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Website: <https://jppssuniuyo.com/> Email: jppssuniuyo@gmail.com

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Article

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SOCIO-CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF GIRL-CHILD MARRIAGE IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

Biola Olatundun Ibitoye¹, **Samauel Abidemi Idowu**²,
John Kayode Ekundayo³ & **Adebola David Ajide**⁴

Centre for Peace and Strategic Studies, University of Ilorin, Nigeria^{1&2}

Institute of Part-Time Studies, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State³

Chief Confidential Secretary, University of Ilorin, Nigeria⁴

Corresponding Email: bibitoye@unilorin.edu.ng¹

Abstract

Child marriage in Nigeria has largely focused on national prevalence rates and general causal factors, thereby creating a gap in localized, in-depth understanding of the context-specific socio-cultural determinants operating within individual states such as Benue State, which is characterized by diverse ethnic and religious communities. The absence of such contextual analysis risks the implementation of interventions that are ineffective or culturally resisted. This study examined the socio-cultural factors that promote girl-child marriage and investigated the efforts of the government in addressing these factors in Benue State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on Feminist Theory and adopted a descriptive survey research design, employing a quantitative method of data collection. Using a simple random sampling technique, respondents were selected from thirteen local government areas of the state. A total of 390 questionnaires were administered, of which 348 were successfully retrieved and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings revealed that key socio-cultural drivers of girl-child marriage include the preservation of virginity and moral standing of the girl-child, deeply entrenched cultural emphasis on chastity, and a complex interplay of cultural and religious values. Government initiatives aimed at curbing girl-child marriage include the implementation of free education at the Universal Basic Education level, which emphasizes education as a tool for empowering girls, delaying early marriage, and promoting adult literacy programmes. The study concludes that despite the presence of these initiatives, girl-child marriage in Benue State persists due to deeply rooted socio-cultural practices and inadequate legal enforcement. It therefore recommends that relevant stakeholders intensify public awareness of national and

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international laws prohibiting child marriage and strengthen enforcement mechanisms at the local level to prevent illegal marriages.

Keywords: Girl-child Marriage, Benue State, Feminism, Culture.

Introduction

Child marriage is a phenomenon that affects both the developed and the developing world. In some countries like India, Niger and Mozambique its prevalence is extremely high across the whole population. In others, like Afghanistan, Cambodia and Ghana, its overall prevalence might be low but early marriage is still widely practiced in particular communities that are marginalised from mainstream society because of race or religion, and as a result the issue may be ignored by governments (UNICEF, 2005). According to Lakshmi (2017), the far-reaching effects of child marriage go beyond the individual, affecting the entire community, and even national and global development. This is so because a young woman that is deprived of education and other rights may not fully develop her potentials. She may not be able to bring up her children properly. She is at increased risk of sexual abuse and exploitation and other harmful practices that negatively affect her survival, development and ability to achieve to her fullest potential. All these would have negative effects on her development which would negatively affect the society at large. Child marriage and sexual violence in Nigeria have been associated with enormous problems especially relating to the developmental potential of young girls and women within the society. Africa has the highest rate of child marriages in the world (UNICEF, 2022). This is more prominent in sub-Saharan Africa with Niger having the highest child marriage rate in the world followed by Chad, Bangladesh and Guinea. According to The Population Council (2014), a third of more than 330 million girls and young women aged 10-19 who currently lives in developing countries were or will be married by their 18th birthday.

Nigeria is confronted with the issue of child marriage and seemingly with governments failing to clamp down on the practice (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Though it is technically unlawful in Nigeria, girls in some States of the Federation are sometimes married by the age of nine years due to tradition, religion and poverty reasons (Forward, 2015). Child marriage is deeply rooted in socio-cultural practices and religion beliefs. Religious and cultural attitudes towards marriage are deeply intertwined with attitudes towards gender roles, particularly those of women. The focus of different religious traditions by the family comes with the expectations of subordination of women in the family. That means a girl's wishes and views on her marriage are often ignored. Girl-child marriage has become a social norm in some communities of Benue State (Elujekwute, 2011). In these communities, tradition played major role in early marriage. Some parents are also too poor to sustain the welfare of the children while some parents just want to maintain good family names thereby giving out their daughters in marriage at young ages in order to maintain chastity by all means. Young girls were happy following men because of monetary gains (Agasa 2023). Some, out of ignorance had premature sex and contacted sexually transmitted diseases like Syphilis, Gonorea, HIV and AIDS many of whom died because of contracted sexually transmitted diseases. For example, AIDS when not treated adequately and timely, while other girls got infected with other health problems associated with early sexual experiences. Bride price given by the husband's family makes them glad as well as being an opportunity to limit promiscuity of the girl-child. Many of the girls that enrolled in the schools dropped out of schools and started playing the role of married women. Unfortunately on the short and long run, a lot of unpleasant developments began to show up in the lives of the girl-child.

