INFLUENCE OF EARLY MARRIAGE ON ENROLMENT AND RETENTION OF GIRL- CHILD IN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT UNITY COLLEGES OF NORTH- CENTRAL, NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study investigated the influence of early marriage on enrolment and retention of girl child in Federal Unity Colleges in North Central Nigeria. The study was guided by two objectives, two research questions and correspondent null hypotheses. The study adopted an expost facto research design and the population of the study comprises of 15, 177 SSII female students from twenty- nine Federal Unity Colleges in North Central Nigeria out of which a sample size of 375 respondents was obtained using Multi Stage sampling procedure. A questionnaire tagged "Early Marriage, Enrolment and Retention of Girl Child Questionnaire (EME&RGCQ)" was developed by the researcher to obtain data from the female students of Federal Government Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria and Proforma on Girl-Child Enrolment and Retention in Federal Government Unity Colleges in North Central Nigeria. Mean and standard deviations were used to answer the research questions while the formulated hypotheses were however tested at 0.05 level of significance using t- test. Findings from the study revealed a significance influence of early marriage on enrolment of girl child in Unity Colleges in North Central Nigeria. The results also showed a significance influence of early marriage on retention of girl child in Unity Colleges in North Central Nigeria. The study concluded that early marriages are common phenomena in the north central zone of Nigeria and in most African societies where some socio-cultural norms and practices such as value attached to bride wealth influenced parents to marry off their daughters before maturity or before completing their secondary education which had negative impact on enrolment and retention of female students from Federal Government Unity Colleges in the area. The study therefore recommended among others that there is need for Government at all levels to come up with legislation that will protect the right of girl- child by not marrying her before the age of 18 or age of maturity to safeguard their education.

Keyword: Early Marriage, Enrolment, Retention, Unity Colleges

Introduction

Education in Nigeria is a great tool and key capable of influencing social change in our society. Through education, one learns beliefs and attributes, develop positive attitudes and makes effective judgments for his or her future. According to Mohamed, *et al* (2017), education is the best legacy a nation can give to its citizens especially the youths (both male and female). Education is also a powerful part to gender equality, strengthening girls' skills, knowledge and power to challenge discriminatory gender norms (Marcus, 2018). However, the inclusive education for both genders is a requisite and best needed to advance science and technology in the country. Traditionally, in Nigeria, as in many developing countries, the girl-child and women in general are marginalized politically, educationally, technologically, culturally, socially, and in many aspects of life (Mohamed, *et al*, 2017).

Salvatore (2019) also posited that some parents justified the denial of girls of their right to education to prevent them from bringing shame to the family through early pregnancy. He further stated that young girls have all along lagged behind in education since they are usually thought of as property for sale; they are usually married off at an early age for fear that they will become pregnant before finishing their studies, and some male teachers interrupt the girls' education by making them sexual partners. Dunga and Chengedzai (2019) felt that reasons why girls do not have adequate access to education in Africa include the fact that some have to stay home to nurse relatives with HIV/AIDS, including dangerous diseases such as hypertension and stroke, which negatively impact girls' education. Enrolment and retention are key variables in the educational industry. Girl-child enrolment and retention refers to the female students who stay at schools upon admission and are provided with the necessary requirements to remain in school without dropping out to the time of sitting for examinations.

Cultural and socioeconomic status such as early marriage, poverty, religion, uneducated parents, gender inequality and child labour are the causes of

low enrolment and recurrent withdrawal of females with poverty as the major factor. Child marriage and girls lack of access to quality education are both rooted in gender inequality and the belief that girls and women are both less than boys and men. There are two ways links between child marriage and girls' education. Keeping girls in school is one of the best ways of delaying marriage on average, the likelihood of a girl marrying as a child is six percent point less for every additional year she stays in secondary education. Decisions around them are complex and influenced by a variety of factors. Access to education affects marriage timing more than marriage affects access to education. Most girls drop out of school and then get married (Ugboha & Ibuebue, 2019).

