

Myth and Realities of the Occurrence of Female Early Marriage among the People of Oron LGA of Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria and the Need for Social Work Intervention

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Abstract: Like most developing countries of the world, female early marriage is prevalent in Nigeria. This practice has negative implications on the overall life styles of these girls. This study is therefore aimed at ascertaining the occurrence of female early marriage among the people of Oron LGA of Akwa-Ibom State. Questionnaire was used to elicit information from respondents (N=94) and data were analysed with the use of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Findings revealed that people of Oron LGA practice female early marriage because of poverty, illiteracy, girls being regarded as economic burden etc. The study equally revealed that limited educational attainment, early pregnancy, complications during birth etc are some of the negative implications of female early marriage. The study recommended that measures such as poverty eradication, educational campaigns, sensitization of community leaders on the dangers associated with female early marriage should be put in motion to at least reduce the ugly practice of female early marriage in Oron LGA in particular and Nigeria in general.

Keywords: Early/Child Marriage, Female, Myth and Reality, Occurrence, Prevalence

I. Introduction

Globally, birth, marriage and death are the standard trio of key events in most peoples' lives; nevertheless, only marriage is a matter of choice. The right to exercise the choice of marriage was recognized as a principle of law even in ancient times and has long been established in international human rights instruments, yet, many girls enter marriage without any choice of exercising their right to choose (Agbaje & Agbaje, 2013). According to United Nations population Fund {UNFPA} (2012), despite national laws and international agreements, child/early marriage remains real and present threat to the human rights, lives and health of children especially girls in many developing countries. They are forced into marriage at a very early age when they cannot make an informed decision about their marriage partner or about the implications of marriage itself. According to United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child {UNCRC} (2016), an element of coercion may also be involved if families apply social or emotional pressure on marriage for economic reasons, or further advocate marriage in the misguided belief that such a union will keep their daughters safe.

According to Yaya, Odusina and Bishwajit (2019), and Svanemyr et al (2015), girl marriage is a global problem and prominent in certain parts of the world, including Latin America, Central Asia, South Asia and Africa. It is recognised as a harmful practice in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda with its proliferation disrupting the global, regional and national goals to ending poverty and inequalities (United Nations, 2015;

Salim & Lombard, 2020). Globally, an estimated 10 million child-marriages occur every year (United Nations Children's Fund {UNICEF}, 2012). From this figure, 833, 333 girls are married off at the age of 18 each month; 192, 307 are married off weekly; 27, 397 are married off daily; and around one girl in every second (Workineh, Kitrebt & Degu, 2015). Similarly, the report of UNICEF (2012) revealed that, one in every three girls in low-and-middle income countries would marry before the age of 18, while one in every nine girls will marry before their fifteenth birthday. In the same vein, more than 67 million women aged 20-24 years were married as adolescents by 2010 with 20% of them from Africa. The indication was that 14.2 million adolescents who were less than 18 years had been married off annually, making almost 39, 000 young women married on daily basis. This will increase to about 15.1 million girls per year beginning from 2021 to 2030 should the current trend be allowed to persist.

A 2017 report by UNICEF revealed that 43% of Nigerian girls are married off before their 18th birthday, while 17% are married before they turn 15. Despite the prevalence of early marriage in Nigeria there seems to be variations from region to region with figures as high as 76% in the North Western region and as low as 10% in the South Eastern region (UNICEF, 2017; Girls not Brides, 2018). Igbolo and Ejue (2016) revealed that factors such as conception of gender roles, gender socialization, son preference, cultural construction of girlhood, gender stereotyping, and poverty among others engendered these practices. Similarly, Cader (2017) observed that incentive to marry out young women to lessen the economic burden on disadvantaged households also leads to the practice. This is because the practice of early marriage was found to be most prevalent among young women who live in disadvantaged households, lack school education, and dwell in rural residence (Hotchkiss et al, 2016).

