from www.ohchr.org on 16 August 2023.

Marriage Age⁵ is defined as that of a male who has attained the age of 18years or that of a female who has attained the age of 16years. In Nigeria, things are not so different from what obtains in other climes. For instance, in Nigeria, the Marriage Act⁶ does not lay down any mandatory age for marriage. By the provisions of the Matrimonial Causes Act, a marriage is void where either of the parties is not of marriageable age. But nowhere in the statute is the term ‘marriageable age’ defined. Girls, especially in the northern part of the country, are betrothed and are married off even before they reach the age of puberty.⁷ It is, therefore, obvious that girls of ‘marriageable age’ more often than not end upon not missing out on the opportunity to attend schools and have formal education.

Achieving universal primary education by ensuring that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling) is one of the 8 Millennium Development Goals.⁸ However, early child marriage tends to rob innocent victims, the opportunity to benefit from this lofty goal. Also, ending global child marriage is one of international consensus; and Target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to ‘*eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations by 2030.*’

Further, the Global Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to ‘*end poverty and hunger, realize the human rights of all achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources.*’⁹ From the foregoing, it can be observed that early child marriage is one of the societal ills that is being sought to be ended by all means as it puts the girl-child at a very big disadvantaged position in relation to her male counterparts. It is, therefore, our aim in this paper to look critically at the issue of child marriage as it affects the girl child and the success so far or otherwise of these various legislations put in place and which are aimed at curbing the problems of child marriage in Nigeria. Finally, we shall also suggest the way forward on this socio-legal quagmire.

Statement of the Problem

The implications of early marriage on the girl-child that negatively impacts her wellbeing and that of the society include education, lack of economic empowerment and lack of knowledge on reproductive health services which will enable them take informed decisions, enhance their ability to leverage resources and participate in community decision making. The reasons usually adduced to perpetuate and defend the evil menace of child marriage are poverty, unwanted pregnancy, parental pressure, peer pressure and developmental stage among others. More so, it has a negative

⁵ Australian Marriage Act, 1961

⁶ Section 3(1) (e) MCA

⁷ [Agu v Agu, Suit No: E/5D/70 (High Court Enugu 1971)

⁸ The World Health Organisation ‘Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/millennium-development-goals-\(mdgs\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/millennium-development-goals-(mdgs)) accessed 28 November 2022 1.

⁹ www.government.se, accessed on the 16 August 2023.

trend on the girl-child which includes emotional and mental distress, intolerance, school drop-out, Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) disease, early widowhood, frustration and hatred for the man as rightly noted by Bala.¹⁰

This practice is against the United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF) recommendations on the rights of the children which include right to free and full consent to a marriage as recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), education, empowerment and health determination. Most societies like Nigeria have domesticated these international agreements and enacted Acts that will further enhance the rights of the children. But implementing the Acts in most Northern states has been controversial as some of the states are also being guided by Islamic laws that have a soft landing and cushion for early marriage by considering age as not a very significant factor in marriage. Indeed, once a girl has been born, she is betrothed to a man old enough to be her father.

In 1990, the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) identified improving access to quality education for girls and women as “the most urgent priority”. More than one hundred countries re-affirmed this at the April 2000 Dakar World Education Forum; ‘ensuring that by 2015 all children, with special emphasis on girls, have access to and complete a primary education of good quality.’¹¹ At this meeting (the Dakar World Education Forum), the then United Nations Secretary- General, Kofi Annan, launched the UN Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI).

In an unprecedented step, 13 UN entities, led by UNICEF agreed to work together on this 10-year initiative to help governments meet their commitments to ensure a quality education for all girls globally. It was generally agreed that:

*discrimination against the girl-child and the violation of the rights of the girl-child, which often result in less access for girls to education, nutrition and physical and mental health care and in girls enjoying fewer of the rights, opportunities and benefits of childhood and adolescence than boys and often being subjected to various forms of cultural, social, sexual and economic exploitation and to violence and harmful practices, such as female infanticide, rape, incest, early marriage, forced marriage, prenatal sex selection and female genital mutilation.*¹²

The resolution reiterates the commitments to undertake legal reforms to ensure the rights of girls, to provide for equal access to basic social services (such as education, nutrition, vaccination, and health care, including sexual and reproductive health care), to enact and enforce legislation against

¹⁰ B T Bala, Teen pregnancy: A Global Tragedy New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society Inc. 8 October 2003.