Sexual violence occurred where the girl-child is not yet ready for sexual intimacy. The persistence of these marriages is compounded by strong influence of patriarchal systems, community elders, and kinship networks, which reinforce acceptance of the practice. Furthermore, weak law enforcement, low awareness of legal rights, and fear of social ostracism discourage victims or their families from challenging such unions. Existing research on child marriage in Nigeria has often focused on national prevalence and general causes, leaving a gap in localised, in-depth understanding of the unique socio-cultural determinants within states like Benue State with diverse ethnic and religious communities. Without examining and addressing these context-specific socio-cultural drivers, interventions risk being ineffective or culturally resisted, thereby allowing the cycle of girl-child marriage and its attendant consequences to persist across generations. The aim of this study is to examine socio-cultural factors that promote girl-child marriage and investigate efforts of the government in curbing socio-cultural factors that promote girl-child marriage in Benue State.

Review of Empirical Studies

A substantial body of research has examined the socio-cultural, economic, and educational factors that contribute to girl-child marriage and its consequences in various countries. In Nepal, Sekine and Hodgkin (2017) used data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2014 to show that early marriage is a leading cause of school dropout among girls aged 15–17. Their study found that the risk of leaving school rises sharply after the fifth or sixth grade, peaks in the seventh and eighth grades, and remains significant through the tenth grade. Married girls were reported to be ten times more likely to drop out of school than their unmarried peers. Similarly, Sah et al. (2014) found that low education and poverty are strongly associated with early marriage, and that child marriage often leads to unwanted pregnancies. Research from East Africa supports these findings. Yowela (2016) in Zambia reported a high prevalence of early marriage (39%) and identified low education, poverty, lack of awareness, and cultural traditions as major drivers. Ikutwa (2015) in Kenya found that married girls face numerous obstacles in exercising safe reproductive and sexual choices, underscoring their vulnerability and the negative impact on maternal health.

In Nigeria, studies in Uzo-Uwani, Enugu, and Ogun States (Eze, 2016; Adebambo, 2010) revealed that socio-cultural norms, community and family pressures, religious beliefs, and the desire to secure economic survival drive early marriage. These practices violate girls' rights, limit educational opportunities, and negatively affect broader community development. Evidence from Serbia among Roma communities (Hotchkiss *et al.*, 2016) showed that poverty, low education, and rural residence are key risk factors, indicating that these socio-economic and cultural influences on child marriage are common across diverse contexts. Despite the growing research, most studies have focused on regions outside Benue State. There is limited knowledge about the socio-cultural determinants of girl-child marriage in this context, particularly from the perspectives of female and male youths, community and religious leaders, and education officials. This gap highlights the need for localised research to understand the cultural, social, and economic factors that sustain early marriage in Benue State and to inform context-specific interventions aimed at reducing the practice and promoting girls' education and rights.

Theoretical Frame Work

This study is anchored on feminist theory. The feminist perspective was formalised in the 1960s–1970s by scholars such as Dorothy Smith (1974), Heidi Hartmann (1979), and others during the second wave feminist movement. This theory is associated with the rights of

women both in simplistic and reductionistic (Tong, 2014). Feminist theory focuses on analysing gender inequality. Themes often explore include discrimination, objectification, (especially sexual objectification) oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping, art history and contemporary art and aesthetics (Hooks, 2020). The major assumption of feminist theory is that gender may be a factor in how human beings represent reality. 'Men and women will construct different types of structures about self and, consequently, their thought processes may diverge in content and form. The four principles of feminist theory are: working to increase equality; expanding human choice; eliminating gender stratification; ending sexual violence and promoting sexual freedom (Macionis, 2018). The oppression of women is not simply related to some other social relationship such as a class system which girl-child marriage and sexual abuse were solid example of the class system that Feminist is considering. Flax (1999) stated that feminist theory sees women's oppression as a unique constellation of social problems and has to be understood in itself context. Oppression is seen as a part of the way the world is structured and is not due to situation in which one found himself/herself. Rather, oppression is within the field of the mind of the individual which are products of very socio-economic and political organisation of that society. The goals of feminist theory are based on understanding power differentials between men and women in their society and environment, power in relationship to the evolution of oppression as well as to bring about social change to end oppression. The commitments to change oppressive structures and to connect abstract ideas with concrete problems for political actions are the main purpose of feminist theory. While the feminist theories also mention issues which are not strictly related to women, it is argued that men and women view the world differently.