Many girls whose reproductive system is not ready for intimate activities and childbirth are forced into marriage by their parents. They are stopped from going to school and getting an education, and are rather exploited for serving their husbands who are older than they are, and giving birth to children. According to Odusanya (2018), there is a large gap between the girl and her husband, which can subject her to domestic violence and physical abuse. They are also exposed to risk of forced childbirth, suffer diseases with her newborn baby, and possible death of the mother, the child or both. Child's marriage decreases a girl's development by resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation. It further interrupts her education, limiting her opportunities for career and vocational advancement; placing her at risk of domestic violence and exposing her to life threatening illnesses like vesico-vaginal fistula, anaemia, high blood pressure, premature birth, malnutrition, sexually transmitted diseases, postpartum depression, and even suicide (UNICEF, 2018).

Child brides are prone to domestic violence and are less likely to participate in family decision making due to immaturity and lower socio-economic status (Santhya, et al, 2010; Kidman, 2016; Delprato et al, 2015). In the views of Yaya, Odusina and Bishwajit (2019), one of the major problems with child marriage is the pressure to raise children while they are still children themselves and have limited knowledge about sexual and reproductive life. In addition, child marriage is associated with many adverse reproductive outcomes such as stillbirth, miscarriage, stunting, underweight, unwanted pregnancies, and abortion (Godha, Hotchkiss, & Gage, 2015).

According to UNFPA (2010) once married, girls are likely to feel powerless to refuse sex, thereby making it difficult for them to insist on condom use by their husbands who commonly are older and more sexually experienced than they are, making the girls vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. The possibilities of getting such infections is high among adolescent girls and young women primarily because they do not have full knowledge and understanding of their sexual reproductive health rights coupled with lack of power and access to negotiate protective health practices and services such as contraceptives and family planning in their relationships (UNICEF, 2010).

From the foregoing, it is imperative that social workers bring to bear their professional roles to ensure that the prevalence of female early marriage in the study area is addressed. They will do this by linking people with resources that provide them with material and human assistance needed for comfort living and make them delay female early marriage. According to Sheafor and Horejsi (2006), social workers facilitate linkage between individuals and available resources in the society. This being the case, social workers can link the people of

Oron local government area to financial institutions that can offer them loans to start up a better living; and nongovernmental organizations that can provide them with social amenities.

According to Muchacha and Matsika (2017), social workers need to support vulnerable families to implement sustainable income generating initiatives that can enable families generate income and keep the girls in school. This is because access to education among girls is positively correlated to delayed marriage (International Center for Research on Women [ICRW], 2011). In the same vein, UNICEF (2007) opined that girls with secondary schooling are up to six times less likely to marry as children when compared to girls who have little or no education. Therefore, social workers should develop and implement strategies to help keep the girls in school thereby delay marriage. Through advocacy, social workers can also influence formulation and implementation of policies and programmes aimed at eradicating female early marriage in the study area. They can liaise with policy makers in formulating favourable and friendly policies that will help stop the practice of female early marriage.

Because of limited awareness on the effects and implications of child marriage in the study area, social workers should also carry out public enlightenment campaigns on the dangers associated with the practice of female early marriage. Social workers have an important role and function in raising community awareness, targeting all members of the community including the children themselves on the impacts and implications of child marriage and about human rights (ICRW, 2011; Svanemyr, 2012). According to Madumere (2017), public enlightenment usually appeals to the emotions of people and raise their consciousness regarding the consequences of some of their actions thereby stimulating their change of behaviours in more positive manner. Community sensitization and awareness initiatives are crucial especially in enhancing behaviour change and attitudes towards child marriage and addressing social norms and cultural practices that promote child marriage (ICRW, 2011).

This current study is therefore aimed at ascertaining the occurrence of female early marriage among the people of Oron LGA of Akwa-Ibom State and recommend ways of curbing it. In doing so, the following research questions were raised: (1) Do the people of Oron LGA practice female early marriage? (2) To what extent does Oron People involve in female early marriage? (3) What are the factors that influence female early marriage in Oron LGA? (4) What are the effects of female early marriage in Oron people?