¹¹ The World Conference on Education for all Report (1990)

¹² The United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (World Education Forum, Dakar) 2020

all forms of violence and exploitation and to protect girls affected by armed conflict. Early marriage has been a common practice among many ethnic groups in the world including Nigeria. However, it has contributed to series of negative consequences both for young girls and the society in which they live. It is a violation of human rights in general and of girl's rights in particular. For both girls and boys, early marriage has profound physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional impacts, cutting off educational and employment opportunities and chances of personal growth.

In Northern Nigeria where the practice is prevalent, the impact is more on girls as many of them marry early in their large numbers and with more intensity. Apart from having negative impacts on girls themselves, the practice of early marriage also has negative consequences on their children, families, and society as a whole. The writers are of the firm belief that it is not only girls that eventually pays heavy price for early marriage but also the society and the economy of the nation. It is against this backdrop that the paper would be based.

The Concept of Marriage

Historically, marriage is as old as the world itself. It is an institution that is recognized and respected all over the world. It is an institution that is universal and which creates relationship from which obligation(s) arise. It is also the recognized basis of the family unit and the aggregation of such units is the society. Marriage is defined as the legal union of a couple as husband and wife. In view of gay and lesbians unions which are now legal in many countries all over the world, it is pertinent to put marriage in contextual perception here. One prominent way through which marital unions are socially approved, contracted and legalized in South Western and South Eastern Nigeria is through the payment of bride price or bride wealth as well as in the fulfillment of other traditional rites. In the Northern part of Nigeria, which is largely influenced by Islam, the most important wedding custom is the bride price or *sadaki* which is usually paid before the wedding.¹³

Perhaps the most popular definition of marriage is as espoused by Lord Penzance in the English case of *Hyde v Hyde*.¹⁴ Here he defined a monogamous marriage as the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. The Interpretation Act¹⁵ by its provisions has further given credence to the above definition by defining monogamous marriage as;

A marriage which is recognized by the law of the place where it is contracted, as a voluntary union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others, during the continuance of the marriage...

¹³ C. Oduah 'Bride Price Custom honoured in Nigeria, despite concerns' (2019). www.voanews.com. accessed 7 June 2021.

¹⁴ (1866] LR 1 P&D 130).

¹⁵ Section 18 (1) (Interpretation Act, 1990).

By its nature, a monogamous marriage in Nigeria is regulated by statutes, namely; the Marriage Act and the Matrimonial Causes Act, hence a monogamous marriage is also referred to as statutory marriage. We also have other types of marriages. A polygamous marriage on the other hand is regulated by customary law. It is usually referred to as customary marriage and it is recognized by law. Customary law marriage is in accordance with native's laws and customs of the indigenous peoples of Nigeria. Indeed, it is a marriage founded on and regulated by the religious and socio-cultural norms of the people. A customary marriage is contracted under the customary law or native law and custom of parties.

Finally, there is Islamic marriage. Marriage and the family are central in Islamic system. Islam views marriage as strong bound, "*Mithaqun Ghaleez*" a challenging commitment. It is a commitment to life itself, to society and to the dignified, meaningful survival of human race. It is a commitment that married partners make to one another as well as to God. It is a kind of commitment in which they find mutual fulfillment and self-realization, love and peace, compassion and serenity, comfort and hope. This is because marriage in Islam is regarded first and foremost as a righteous act, an act of responsible devotion. Islam encourages its adherents to marry. Islam recognizes the value of sex and advocates marriage. Islam as earlier on mentioned does not believe in celibacy.

