

Child Marriage: A Cultural Health Phenomenon

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Abstract

Child marriage continues to be a challenge worldwide and especially in southern Asia and Africa. While it affects both sexes, girls are more affected as they are the majority of the victims. Child marriage causes untold suffering to the victims; it curtails the child's education, affects the general health, and puts the affected in a disadvantaged position. From this paper, culture continues to perpetuate and entrench the practice of child marriage in most communities. This paper discusses the cultural factors behind the practice of child marriage such as bride wealth, value of virginity among others. It also examines the health implications on the life of the children as well as the strategies put in place by various stakeholders in order to end the practice. The paper recommends that the communities should be actively involved in coming up with the ways of ending the practice. Awareness should be created on the negative implications of child marriage on the health of the children and their general wellbeing.

Key words: Child marriage, Culture, Health, Kenya

1. Introduction

Child Marriage refers to any marriage of a child younger than eighteen years old, in accordance to article 1 of the Convention of the Right of the child. According to CEDAW, the right to protection from child marriage in article 16 states; “ The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action including legislation , shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage” (UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1994). While marriage is not considered directly in the convention on the rights of the child, child marriage is linked to other rights such as the right to express their views directly, the right to protection from all forms of abuse and the right to be protected from harmful traditional practices and this is frequently addressed by the committee on the rights on the child. Child marriage was also identified by the Pan African Forum against Sexual Exploitation of children (Mikhail, 2002).

According to World Health Organization, health refers to a complete state of wellbeing, mental, physical and social and not merely the absence of diseases (WHO, 1946). This implies that certain social/cultural aspects affect the health of an individual. On the other hand, culture refers to a way of life of members of a society or groups within a society. It includes how they dress, their marriage customs and family life, their patterns of work, religious ceremonies and leisure pursuits (Giddens, 2001). Culture and community are closely related, in fact, they are enmeshed hence, affecting the health of an individual or the community. This explains the persistence of the child marriage as a way of life in some communities.

In India, almost half (44.5%) of women aged 20-24 years got married before they reach eighteen years (Sinha, 2009). Further, girls in India grow up with the normative expectation of marriage within a socially determined social frame. Indeed, this shows that culture is rooted in the societal structures. In Latin America and the Carribean, 29% of young women were married by age of 18. In Southern Asia 48% (nearly 10 million) of young women were married before the age of 18. In Africa, 42% were married before turning 18 (UNICEF, 2005). In Ethiopia and some West African Countries, some girls get married as early as 7 years. In Bangladesh, 45% of young women between 25 and 29 were married between the age of 10 and 14 (UNICEF, 2001).

Studies have shown that approximately half of Yemeni girls are married before 18, while some as young as eight (Carla, 2009). Initially, Yemeni law set the minimum age for marriage at 15 but tribal customs often flouted it. In 1999, the minimum marriage age of 15 for women was abolished; the onset of puberty, interpreted by conservatives to be at the age of nine, was set as a requirement for consummation of marriage (Human Rights Watch, 2001). In practice, "Yemeni law allows girls of any age to wed, but it forbids sex with them until the indefinite time they are suitable for sexual intercourse (Carla, 2009).

According to International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), in Niger, Chad and Mali, more than 70% of girls are married off before the age of 18, whereas in Bangladesh, Uganda, India, Zambia, and Tanzania, the range is between 40 and 50 % (UNFPA, 2005). These findings are presented in table 1. In Kenya, child marriage is not a new phenomenon. It is quite common especially among the pastoralist communities such as the Samburu, Maasai, and the Pokot. For example, a 10 year old in Samburu was married off to a 55 year old man (*Daily Nation*, June, 2008). To them, it is cultural and is seen as a way of life. In some areas in Nyanza, child marriage is quite prevalent (Bruce *et al.*, 2006; Glynn *et al.*, 2001).