II. Literature review

Early marriage otherwise known as child marriage is an ancient tradition and therefore can be defined as any marriage that occurs when the girl is not physically, mentally or physiologically ready to bear the pressure of marriage and child bearing (Alabi, Bahah, & Alabi, 2014). According to Nour (2006), early marriage is seen as a marriage of a child under the age of 18. This occurs when one or both of the spouses are below the age of 18, and refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which a girl lives with a partner as if married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2015). Early marriage is often referred to as “forced marriage” since given their age, the children are not able to give prior and informed consent to their marriage partners or to the timing of their marriage (UNFPA, 2016). It is a long-term practice, which is culturally acceptable as a rightful approach to protecting young women from premarital sex and consequences of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Walker, 2012).

Though the Nigerian government subscribed to United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and African Union’s Charter on the Rights of the Child (ACRWC) acts, and further introduced the National Child’s Rights Act (NCR) of 2003 to curtail the prevalence of early marriage in the country; many girls are still being married off at very tender age. This accounts to why Nigeria has the largest number of early child marriage in Africa. According to Ujam (2019), Nigeria has the largest number of child brides in West and Central Africa at 22 million, accounting for 40 percent of all child brides in the region with 18 percent married by age 15 and 44 percent married by age 18.

Geographical location was found to have huge influence on the occurrence of early marriage. For instance, northern Nigeria has the highest rate of early marriage in the country. According to Adekola, Akanbi and Olawole (2015), early marriage is endemic in the north especially in the northeast and northwest geopolitical

zones with over 45 percent of teenage marriage. The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 2009) and NDHS (2018) reports equally revealed that in northwest region, 48 percent of girls were married by age 15 and 78 percent were married by age 18. In these regions according to Adebusoye (2016), girls enter marriage and begin their sexual experience when they are young, sometimes as young as 10 years old. In the same vein, studies have revealed that the practice is more prominent among rural dwellers, the poor, illiterates and in less-developed areas (UNICEF, 2014).

As a practice that is driven by poverty, social norms and discrimination against girls, child marriage has emerged as an important social issue in recent years due to increased concerns among reproductive health advocates about the harmful consequences for young women marrying too early (Klugman et al, 2014; Mensch, Singh & Casterline, 2006). The consequences can include dropping out of school; health risk that result from early sexual activity and pregnancy including sexually transmitted diseases and maternal mortality; being prevented from taking advantage of economic opportunities, and if they have children, child malnutrition and mortality (Hotchkiss et al, 2016). According to Jain and Kurz (2007), there is also the concern that child marriage deprives girls of their basic human rights and puts them at risk for harmful practices and disadvantage including exploitation, intimate partner violence and abuse.

Research has shown over the last decade the prevailing factors that contribute to early marriage, and some of its consequences (Jain, & Kurz 2007; Klugman, et al, 2014; Malhotra, et al. 2011; Lloyd, 2005; Santhya, Haberland, & Singh 2006, 2010; UNFPA 2012; UNICEF 2014b; Vogelstein, 2013). The factors that influence early marriage include social and cultural norms (Jain, & Kurz 2007). In addition, socio-economic status, education levels, and community context also influence the likelihood of a girl being married early (Klugman, et al, 2014). The poorest countries have the highest child marriage rates, and child marriage is most common among the poor who have fewer resources and opportunities to invest in alternative options for girls (Malhotra, et al, 2011). Social norms around girls' education and women's participation in the formal labour force may mean that girls are not prioritized in a household's education investment decisions (Lloyd, 2005). In other contexts, parents may assess the costs and benefits of marriage and decide to marry out their daughters early if they are seen as an economic burden that can be relieved through marriage (Santhya, Haberland, & Singh 2006).

Financial transactions around marriage contribute to the practice. In contexts where bride wealth or bride price is practiced (i.e. a groom or groom's family provides assets to the bride's family in exchange for marriage), families may reap immediate economic benefits from marrying their daughters. In such cases, families may obtain a greater financial amount the younger the bride is. When parents marry off their daughter, there are often economic and social reasons for them to make that choice. However, the short-term economic reasons that influence parental choice do not serve the long-term interests of girls (Vogelstein, 2013).