Allah has commanded the Muslims to marry: *and marry those among you who are single*¹⁶. It is therefore a religious duty of every Muslim to contract a marriage according to the rules of Islam. A person who remains a bachelor without any reasonable excuse disobeys the words of God. Moreover, marriage is also the tradition of the Prophet of Islam. It has also been said that marriage is so holy a sacrament that in this world, it is an act of *Ibadat* or worship, for it preserves mankind free from pollution¹⁷.

Having stated the above, it then becomes imperative to examine who a child is and analyse the concept of the girl-child education. Apart from the adapted provisions and treaties by the United Nations, the major Act or enactment regulating the affairs of a child in Nigeria is the Childs Right Act. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (which was adopted in Geneva at the Forty Fourth Session of the United Nations General Assembly and was opened for Signature by all States) provides in its Article I that; '*for the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier*'.¹⁷

¹⁶ (The Holy Quran 24:33)

¹⁷ Meraj Ahmad Meraj, The Importance of Marriage in Islam [2018] 6(11), 1-6 <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v6.i11.2018.1082> International Journal of Research Granthaalayah.

By the provisions of the Childs Right Act,¹⁸ the marriage of a person less than 18 years whether, male or female is prohibited. The Act further provides that no parent, guardian or any person shall betroth a person less than 18 years to any other person. Such betrothal, if it ever happens, is null and void thereby prohibiting child betrothals in Nigeria. Item 61 of the Exclusive Legislative List in the Nigerian Constitution (1999 as amended) recognizes the power of the National Assembly to legislate on the “formation, annulment and dissolution of marriages other than marriages under Islamic Law and Customary Law including matrimonial proceedings relating thereto.”

Therefore, by virtue of Section 4 (2), (3), and (5) of the 1999 Constitution, no State Assembly in Nigeria can legislate on marriage except those marriages contracted under Customary law or Islamic law. It is therefore clear from these Constitutional provisions as stated above that there are three forms of marriages in Nigeria- Marriage under the Act or Statutory marriage, marriage under Customary Law and marriage under Islamic law.

Whereas, only the National Assembly can legislate on the statutory marriage or marriage under the Act, the State Houses of Assembly can exclusively legislate on marriages under customary law and Islamic law. Therefore, the definition of child marriage based on the bar of below 18 years as a prohibition as provided in the United Nations Convention and the Child Right Act is only with respect to Marriages under the Marriage Act and the States of the Federation where their State Assemblies have further domesticated the Child Right Act by raising the bar of below 18 years prohibition. States where the Act has not been domesticated still enjoy the practice of child marriage under the Customary and Islamic Laws where this practice is prevalent. It must however be pointed out that any Law that goes contrary to the provisions of Section 1 (3) of the 1999 Constitution is null and void.

Early Marriage and The Girl-Child

The term “early marriage” is used to refer to both formal marriages and informal unions in which a girl lives with a partner as if married before age of 18. For the United Nations Population Fund,¹⁹ early marriage, also known as Child Marriage, is defined 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.” The term early marriage or child marriage also refers to any marriage of a child younger than 18 years old in accordance with the Article on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Child marriage is viewed as a violation of human rights and is prohibited by a number of international conventions and other instruments.²⁰ Child marriage, on the other hand, involves either one or both spouses being children and may take place with or without formal registration, and under civil, religious or customary laws. It must be stated here that both terms are usually used interchangeably. While more women are marrying in

¹⁸ CRA 2003 in Sections 21 and 22

¹⁹ UNFPA Annual Report, 2006.