Feminist Theory is important since it helps to address and better understand unequal and oppressive gender relations. It promotes the goal of equality and justice while providing more opportunities for women. True feminism benefits men too and is not only applicable to women. It allows men to be who they want to be, without being tied down to their own gender roles and stereotypes. Through feminism, men are encouraged to be free to express themselves in a way which may be considered 'typically feminine' such as crying when they are upset. In this way, men's mental health can benefit from feminism since the shame associated with talking about their emotions can be lifted without feeling the expectation to 'man up' and keep their feeling buried. Feminist Theory provides a critical framework for understanding girl-child marriage as a manifestation of systemic gender inequality sustained by cultural, economic, and institutional structures. At its core, feminist thought asserts that societal norms, laws, and traditions are often shaped by patriarchal values that privilege male authority and subordinate women and girls (Beasley, 2013). Within the context of Benue State, these patriarchal systems are reinforced through cultural practices, religious interpretations, and economic arrangements such as the bride price, which commodifies girls and positions them as property to be transferred from the natal family to the husband's household.

Methodology

This study adopted descriptive survey research design with the use of quantitative method of data collection. The population of the study is 6,141,300 (NBC, 2022), out which a multi-stage sampling technique was used to select the 390 respondents in thirteen randomly selected local government area of the State. A total of 21 community leaders, 115 female residents, 118 girl-child's parents, 91 Local Government officials, and 45 religious leaders

were purposively selected and administered copies questionnaire in the State. A total of 348 copies of questionnaire were retrieved back and analysis using SPSS

Data Presentation Analysis and Discussion of the Findings

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Information of Respondents, N = 348

Demographic items	Study Sample (N = 348)		
	Information	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Female	245	70.4
	Male	103	29.6
Religion	Christianity	223	64.1
	Islam	89	25.6
	A.I.R.	36	10.3
Educational Level	No formal education	31	8.9
	Primary	40	11.5
	Secondary	86	24.7
	Post-secondary	191	54.9
Status	Indigene	273	78.4
	Non-indigene	75	21.6
Ethnicity	Idoma	101	29.02
	Igede	93	26.7
	Tiv	135	38.8
	Others	19	5.5

Source: Research Field Survey, 2018.

Sex Distribution: A significant majority of respondents were female 245 (70.4%), while males constituted 103 (29.6%) of the sample. This suggests that the study engaged more women, which may reflect the topic's relevance to female experiences.

Religious Affiliation: Most respondents were Christians 223 (64.1%), followed by Muslims 89 (25.6%) and adherents of African Indigenous Religions (A.I.R.) 36 (10.3%). This indicates a predominance of Christianity in the study population, with notable religious diversity.

Educational Level: The largest proportion of respondents had attained post-secondary education 191 (54.9%), followed by secondary education 86 (24.7%), primary education 40 (11.5%), and no formal education 31 (8.9%).

The findings reflect a relatively high educational attainment among participants, with more than half having advanced beyond secondary school. **Indigene/Non-Indigene Status:** The majority of respondents were indigenes 273 (78.4%), while non-indigenes made up 75 (21.6%). This suggests that most participants were native to the study area, potentially influencing their perspectives on local socio-cultural practices. **Ethnic Composition of Indigenes:** Among the 273 indigenes, the largest ethnic group was Tiv 135 (38.8%), followed by Idoma 101 (29.2%), Others 19 (5.5%), and Igede 93 (26.7%). This shows that Tiv ethnicity is the most represented group among the local population sampled.