III. Theoretical orientation

Theory of change on child marriage was adopted to form the theoretical framework of this study. Girls Not Brides propounded the theory in 2012 to articulate what an effective response to child marriage entails. The assumption of this theory is to build a world without child marriage where girls and women enjoy equal status with boys and men and are able to achieve their full potential in all aspects of their lives. The theory of change outlines the range of approaches needed, demonstrates how they intersect, and aims to provide a basis for identifying common indicators that could be used by diverse practitioners to monitor progress.

An important decision in the development of this theory of change was to include the prevention of child marriage as well as its mitigation or the provision of support to girls who are already married. The decision to include both aspects has two rationales: first, support for girls should not disappear once they are married because the factors that make them vulnerable to child marriage make them vulnerable within marriage as well. Second, there is emerging research suggesting that working to address these two goals simultaneously can have a mutually reinforcing impact, especially to improve the status of girls more broadly (Girls not Bride, 2012).

The theory of change on child marriage covers both formal and informal unions, recognising that in some regions where child marriage occurs, the union may not have been formalised but the circumstances are similar to a child marriage. The theory of change has been developed to facilitate greater partnership and collaboration among and across organisations, sectors and levels (Sautmann, 2017). The theory helps to explain why young

girls are still being married-off before the approved age of 18. Despite the national and international acts prohibiting the practice of child marriage, many people including the people of Oron LGA of Akwa-Ibom State still indulge in such practice. This might be as a result of misguided belief in culture, ignorance and poverty. Therefore, since the central assumption of this theory is to build a world free of child; the people of Oron LGA especially the rural residents and the poor need to be educated on the dangers associated with female early marriage on the lives of the girls, their family members, and the entire community. This will at least help reduce the occurrence of female early marriage in the study area. Empowering girls with information about their rights and the skills to exercise them will be crucial. Ultimately, change will happen locally, when individuals, families, and communities understand the dangers of child marriage. For this to happen, the theory of change posits that it will be necessary to create an environment that offers girls opportunities beyond the traditional roles envisaged for them.

III. Data and methods

The study was conducted in Oron L.G.A of Akwa-Ibom State, and adopted cross-sectional survey design. According to National Population Commission (NPC, 2006), the study area has a population of 156,461 representing 76,408 male and 80,053 female. Simple random sampling was used to select the 200 respondents from the study population. Oron community has a total number of 30 villages, and 10 villages were randomly selected with the use of balloting. Further, 20 households were randomly selected from each of the 10 selected villages, making a total number of 200 respondents. In addition, from each selected household, one person (man or woman) was selected and used for the study. The selected villages are Esin Ufot, Eyo Ekung Inyang, Udung Esien, Eyo – Esu, Eyo – Odiong, Eyo – Uya, Udung Ekung, Udung Uko, Eyo-Esang-Obisung and Eyo – Okpo – Oyo. The data collection for the study was performed using questionnaire. The questionnaire was structured in open ended and close ended format. The statistical procedure for data entry and analysis was employed, using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Frequency tables and simple percentage were used in the data analysis.

IV. Results/findings

Demographic characteristics of respondents

Table 1: Percentage distribution of respondents by socio-demographic variables

Socio-demographic variables Percentage		Frequency
Sex		
Male	98	50.5
Female	96	49.5
Age		
16-25	7	3.6
26-35	86	44.4
36-45	29	14.9
46-55	71	36.6
56>	1	0.5
Marital Status		
Single	46	23.7
Married	101	52.1
Divorced	14	7.2
Separated	7	3.6
Widowed	26	13.4
Religion		
Christian	143	73.7

Traditionalist	51	26.3
Education		
No Formal Education	18	9.3
Primary	39	20.1
Secondary	26	13.4
OND/NCE	94	48.5
HND/BSc.	17	8.7
Occupation		
Trading	29	14.9
Student	15	7.7
Civil Servant	74	38.1
Farming	45	23.2
Artisan	24	12.5
Unemployed/self employed	7	3.6
Income		
N1000-30000 (low-income earners)	111	57.2
N31000>-13000 (higher-income earners)	83	42.8
Place of residence		
Urban	83	42.8
Rural	111	57.2

Source: Fieldwork 2018

Table 1 above showed the demographic variables of the respondents based on the returned 194 questionnaires. The table showed that (50.5%) of the respondents were males while (49.5%) were females. This showed that male respondents were slightly higher in number than their female counterparts. The table equally revealed that (44.4%) highest respondents fell between the age bracket of 26-35 years; 52.1% majority of the respondents were married at the time of the study; while (73.7%) majority were of Christian background against (26.3%) who were traditionalists. The table showed that there were no respondents from other religions.