²⁰ Universal Declaration, 1948.

their thirties in developed countries, overall, 20 to 50 percent of women are married by the age of 18 in the developing world with the highest percentages in West African within Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Approximately 40% of women aged 20-24 worldwide who were married before the age of 18 live in Sub Saharan Africa, thus resulting in early marriage being largely sub-Saharan African phenomena. Within Africa, the literature identifies countries in the North as having made the demographic transition to higher age of marriage for girls, lower total fertility rates, higher education for girls; and increased status for females. Globally, approximately one-quarter women aged 20-24 years entered into or are in a union before the age of 18 years, with approximately one out of thirteen married or in such unions before the age of 15 years.²¹

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Despite the preponderance of policies and legislation across nations that are signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international conventions, in the face of socio-cultural traditions and norms exacerbated by contextual political economies, child marriage remains persistent in many countries. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimated that between 2011 and 2020, more than 140 million girls would become child brides, meaning that 14.2 million girls will marry annually, or 39 000 girls will become child brides each day. Furthermore, of the 140 million girls who will marry before they are 18 years, fifty million will be under the age of 15 years.²²

A World Bank Group report²³ indicates that 41,000 girls are married each day translating to 15 million girls every year complementing the position by UNFPA.²⁴ Global data indicates that child marriage of girls is most common in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa and the highest global prevalence rates have been documented in 10 countries²⁵ found in these two regions of which Ethiopia, Mali and Niger fall among the study countries.²⁶ While 17 African countries are ranked

²¹ UNICEF Report.

²² UNFPR Report, 2013.

²³ World Bank Report, 2007

²⁴ Girls Not Bride Report, 2017

²⁵ The 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage in 2014 include Nepal, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, India, Central African Republic, Mali, Chad, Bangladesh and Niger. According to a report, it was established that prior to COVID-17 pandemic, more than 100 million girls would be married before their 18th birthday in the next decade. Now with the advent of the pandemic, it is believed that up to 10 million more girls are at the risk of becoming child brides with Niger, the Central African Republic, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea topping the charts)

²⁶ UNICEF Report, 2014)

among those with the highest rates of child marriage,²⁷ child marriage is widespread in many countries in Asia and South America as well.

THE GIRL-CHILD AND THE 2030 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: AN APPRAISAL OF THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS

Gender equality and women's economic empowerment are at the centre of the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although, gender equality has been included amongst the top targets that countries must meet in order to reach the ultimate SDG, the issue has been on the front burner of international development agendas for decades. As is to be expected, Nigeria remains a focus of global policy leaders and stakeholders in the SDGs Gender Equality project, being one of the many countries where tradition, customs, sexual stereotyping of social roles and cultural prejudice militate against the enjoyment of rights and full participation of the women on an equal basis with men in national development. Target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to 'eliminate all harmful practices, such as child-early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations by 2030.' As a member of the United Nations, Nigeria has signed and ratified various relevant instruments, treaties and conventions that require member nations to establish mechanisms to eliminate gender discrimination, child marriage and to ensure equality and human dignity to all men and women. Yet, one of the vital issues begging the question is what efforts have the Nigerian government and other stakeholders made so far to meet the gender equality goals of the SDGs and particularly Target 5.3?

A look would be made at the efforts of the Nigerian government and other stakeholders while also examining if the efforts made so far have brought about any positive changes or otherwise. First, as far back as 2006, the Nigerian government, in line with international commitment has developed a National Gender Policy that focuses on gender mainstreaming, women empowerment and elimination of discriminatory policies that are harmful to women. The National Gender Policy, which replaced the National Policy on women (NPW), was designed to equip stakeholders with strategic skills for engineering the levels of social change required for the empowerment of all citizens to participate actively in the country's socio-economic and political developments. It was one of the cardinal objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which preceded the SDGs to which Nigeria subscribed and which were geared towards gender equality and women's empowerment.²⁸ In achieving this ambitious goal, the Federal Government pledged to take drastic steps and measures that would promote the full participation of women in both the public and private sector as agents of development. The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development was designated as the vehicle for achieving measurable targets and enhancing accountability to gender equality and women's empowerment.