The Socio-cultural Factors that Promote Girl-child's Marriages in Benue State

Table 2: Respondents' Perceptions on the Factors that Promote Girl-child Marriage in Benue State

Socio-cultural Factors	Mean Score	Rank
Preservation of virginity and moral standing	2.861	1 st
The practice of Islam /African Indigenous Religion encourages girl-child marriage.	2.860	2 nd
Community custom, norms and tradition is a contributory factor to early marriage of girls.	2.729	3 rd
High level of parental illiteracy often encourages girl-child marriage	2.609	4 th
Community and family expectations reinforce the practice viewing girls as destined for domestic role	2.579	5 th

Source: Researcher Field Survey, 2018

The most significant socio-cultural factor identified by respondents was preservation of virginity and moral standing which ranked 1st (2.861), showing that cultural emphasis on chastity strongly drives the practice of girl-child marriage in Benue State. This was closely followed by the practice of Islam/African Indigenous Religion ranked 2nd (2.860), indicating that certain religious and traditional beliefs are key promoters of early marriage. Community customs, norms, and traditions ranked 3rd (2.729), suggesting that entrenched cultural values play a substantial role in perpetuating the practice. High level of parental illiteracy ranked 4th (2.609), implying that low educational attainment among parents contributes to encouraging early marriage. The least ranked factor was community and family expectations viewing girls as destined for domestic roles ranked 5th (2.579), which still represents a notable cultural influence on girl-child marriage. The study highlights preservation of virginity and moral standing as the most significant socio-cultural factor driving girl-child marriage in Benue State. This emphasis on chastity aligns with findings in various cultural contexts where virginity before marriage is highly valued as a symbol of family honour and social respectability (Nour, 2006; UNICEF, 2014). In many African societies, including Nigeria, maintaining a girl's virginity is often linked to family dignity and is used as a justification for early marriage to prevent premarital sexual activity (Ahinkorah et al., 2020). This cultural imperative often out-weighs the rights and wellbeing of the girl herself, sustaining early marriage practices. Closely related is the influence of religious beliefs, particularly Islam and African Indigenous Religions, ranked second. Religious doctrines and interpretations often play a central role in legitimising early marriage, either explicitly or implicitly (Walker, 2012; Nour, 2009).

In some communities, religious leaders endorse child marriage as a means of protecting girls from immoral behaviour or as fulfilling religious obligations (UNICEF, 2018). This confirms the findings of this study that specific religious and traditional beliefs are powerful promoters of early marriage. Community customs, norms, and traditions, ranked third, further emphasize how entrenched cultural values sustain the practice. Early marriage is frequently embedded in long-standing social norms that dictate appropriate life transitions for girls (Delprato et al., 2017). These customs often prioritize marriage and motherhood as the primary roles for girls, reinforcing early unions despite changing legal frameworks and awareness campaigns (Chae & Ngo, 2017). The study also found that parental illiteracy significantly contributes to the persistence of child marriage. Low educational attainment limits parents' awareness of the negative consequences of early marriage and restricts their ability to access alternative economic opportunities (Raj et al.,

2010; Koski et al., 2017). Education has been widely recognized as a protective factor against child marriage, empowering parents and girls with knowledge about rights, health, and economic prospects (Wodon et al., 2017). Finally, the community and family expectations that girls are destined for domestic roles, though ranked lowest, still represents an important cultural influence. Gendered expectations that confine girls to household and caregiving duties perpetuate their early withdrawal from formal education and entry into marriage (Yaya et al., 2019). Such normative beliefs reinforce the idea that girls' value lies in domesticity rather than personal development or career advancement.

The Efforts of the Government at Curbing Socio-Cultural Factors that Promotes Girl-Child Marriage in Benue State

Table 3: Respondents' Perceptions on the the Government at Curbing Socio-cultural Factors that Promotes Girl-child Marriage in Benue State

Government's Efforts	Mean score	Rank
Ratification and domestication of National and International instruments dealing with women and girl-child marriage	2.283	3 rd
Enforcing existing laws against child marriage as stipulated in the Nigerian constitution	2.140	4 th
Efforts made by law enforcement agencies in reducing child abuse and trafficking by apprehending culprit	1.725	5 th
Government policy on free education at the Universal Basic Education (Basic 1 – 9) levels	2.713	1 st
Giving females considerable quota in admission into different level of educational institutions (Primary, Secondary and Tertiary) in the country	1.672	6 th
Introduction of the adult literacy programme	2.572	2 nd
Rescue and Child Protection Initiatives	1.515	7 th