The data also showed that the highest number of the respondents representing (48.5%) attended higher institutions of learning and obtained either Ordinary National Diploma (OND) or National Certificate on Education (NCE). The analysis of the data also revealed that (38.1%) respondents were civil servants; 57.2% of the respondents were earning between N1000-30000 and were classified as low income earners; while (57.2%) majority of the respondents were living in the rural areas, which informed the reason behind the practice of early marriage. From the above analysis, it was found that there is a strong relationship between income level and place of residence and the practice of early marriage in Oron LGA of Akwa-Ibom State.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of respondents on their knowledge, occurrence, involvement/level of involvement, relationship with the married child, factors responsible for early marriage, effects of early marriage, and suggestions on how to reduce early marriage.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Knowledge of early marriage		
Marriage of female child under 18 years	121	62.4
Marriage of a child under puberty	11	5.7
Marriage of a child before maturity	26	13.4
All of the above	36	18.5
Early marriage occurs in your village		
Yes	127	65.5
No	67	34.5

Involvement in early marriage		
Yes	103	53.1
No	91	46.9
Extent/level of involvement		
Very high	13	6.8
High	20	10.7
Moderate	74	37.9
Low	65	33.0
Very	22	11.6
Relationship with the child married out		
Sister	65	32.0
Niece	15	7.8
Daughter	7	2.9
Extended family	32	15.5
No blood relationship/friend's daughter	75	41.8
Factors influencing female early marriage		
Poverty	62	34.4
Illiteracy	29	14.2
Girls regarded as economic burden	19	9.4
Economic gain to the family	14	6.4
Religious/cultural belief	40	20.3
Check against premarital sex and early pregnancy	30	15.3
Effects of female early marriage		
Limited educational attainment	30	15.4
Sense of powerlessness	23	12.9
Early pregnancy	35	17.7
Increased risk of premature labour	11	5.5
Complications during birth	32	16.6
Increased risk of death/other medical complications	13	6.5
All of the above	50	25.4
Measures to reduce early marriage		
Poverty eradication/empowerment scheme	58	29.4
Awareness campaign against early marriage/free education	51	26.5
Enact laws banning the practice of early marriage	40	20.5
All of the above	45	23.6

Source: Fieldwork 2018

Table 2 above showed the responses of the respondents on some key research issues. The table showed that all the respondents (100%) had knowledge of female early marriage. Specifically, (62.4%), majority of the respondents saw female early marriage as a marriage of a female child under 18 years; while (5.7%) defined it as a marriage of child under puberty, (13.4%) said it was a marriage of a child under maturity. The result also indicated that significant majority of the respondents (65.5%) agreed that female early marriage occurs in the study area against (33.5%) respondents who had dissenting views.

On whether or not they had been involved in the practice of early marriage, (53.1%) respondents agreed that they had been involved either directly or indirectly, while (46.9%) respondents were never involved in the practice. Regarding their involvement level in the practice, (37.9%) which happened to be the highest number of the respondents revealed that they had been moderately involved in the practice of female early marriage. This showed that the practice of early marriage is moderate in the study area. In addition, (41.8%) of the respondents who were involved in the practice of early marriage revealed they had no blood relationship with the children married out. It further revealed that only (2.9%) of the respondents testified that the affected children were their daughters.

The analysis equally revealed that the respondents viewed the causes of female early marriage to include poverty (34.4%), illiteracy (14.2%), girls being regarded as economic burden (9.4%), girls being seen as economic gain to the family (6.4%), religious and cultural beliefs (20.3%), and early marriage as a check against premarital sex and subsequent pregnancy (15.3%). The findings also revealed that some of the effects of female

early marriage include limited educational attainment (15.4%), sense of powerlessness (12.9%), early pregnancy (17.7%), premature labour (5.5%), complications during birth (16.6%), and increased risk of death and other complications (6.5%). The study equally revealed that female early marriage could be reduced through poverty eradication/empowerment scheme (29.4%), awareness campaign against early marriage and free and compulsory education (26.5%), and enacting laws prohibiting the practice (20.5%).