²⁷ UNICEF 2016

²⁸ www.oradi.org accessed 15 August, 2023

A part of the efforts of the government and stakeholders also includes the celebration of the International Women's day done on the 8th of March every year to commemorate the struggles for women's rights. These celebrations have been done for the past few years and it was also an epoch making event when the African Development Bank (AfDB) partnered with the Nigerian Ministry of Women Affairs and several development partners (UN)-Women, United Nations Development Programme, Oxfam, the European Union, Action Aid, and others) to celebrate IWD with a knowledge-sharing event.

Sadly, despite the spirited efforts of the Olusegun Obasanjo administration and its successors to address the problems of Nigeria's huge gender imbalance, significant gender gaps in education, economic empowerment, child marriage and political participation remain. As anticipated by many, the major challenges faced by the country's gender policy objectives remain moving from the policy prescriptions to the actualization of the policy goals and targets. According to Adimula,²⁹ Nigeria still has the world's 11th highest prevalence of child marriage and the 3rd highest absolute number of women married or in a union before the age of 18. While 16 percent of the girls in Nigeria are married before their 15th birthday, 43 percent are married before they attain the age of 18.

While there are legislations against Child marriage, the practice remains prevalent in the country. The federal and state governments need to enforce those laws adequately. As of 2022, 32 out of the 36 states have adopted the Act including Kebbi, Kano, Katsina, Jigawa, Zmfara, Yobe, Gombe, Bauchi and Adamawa. These states have however failed to indicate the age a child can marry. People who defend child marriage sometimes use customary and religious excuses to justify the practice. Furthermore, the penalties for the contravention of the provisions of the Child Rights Act on child marriage are not potent or stringent enough to discourage the practice. It has led to men including senators marrying young girls as young as 12 years old.³⁰ Women are also blameworthy. For instance, during the presidential primary elections, Sarah Jibril contested alongside former President Olusegun Obasanjo in the People's Democratic Party presidential primaries but lost woefully. It is interesting and curious to know that Mrs. Sarah had only one vote. It is a no brainer that she voted for herself and no one else did. She later defected to the Progressive Action Congress where she became the first woman to contest elections in Nigeria in the presidential elections. She still lost to Obasanjo.³¹

Furthermore, while progress towards parity in primary school education has been recorded over the last decade, there remain a significant wage and labour force participation gender gap.

²⁹ O. Adimula, Battle against gender inequality in Nigeria: Ending the money marriage culture. (2003) www.thecable.ng accessed on 17 August 2023.

³⁰ A. Hirsch, The Guardian Newspaper, 2013.

³¹ I.S Eyiuche, Active participation of Nigerian Women in Politics and Governance: A Reality or a Mirage? (2018) *NAUJILJ* 9 (2).

Discriminatory laws and practices, violence against women and gender stereotypes continue to stall the progress toward gender equality in the country. For instance, Nigeria still records a high maternal mortality rate each year, while access to quality health care for women is limited especially in rural areas. Nigeria is behind India as India in 2020 recorded '788 per thousand' deaths while Nigeria a recorded '540 women and children per thousand' in the same year.³²

The patriarchal system still operating in Nigeria leaves much to be desired when it comes to gender equality, huge gender imbalance, and significant gender gaps in education, amongst others. As in other male dominated societies, the social relations and activities of Nigerian women and men are governed by a patriarchal system of socialization and by cultural practices which favour the interest of men above those of the women.³³ In other words, women still find themselves playing second fiddle, with a subordinate role at all levels, despite the government's repeated pledges to take steps in breaking down gender walls.

Finally, gender based violence has come to the fore as a major issue in recent times, and reflects the extent to which women's physical safety is threatened. The background to this belief is that women are inferior and are supposed to be treated as second class citizens in the society. Linked to the issue of gender based violence is the issue of human trafficking which generally and more often than not affects women and girls. Trafficking in women and children in Nigeria had started right from the ancient days when women in some homes were often times given to either a man or a woman with the intention of alleviating poverty from such homes. Another point worthy of note is the 'invitation to treat' from young girls and ladies. The use of social media has encouraged and promoted all forms of immoral and irrational behaviours all in the name of social influencing. The rate at which young girls and ladies indecently expose their private parts on the streets of social media is quite alarming. They make themselves easy targets of human trafficking.