2. Reasons Behind Child Marriage

2.1. Cement Alliances

The reasons behind child marriage vary from one country to another. Most studies have shown that the dominant reason is culture. Yet in most cases, it is easy to demonise the practice without even attempting to find out the socio-cultural factors. According to the study done in Ethiopia by ICRW, children are betrothed before birth to cement the strategic alliances between families (International Center for Research on Women, 2007). This aspect of betrothal was also common among the Maasai of Kenya, although it has reduced with social change in the society. In South Africa, the law provides for respecting the marriage practices of traditional marriages, whereby a person might be married as young as 12 for females and 14 for males enhancing the practice (Nawal, 2006).

2.2. Bride Wealth

Closely related to the above is the aspect of bride wealth. It is a cultural phenomenon not only in Africa but also outside. In India, bride wealth as a gift to a daughter married is like a bribe to the groom for taking one's daughter off one's hands (Rao, 1993). This is closely tied to the fact that culturally women are of low status as compared to men. Additionally, grooms of different professions have unspoken but well established rates for bride wealth. In some, the bride price decreases as the girl gets older. This implies that parents would want to marry off the daughters as fast as possible. Bride wealth enhances the practice in most African communities as it is highly valued and encourages parents to marry off their children soon (UNICEF, 2001). It is a source of wealth and prestige when given in the form of livestock such as cattle, goats, and sheep among others. The more livestock one has the more wealthy one is, hence, more respect.

2.3. Women status in the community

The status of women in society plays a key role in child marriage, women are seen as inferior, and hence, they are neglected and despised (World Youth Report, 2003). As a matter of fact, in India, the birth of a girl is often an occasion of heartbroken sorrow and despair, even in relatively affluent and educated families. A girl is seen as a burden given the fact that they will get married and leave the natal family. The parents prefer to educate boys and marry the girls off at an early age. A male child is more likely to gain full education, gain employment and pursue a working life, thus tending to marry later. In Mali, the female: male ratio of marriage before age 18 is 72:1; in Kenya, it is 21:1 (Nawal, 2006).

2.4. Virginity

The importance of virginity is valued in many communities. In India, virginity is highly valued and the girls are expected to observe (Fernandes, 2013). The younger the bride, the likelier she is to be a virgin. In most African communities, virginity was highly valued and the girls who broke their virginity were a laughing stock. It is considered that shame would be cast on a family if a girl was not a virgin when she marries. Therefore, in order to ensure that a girl's virtue remains intact, girls may be married earlier, in order to ensure their virginity.

2.5. Poverty

More often than not, child marriage takes place due to poverty. It can be argued that poverty is related to culture to a certain degree. This is due to the fact that some people do not work hard and have cultivated the spirit of dependence. Where there is acute poverty, a young girl may be seen as an economic burden, when purchased will relieve the family financially and socially (International Center for Research on Women, 2007). Hence, marriage is considered a transaction, a significant economic activity. In most African communities, bride wealth is linked with marriage. In the context of Poverty, therefore, this practice encourages child marriage. In addition, some communities do not regard the education of the girl highly as that of the boy. The girls are married off early and are seen as a source of wealth.

3. Implications of Child marriage

Child marriage causes untold suffering to the victims. It results in lost of development opportunities, limited life options and generally poor health. Child marriage curtails the girls' education and affects their health among others (Bruce, 2007). Various studies show a strong correlation between a woman's age at marriage and level of education. Large number of girls who drop out of school do so because of early marriage leaving many women illiterate (UNICEF, 2001). Due to lack of education, the married women are not empowered socially and economically, they lack decision making power, girls' social networks and even the ability to negotiate with partners and family over healthy behaviours (Bruce, 2007). Lack of education means the married woman will not be able to bargain in matters that affect her life and that of the family due to lack of empowerment.