V. Discussions

Despite the national and international laws against the practice of child marriage, female early marriage still prevail across the globe with its prevalence evident in low-and-middle income countries including Nigeria. According to Yaya, Odusina and Bishwajit (2019), child marriage is a global issue that cuts across countries, cultures and religions. In Nigeria, many of our under-aged girls are often forced and persuaded into early marriage on cultural, religious, economic and political grounds with far-reaching negative implications on the overall development of the girl child. This study therefore aimed at investigating the myth and realities of the occurrence of female early marriage among people of Oron L.G.A of Akwa-Ibom State.

Findings from the study revealed that the entire respondents had knowledge of what constitute female early marriage with substantive (64.2%) describing it as marriage of female child under 18 years. This finding is in line with the findings in the works of other scholars in early marriage like Nour (2006) who defined early marriage as a marriage of a child less than 18 years of age. In the same vein, UNICEF (2015) sees early marriage as both formal marriages and informal unions in which a girl lives with a partner as if married before age of 18. Social workers should also be involved in educating the people of Oron on what constitute an early marriage. They will do this by playing the role of a teacher or educator.

The study equally revealed that there are occurrences of female early marriage in Oron LGA of Akwa-Ibom State. A significant majority of (65.5%) respondents revealed that the practice of female early marriage is common in Oron communities, which they attributed to certain factors including poverty and age long culture. This finding is in agreement with the report of Integrated Regional Information Networks [IRIN] (2010) in Nigeria, which estimated that more than 2 million girls are married before age 15. Also, the Indian Magazine Frontline (2015) stated that although early marriages are often said to reflect traditional cultures in India, the pressures that lead to early marriage are found to be poverty. In line with the above findings, social workers can as well educate the people on what constitute early marriage and its negative implications on the lives of the young girls.

The study also found that notable number of the study respondents (53.1%) have been involved and/or supported female early marriage in Oron LGA, which they perceive to be normal citing cultural reference and poor level of development in the area. This finding is in agreement with the work of Yaya, Odusina and Bishwajit (2019) which revealed that marriage laws in several Sub-Saharan African countries have provisions that allow children to marry in certain circumstances such as under customary laws or if they become pregnant irrespective of their age. Here, the social worker is expected to work with other stakeholders in the community to discourage the practice of early marriage. He should encourage the girls to enrol for education and vocational training instead of rushing into marriage.

The analysis of the study also found that there are factors responsible for female early marriage among people of Oron LGA. The study revealed that poverty, illiteracy, girls been regarded as economic burden, girls been seen as economic gain to the family, religious/cultural practices, and the people seeing female early marriage as a check against premarital sex and early pregnancy are responsible for early marriage in Oron LGA. Factors such as educational status, socio-economic factor, socio-cultural factors, and place of residence were also revealed as causes of female early marriage among people under study. The work of Giyan (2009) is in agreement of the above findings when it noted that some religious practices, such as Islam encourages early marriage for fear of their daughters being pregnant out of wedlock. Forward (2008) further observed that child marriage is predominantly practiced in the rural and poor communities where young girls are regarded as economic burden and quickly married off to alleviate household expenses. Similarly, Klugman, et al (2014) revealed that socio-economic status, education levels, and community context also influence the likelihood of a

girl been married early. The social worker is expected to link the people with resources needed to make them self-reliant instead of marrying-out their daughters for socio-economic, political, cultural or religious reasons.