According to the report from the National Agency for Prohibition in Trafficking in Persons and other Related Offences (NAPTIP), Onitsha, being the commercial centre in Nigeria and the home of the biggest market in West Africa, also did experience trafficking in persons from the olden days.³⁴ The traditional culture and practices in Nigerian societies are prone towards making women vulnerable to trafficking because women are considered as inferior to men. Young girls are therefore easy targets for trafficking. In some cases, the family heads traffick their young girls and they do not have any say or power to resist being trafficked because they are coerced into trafficking.³⁵

³² N. Adebawale-Tambe 'Nigeria is world's second nation with high maternal, child deaths-Report' (2023). www.premiumtimesng.com accessed 17 August, 2023

³³ www.oradi.org accessed 15 August, 2023

³⁴ NAPTIP Report, 2004

³⁵ A.O. Irele, Human Trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria: Experiences of Some Young Girls who have Survived Trafficking (2020). LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research, 17(2), 204-224, 2020 ISSN: 1813-2227.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ending child marriage in Nigeria requires concerted efforts from the relevant stakeholders such as the government, NGOs, religious leaders and traditional rulers. The government must look into a systems-level approach- that addresses structural inequalities-to fix the root causes perpetuating unequal outcomes for the girl-child. Such structural inequalities include limited access to education, patriarchal norms, lack of legal protection, *etc.* The approach will transform policies, laws, services and budgets that discriminate and put girls into situations of vulnerabilities or dependency. An example of such an approach is legal reform.

There is a need to review and address the loopholes in the Child Rights Act. Nigeria can take a cue from Malawi. In 2015, Malawi amended its Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act to increase the legal minimum age of Marriage to 18 years for both girls and boys. The same law introduced penalties, up to imprisonment, for those who marry or facilitate child marriage. In addition, the law requires parents and guardians to ensure that their children are not married before the age of 18.

There is a need to incorporate gender sensitive curricula and teaching materials in the primary and secondary education. A gender sensitive curriculum considers all genders' diverse needs and experiences to promote gender equality. For example, most textbooks used at the basic educational level depict men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. The government must integrate more women with success stories into primary, secondary and tertiary school subjects. The gender sensitive initiative will help girls and boys see the balance in the gender roles. Fundamentally, there is a need to constantly train and retrain young child of both sexes as morals are being lost on a daily basis. For instance, in Nigeria, we now have the 'Association of Yahoo Mothers.' This group is a group of women who support the illicit and illegal atrocities of internet fraud 'Yahoo' being carried out by their children. The decadence in the moral upbringing of children has brought about a plethora of crimes such as stealing, kidnapping, use of hard drugs, prostitution, amongst others.

Furthermore, arrests and convictions of offenders of gender based violence and human trafficking should be of utmost importance and priority as this would serve as a deterrence to others. Nigerian authorities should take measures to ensure that reintegration services, including counseling, medical care, and livelihood support, are long-term and are tailored to meet the specific needs of women and girls, as well as their families. They should expand options for formal education, including through bridging programs, technical and professional training, and ensure that such programs promote women's equality and do not reinforce traditional gender roles that disadvantage women and girls. The government and stakeholders are to establish a gender-sensitive education system and also aim at appointing more women into political positions would

help close the gender gap. The girls need to be taught that they have a right, a voice, a choice and a life of their own. Parents need to teach girls that societal expectations do not and should not limit them. These actions can help to make girls feel empowered. It might take time, but the benefits of ending child marriage are enormous for girls, their families and their communities and society at large. Ending child marriage in Nigeria is crucial to achieving gender equality. There is no doubt that the ambitious scope of the SDGs represents new windows of opportunities for Nigeria to address gender equality and to do away with structural constraints such as entrenched social norms and inequality.