Various studies have shown that a woman's education beyond primary school is a reliable route to economic empowerment and long term changes in the status quo, as well as determinants of a family's health and nutrition. Education beyond ten or more years of school is also a predictor of lower fertility, improved infant survival, reduced maternal mortality and enhanced levels of infant and child development and educational attainment (U.N., 1998). Women who marry early and young remain vulnerable and powerless given the fact that there's a great difference in age between them and their spouses. Data on spousal age differences show that adolescent girls' husbands are considerably older. Research from sixteen African countries in the Sub-Sahara indicates that husbands of 15-19 yrs old girls are on average 10 years older than their wives (UNICEF, 2001). Due to this vulnerability on the part of women, it can be argued that the children are exposed to serious health complications.

4. Health risks of child Marriage

Studies have shown that there are serious health implications that come with child marriage. It leads to maternal mortality, sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer among others (International Center for Research on Women, 2007; UNICEF, 2001). According to the United Nations World Population Fund, in Africa 60% of women and girls give birth without a skilled medical professional present. Worldwide, 70,000 girls aged 15-19 years die each year during pregnancy and child birth (UNICEF, 2005). Indeed, this shows that the health of the girl child is adversely affected due to child marriage.

Besides, the child bearing functions of women, especially in developing countries, have been granted as a normal or routine process. Yet these valued and precious parts of life are among the most hazardous experiences that women often engage in without being aware of the risks or dangers that they are in. Women's access to health care is a complex one - as it is both the outcome of women's status in the society, including society's response to their health needs especially the central role of the partner in decision making, and a determinant of women's health and productivity. According to WHO 2012 report, every day, approximately 800 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth of which 99% are from developing countries. Maternal mortality is higher in women living in rural areas and among poorer communities and especially young adolescents. In assessing this fact critically, culture entrenches the fact that men have high status as compared to women. This coupled with helplessness in terms of economic empowerment and decision making skills exposes the married children even more.

Child marriage exposes the young girls to risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. A study in Kenya showed that married girls had a 50% higher likelihood than unmarried girls of contracting HIV infection. The risk was even higher in Zambia at 59%. In Uganda, the prevalence rate for girls 18-19 years was higher for married at 89% as compared to unmarried girls at 69% (Kelly *et al.*, 2003). The study noted that the age difference between the men and their wives was a significant cause of this infection. Those women who marry early and young remain vulnerable and powerless given the fact that there's a great difference in age between them and their spouses. Data on spousal age differences show that adolescent girls' husbands are considerably older. Research from sixteen African countries in the Sub-Sahara indicates that husbands of 15-19 yrs old girls are on average 10 years older than their wives (UNICEF 2001). Due to age differences, the husbands were likely to have had numerous sex partners. Additionally, in these areas of Africa, polygamy is common (Clark, 2004).

What even perpetuates the practice is the fact that girls are financially dependent and therefore, lack the power to make demands upon their husbands, a fact supported by culture, where the man is the head of the family and has got the final say with regard to sexual matters. They cannot ask their husbands to take a HIV test nor can they abstain from intercourse or ask the husband to use a condom making them quite vulnerable (Clark, 2004).

For instance, in Samburu traditions, it is believed that girls are the property of the community and so, they are not enrolled in schools. The community believes that girls have no need for education because all their needs are catered for by their fathers and husbands. Female Genital Practice and child marriage is prevalent among the community. What happens to girls who want to have access to education or who, for whatever reasons, cannot conform to past patterns of behaviour?

In most cases, these young women are either pressured to conform or become outcasts. Loise Towon, the founder member of Samburu Girl child Education Support Programme (Sagep) established in 1997 has always found herself resented by the Samburu elders who feel threatened by her work, which they claim is aimed at breaking down the very core of the Samburu traditional culture (Global Literacy Project-Global Citizens). The practice therefore puts the women in disadvantaged positions, they are married young and do not have the courage to confront their husbands who are much older than them.