The findings of the study revealed that the practice of early marriage has negative effects in the life of the girl child. The findings showed that such effects include but not limited to powerlessness of women, limited educational attainment, early pregnancy, increased risk of premature labour, serious complication during birth, and increased risk of death by the female child. This is in line with the work of Hotchkiss et al (2016) who observed that consequences of early marriage can include dropping out of school; health risk that result from early sexual activity and pregnancy including sexually transmitted diseases and maternal mortality; being prevented from taking advantage of economic opportunities, and if they have children, child malnutrition and mortality. According to Jain and Kurz (2007), there is also the concern that child marriage deprives girls of their basic human rights and puts them at risk for harmful practices and disadvantage including exploitation, intimate partner violence and abuse. Also, Agbaje and Agbaje (2013) revealed that early marriage leads to domestic child servitude and divorce of young married women, who consequently become sex workers.

The findings of the study also suggested that the occurrence of female early marriage could be reduced through measures such as enacting laws against early marriage, making perpetrators to pay fines, and carrying out media and educational campaign to sensitize the communities on the dangers of female early marriage. Further, measures like poverty eradication/empowerment programmes, banning the practice of early marriage and mobilizing community heads to stop the practice should also be put in place. Social workers must work with other professionals in other fields to put in place policies that will discourage the practice of early marriage. He can speak on behalf of the young girls and recommend to policy makers ways of controlling the practice of female early marriage in the study area.

VI. Conclusions/recommendations

This study aimed at assessing the myth and realities of the occurrence of female early marriage among people of Oron L.G.A of Akwa-Ibom State. Findings of the study revealed that despite national and local laws aimed at containing the prevalence of early marriage in Nigeria, the people of Oron community still indulge in early marriage. Many teenage girls in the study area are still being married off as a result of poverty, illiteracy/ignorance, and religious and cultural beliefs etc. The study equally revealed that the practice of early marriage has negative effects in the economic, health, social, educational, psychological, emotional and political lives of the girl child. In view of the above, the study recommended that:

1. Economic stimulus such as empowerment programmes, provision of employment and skills acquisition should be provided for girls to make them economically viable. This is because poverty was seen as one of the major factors of female early marriage. In other words, efforts to improve the access of young married and non-married girls to economic resources should focus on expanding employment and entrepreneurial skills. This will make them independent to an extent.

2. The study equally recommended that the government should ensure free and compulsory education for children of school age. This is because enrolling them at schools at tender age will get them busy and take away their minds from irrelevant things including marriage at such age. Further, knowledge they say is power. Therefore being in school will expose them to the importance of acquiring knowledge and dangers associated with early marriage. In addition, the study recommended the use of mass media to increase the awareness level of the whole community on the negative consequences of early marriage on the girls, their families and the community as a whole. This will lead to the empowerment of girl child into skills for self-confidence, assertiveness, speaking out, and decision-making.

3. Both the government and non-governmental agencies and even the local communities should ensure that laws allowing only those from 18 years and above to marry are effectively implemented to protect the rights of the child. Severe punishment should be meted on those who flaunt the law by engaging in the practice of early marriage. They should be made to face the law.

4. There is the need for social workers to help in addressing the issue of economy, which motivates families to marry-off their daughters at an early age. Social workers should strive to strengthen the economic base of the

family to reduce the economic and social pressures to marry out their daughters. This will be done by identifying and supporting the strengths and coping capacities of the concerned family.

5. Since poverty was revealed as the major cause of female early marriage in the study area, social workers can work towards reduction of the poverty level of families by linking them to agencies that will assist them. They can do this by linking them to financial institutions that can provide them with grants and low-interest loans for small-scale businesses and large-scale agricultural production. Social workers can also source expertise from other professionals to provide these families with technical training and knowledge on business, agriculture and entrepreneurship.

6. Social workers should also encourage Oron people to always take advantage of government policies and programmes meant to benefit them like the National Poverty Eradication Programme and N-Power. This will make them economic viable and discourage them from giving out their under-aged daughters for marriage because of economic pressure.

7. Finally, social workers should carryout enlightenment and educational campaigns to sensitize the people on the dangers associated with the practice of female early marriage and encourage the young girls to report to relevant authorities like the social workers any act of early marriage noticed in the area. They should sensitize the girls, their families as well as the community on the importance of education; and collaborate with the schools and public health experts to organize sexual reproductive education to girls to enable them understand the biological developments in their bodies and the need to abstain from sexual intercourse to avoid early pregnancy which can ruin their future.

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