Source: Research Field Survey, 2025

The most highly rated government effort was the policy on free education of the Universal Basic Education (Basic 1–9) levels which ranked 1st (2.713), indicating that providing free basic education is perceived as the most effective strategy in addressing girl-child marriage. This was followed by the introduction of adult literacy programmes, ranked 2nd (2.572), showing recognition of the role of adult education in changing societal attitudes and reducing illiteracy-driven practices. Ratification and domestication of national and international instruments dealing with women and girl-child marriage was ranked 3rd (2.283), suggesting moderate awareness of the importance of legal frameworks. Enforcing existing laws against child marriage as stipulated in the Nigerian Constitution ranked 4th (2.140), reflecting a perception that enforcement is occurring but not at the highest level of effectiveness. Efforts by law enforcement agencies in reducing child abuse and trafficking by apprehending culprits ranked 5th (1.725), while giving females a considerable quota in educational admissions ranked 6th (1.672), indicating relatively low impact or visibility. The least perceived effort was 'rescue and child protection initiatives', ranked 7th (1.515), suggesting limited awareness or implementation of such interventions among respondents.

The study reveals that the most highly rated government effort to combat girl-child marriage in Benue State is the policy on free education at the Universal Basic Education (UBE) levels (Basic 1–9). This finding reflects widespread recognition of the critical role that access to free basic education plays in delaying early marriage (UNICEF, 2014; Wodon et al., 2017). Free education reduces financial barriers for families, enabling more girls to stay in school longer, which in turn lower the likelihood of child marriage (Raj et al., 2010). This finding

suggests that the Benue State government considered child education very imperative. Closely following is the introduction of adult literacy programmes, ranked second, which highlights an important but often under-emphasized strategy. Adult education empowers parents and community members, particularly women, by increasing literacy and awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage (Koski et al., 2017). Through adult literacy, societal attitudes can be shifted, challenging deeply rooted cultural norms that perpetuate early marriage (Acharya et al., 2010). Through adult education, it is possible that mother of girls-child in Benue State will learn from the mistake of the past and take the corrections on the girls-child.

The ratification and domestication of national and international legal instruments against girl-child marriage is ranked third, indicating a moderate level of awareness and appreciation for legal frameworks. This suggests that while respondents recognise the importance of laws such as the Nigerian Child Rights Act and international conventions (CEDAW), their impact might be limited by challenges in implementation and enforcement. Aligning to this, the fourth finding showed that enforcement of existing laws against child marriage, points to a perception that legal action is being taken but is not fully effective. This reflects the widespread issue of weak enforcement mechanisms in many Nigerian states, where socio-cultural norms and lack of political will undermine legal efforts (Ahinkorah et al., 2020). Corroborating study (Wodon et al., 2017) noted that enforcement agencies often face challenges such as corruption, insufficient resources, and community resistance. Efforts by law enforcement agencies to reduce child abuse and trafficking which ranked fifth, shows a relatively low rating, possibly indicating limited visibility or effectiveness of these interventions among the community. This could be due to inadequate coordination, lack of trust between communities and police, or insufficient prioritization of child protection issues (UNICEF, 2018). Research suggests that comprehensive child protection requires not only apprehension of offenders but also community education and victim support systems (Delprato et al., 2017).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concluded that numerous socio-cultural drivers of girl-child marriage exists in Benue State, Nigeria. These factors included preservation of virginity and moral standing, effect of deep-rooted cultural emphasis on chastity. This is closely intertwined with certain religious beliefs particularly Islam and African Indigenous Religions which also strongly support early marriage practices. Additionally, entrenched community customs, norms, and traditions further perpetuate the practice, indicating that girl-child marriage is sustained by a complex web of cultural and religious values. Among government initiatives, the policy on free education at the Universal Basic Education level is perceived as the most effective strategy to combat girl-child marriage, emphasizing education's role in empowering girls and delaying marriage. Adult literacy programmes are also valued for their potential to shift societal attitudes and reduce illiteracy-related factors. However, while legal frameworks (national and international instruments) exist, awareness and enforcement seem moderate, indicating a gap between legislation and its practical impact on the ground.

Recommendations

- i. Government should design and implement community-based awareness programmes that respect and engage with local cultural and religious leaders to challenge harmful norms related to virginity preservation and early marriage.

- ii. Religious and traditional leaders as key allies should discourage child marriage, leveraging their influence to reinterpret cultural and religious beliefs in ways that support delaying marriage and valuing girls' education.
- iii. Government and non-governmental organisation should promote wider awareness of national and international laws prohibiting child marriage through media and community outreach. Strengthen enforcement mechanisms by training local authorities and empowering communities to report and prevent illegal marriages.

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