Besides, they have no power to ask their husbands to remain polygamous and ultimately they cannot leave because they cannot repay the dowry nor can they return to their parents. In such communities, culture is so strong to an extent that divorce is not an option. It is unacceptable and a taboo to return back to the parents, as it has serious implications on social and tribal ties that were developed during marriage. Due to this cultural dimension the married girls are subjected to a lot of pain and suffering. Additionally, married girls are not economically empowered, they have poor access to health care and their husbands have had multiple sexual partners. This among others has led to increase in cervical cancer. In Mali, cervical cancer has an incidence rate of 24.4% per 100,000 and is the second cause of death. In Morocco, studies show that child marriage among others contributes to cervical cancer (Chaonki, 1998).

It is known that in most communities, marriage is not seen to be complete without children. The married girls therefore are under pressure to consummate the marriage by giving birth. Child bearing poses a lot of health challenges to the married girls. During pregnancy, they are prone to diseases such as malaria because the immune system is suppressed. Malaria kills about one million people in a year, about 90% in Africa (Watanabe & Takahashi 1997).

Besides, during delivery young mothers are at a higher risk as compared to older mothers. Studies have shown that married girls are more likely to die from childbirth due to various reasons such as postpartum haemorrhage, HIV Infection, malaria and even obstructed labour. The girls' pelvis is too small to deliver a foetus and without a caesarean section, the neonate dies and the mother is likely to die and is only fortunate if she survives.

Many times obstructed labour leads to fistulas. More than two million adolescences are living with Fistulas. Young girls below 15 years are quite vulnerable, as their bones are not ready for child bearing and delivery. Their risk for fistula is as high as 88% (United Nations children's Fund (UNCF), 1998). Once a fistula is formed, it may result to humiliation and even depression due to leakage of urine from the bladder. Unless the fistula is repaired surgically, the girls face a lot of challenges, face stigma and some are even send back to their parents. Further, studies have shown that a lot of stigma is attached to fistula, as a result, not many women are willing to seek medical attention which to some extend is neither accessible nor affordable.

5. Strategies To End Child Marriage

Various studies have outlined some strategies that have been put forward to address child marriage. These include addressing the social, cultural and economic forces that underlie child marriage. One way of doing so is through transforming harmful cultural norms.

Child marriage is deeply embedded in cultural traditions, which can be difficult to change. However, as the campaign against female genital cutting demonstrates, community mobilization can be effective in initiating behaviour change and discouraging harmful practices. Many indigenous communities already are taking action to end child marriage. A program conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) found these community-based interventions are working to reduce early marriage with multifaceted programs that educate families and community members on the dangers of child marriage, provide girls with education and life skills. One such example is among the Samburu of Kenya spearheaded by Loise Towon, the founder member of Samburu Girl child Education Support Programme (Sagep) established in 1997 as a women's self help group. She is Samburu herself but finds herself resented by many Samburu elders who feel threatened by her work, which they claim is aimed at breaking down the very core of the Samburu traditional culture.

Sagep's principal objective includes the promotion of gender awareness and balance among the Samburu communities with emphasis on education for the girl-child. Their most controversial activity is the training of schoolgirl dropouts and ostracized girls. Her stated goal is to equip young women with the basic skills and knowledge to cater for their welfare and that of their children in the future but certain elders argue that by taking in social outcasts into her compound, she is violating the Samburu culture.

Studies have shown that Child marriage is linked to poverty, and families' economic status strongly indicates whether their daughters will be married early. Provision of economic activities and access to education for young girls plays a role in prevention of child marriage. Child brides have less access to schooling and employment. Cut off from educational and economic opportunities, girls who marry young are more likely to be poor and remain poor. Eliminating child marriage could contribute to broad efforts to reduce long-term poverty in the short term. Targeted incentives for postponing marriage into adulthood and providing economic opportunities for unmarried girls after they finish school can help delay marriage. These livelihood opportunities include skills training, microcredit or savings clubs, and jobs and job placement services.

