

Facts on Adolescent Marriage in North-East Nigeria

Introduction

Marriage of adolescent girls remains common in many parts of the developing world¹. A third of the more than 330 million girls and young women aged 10–19 who currently live in developing countries were or will be married by their 18th birthday². Seventy-three percent of girls within ages 13 and 19 are married in the North-East States of Nigeria³.

Reasons for Early Marriage

Some reasons given for early marriage are:

- *Preventing Pre-marital Sexual Activities*

It is considered that shame would be cast on a family if a girl was not a virgin when she marries. In Bauchi, 30 out of 100 traditional leaders interviewed said that early marriage is a preventive mechanism against pre-marital sex⁴.

- *Marriage Alliances and Transactions*

In North-East Nigeria, many marriages are often arranged marriages where the girls' parents marry off their daughters to family friends and business partners⁵. These are usually aimed at reinforcing family linkages which in turn foster/enhance political, economic, and social alliances.

- *Poverty*

Poor families may regard a young girl as an economic burden and her marriage as a necessary survival strategy for the family⁶.

Consequences of Adolescent Marriage

Adolescent marriage is a developmental issue with several consequences for the married adolescents such as:

Health Consequences

- *Lack of Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Information and Services*

Restrictions on mobility, girls' lack of decision-making authority, distance, and low economic status limit access to information and services⁷.

- *STIs and HIV*

Married girls have sex more often, have more unprotected sex, and often have partners who have multiple concurrent sexual partners, thus placing them at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections including HIV⁸. Furthermore, the power imbalance between husbands and wives makes it difficult for the young bride to initiate decisions as relates to HIV prevention such as HIV Counseling and Testing, Condom Use, and Abstinence.

- *Maternal Mortality*

6 out of every 100 married girls in North-East Nigeria die during pregnancy or labour⁹. Girls between the ages of 10 and 14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than women aged 20-24, while girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die¹⁰.

- *Infant and Under-5 (U5) Mortality*

Infants and children of mothers who give birth to them before the age of 20 are more likely to die before age 5¹¹. North-East Nigeria has the second highest rate of U5 mortality in Nigeria¹².

- *Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF)*

A study on “Risk factors of Vesico-Vaginal Fistulae in North-East Nigeria” revealed that obstructed labour was responsible for 9 out of 10 of the fistulae, and this occurred highest in girls below age 20¹³.

Social and Economic Consequences

- *Limited Educational Attainment*

Out of every 100 married adolescents between ages 15 and 19, only 2 are currently in school compared to 69 out of 100 of their unmarried counterparts. Out of every 100 married adolescents in Nigeria, 73 receive no formal schooling compared with only 8 out of 100 of those who are unmarried¹⁴.

□ *Low Socio-Economic Status*

Early marriage, early childbearing, and lack of access to continued educational opportunities limit young women's access to employment opportunities as families fear for the safety of girls at workplaces. Besides, young women's employment is often seen as a threat to culturally accepted gender roles¹⁵.

□ *Low level of Participation in Decision-Making Processes*

Since early marriage limits skills, knowledge, and autonomy, married girls rarely take part in family decision-making processes even on matters that concern them primarily¹⁶.

Policies on Adolescents' Sexual and Reproductive Health

Nigeria has shown an increasing commitment to the health and development of young people by formulating policies and plans¹⁷ such as:

1. National Reproductive Health Policy and Strategy,
2. National HIV & AIDS Policy,
3. National Health Policy
4. The National Policy on the Health and Development of Adolescents and Young People in Nigeria.
5. National Youth Policy And Strategic Plan Of Action
6. National Family Planning / Reproductive Health Policy Guidelines and Standards of Practice

In these policies, little or no provision is made for married adolescents. Thus, married adolescents represent an acutely under-served group, who in the context of sexual and reproductive health issues including HIV, are especially vulnerable.

Strategies

Legal and Policy Reform

- Review existing/enact new laws and policies on adolescent sexual and reproductive health to include married adolescents
- Abolish fees for sexual and reproductive health information and services to married adolescents

Promote Girl-Child Education and Empowerment

- Keep girls longer in school to complete at least secondary school education; enforce Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act
- Provide girls with livelihood skills-building opportunities and entrepreneurial education

Improve Provision of Sexual and Reproductive Health Information and Services

- Provide adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services at all public health facilities
- Promote effective child-spacing services for married adolescents
- Provide access to comprehensive life-skills based, age appropriate and gender-sensitive Family Life and HIV Education

Advocacy and Public Education

- Build capacity of parents, religious, community and traditional leaders as key advocates for the health and well-being of married adolescents
- Encourage community-centred response to promote the health and well-being of married adolescents

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