Research suggests programs that provide or increase access to education for girls are crucial to delaying marriage (Bruce, 2007). Girls with eight or more years of schooling are less likely to marry early than girls with zero to three years of education. But primary education is not enough. It is important to point out that the Kenya government is offering free primary and partly subsidized secondary education. This has witnessed the number of children going to school increase hence decrease school drop out. It is known that education empowers women to control their own destinies and effect change in their communities when they have higher levels of education. Put differently, educated mothers are more likely to seek health care services than less educated women (Celik & Hotchkiss, 2000). This will also reduce the mortality rates of women. Parents and community leaders also need to be sensitized to support girls in school as they are able to make decisions that affect their families later in life and even challenge their spouses with regard to sexuality.

In most countries, legislation has acted as a remedy to child marriage. In April 2008, Nujood Ali, a 10-year-old girl in Yemen, successfully obtained a divorce after being raped under these conditions. Her case prompted calls to raise the legal age for marriage to 18 (Daragahi, Borzou, 2008). Later in 2008, the Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood proposed to define the minimum age for marriage at 18 years. The law was passed in April 2009, with the age voted for as 17. But the law was dropped the following day following manoeuvres by opposing parliamentarians. Negotiations to pass the legislation continue (Mahmoud Assamiee and Nadia, 2010). Meanwhile, Yemenis inspired by Nujood's efforts continue to push for change, with Nujood involved in at least one rally (Sadeq Al-Wesabi, 2010).

In Kenya, under the childrens' Act 2001, Acts no 8 article 14, no person shall subject a child to female circumcision, early marriage or other cultural rites or traditional practices that are likely to negatively affect the child's life, health, social welfare, dignity or physical or psychological development. Additionally, under the same Act the child shall be entitled to education, the provision of which shall be the responsibility of the government and the parents. Indeed the law is clear on the rights of the child.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing discussion, it shows that in spite of the strategies put in place, there is still more that needs to be done. The girls who are already married need educational and economic opportunities to help break the cycle of inequality, illiteracy, illness and poverty that perpetuates child marriage. Despite the fact that free primary education in Kenya has opened opportunities for both boys and girls, studies still show that many girls do not receive education.

Clearly, more needs to be done to educate the married girls. Educated women have more opportunities to improve their own well-being and that of their family than women without an education. Research shows that the education of girls and mothers leads to sustained increases in educational attainment from one generation to the next (Bruce, 2007). All levels of education must be made more accessible to girls so that more girls will be enrolled and retained. Parents and community leaders also need to be sensitized to support girls in school. And married girls, too, need to be encouraged to continue their education.

Policy-makers and program planners should also consider ways to make it easier for families to afford education fees and send girls to school. Expanding opportunities for girls and young women can help change social norms that view marriage as their only option, particularly in cultures where bride price and dowry are common.

Additionally, the society should look into creating employment opportunities or improve women's access to paid work; this ensures the survival and security of poor households. Besides, the government should assist women have access to credit facilities to be able to start small businesses, an important way to lift their households out of poverty.

It is important to point out that the role of community is critical in dealing with the practice. The community should be actively involved, this involves grassroots efforts, coupled with national policies that prohibit child marriage should work closely together. Research carried out by ICRW found out that many of these countries lack the resources to implement, coordinate and expand efforts to reduce early marriage. ICRW's Web-based program scan found only 69 programs addressing child marriage. These programs, of various sizes and resources, are missing from areas where the needs are greatest. In six of the 20 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage, no programs were found (International Center for Research on Women, 2010). The governments on the other hand should ensure that the laws with regard to child marriage are followed strictly. Those who are found to have violated the law should be punished. A multi-sectoral approach is required for this program to be realized.

Table 1. Child Marriage hot spots

	Country	% girls married before 18
1	Niger	75
2	Chad	72
3	Bangladesh	66
4	Guinea	63
5	Central African Republic	61
6	Mali	55
7	Mozambique	52
8	Malawi	50
9	Madagascar	48
10	Sierra Leone	48
11	Burkina Faso	48
12	India	47
13	Eritrea	47
14	Uganda	46
15	Somalia	45
16	Nicaragua	43
17	Zambia	42
18	Ethiopia	41
19	Nepal	41
20	Dominican Republic	40

Adopted from: UNFPA (2005)

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