A marriage is a legally recognized union between a man and a woman in which they are united sexually, cooperate economically, and may have children through birth or adoption (Birabwa, Namuyonga & Ojok, 2023). The term early marriage on the other hand, is seen as the union of both or any of the parties younger than 18 years of age. Therefore, Early Marriage is either one or both of the marriage couple being under the age of 18 years old or high school age (Ugboha & Ibuebue, 2019). Early marriage according to Odaga (2022), is any marriage carried out by couples below the age of 18 years or before the girl or boy is physically, physiologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing. However, the declaration of human rights recognizes the right to free and full consent to a marriage, acknowledging that consent cannot be "free and full" when one of the individuals involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner (Baba, *et al*, 2023).

In Nigeria and North central zone in particular, early marriage leads to early pregnancy and motherhood, which adversely affects the education of girls in schools. In spite of the recognition of women education, there are many barriers in the way a woman gets higher education and contribute their maximum impact to the betterment of the society (Baba, *et al*, 2023). The mindset of the society does not allow girls for higher education in that, it promotes gender inequality

and ensures prioritization of economic resources for boy-child(re). They get fewer opportunities not only in education, but also in all facets of life (Ugboha & Ibuebue, 2019). Studies conducted by Tusiime (2017) on social worker and researcher revealed that many young married women face many problems and leave their education uncompleted due to different social and cultural factors.

Early marriages are common in most African societies. Re-entry into education after early marriage has not been possible. Research work by Dunga and Chengedzai (2019) indicated that socio-cultural norms and practices such as value attached to bride wealth influenced parents to marry off their daughters before maturity. Marcus (2018) supported the findings by Dunga and Chengedzai, stating that families in the lower socio-economic structures marry off their daughters in order to provide economic support in terms of bride wealth to the family. Mbilinyi and Mbughuri (2019) added that in some African communities, girls are valued as objects of exchange in bridal wealth. Girls are seen as sources of income by their parents in the custom of charging fines for adultery and pregnancies of unmarried girls. In this arrangement, girls are denied opportunity for education. They are withdrawn from schooling during periods for initiation and betrothal ceremonies.

According to UNESCO (2022), there is an estimate of about 129 million out of school girls across the countries of the world including 32 million of primary school ages and 97 million of secondary school ages. UNESCO (2022) also submitted that Nigeria alone has approximately 20 million out of school children. It was noted that, there were 244 million children and youth between the ages of 6 and 18 years who were out of school globally (Eweniyi & Usman, 2018). According to the statistics, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan have the highest number of out-of-school children globally (UNESCO, 2022). Girls account for 60% of Nigeria's 10 million out-of-school children facing barriers such as child marriage, income level, and discriminatory social norms. In Nigeria, 30% aged 9-12 have never been to school at all (Eweniyi & Usman, 2018).

Furthermore, in WAEC executive summary report of 2018, public candidates' examination in Nigeria, 1.57 million candidates sat for the examination out of which 822,941 of the candidates were male while 746,595 were females. Similarly, the researcher gathered from the report of the six North-Eastern states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe on the enrolment of male and female public candidates, it was found that a total of 11,350 males and 7,233 females enrolled in Taraba State, 27,015 and 15,172 for Male and Female candidates in Bauchi State, 12, 664 and 9, 373 for male and female candidates in Adamawa State, 20, 266 and 14, 120 candidates in Borno State, 9,557and 6771 for male and female candidates in Gombe State and 11,819 and 5,079 for male and female candidates in the Yobe State, respectively. In view of this report, it is clear that the number of male candidates was higher than the number of female candidates.

Statement of the Problem

It is common knowledge that education is the cornerstone of all societies and must be provided to everyone, regardless of gender. Issues with girls' education are a worldwide matter rather than a regional, state, national, or continental one. The most effective tool for men to control their surroundings and map out their future is education. There has been a significant improvement in the education of girls in Nigeria over the past few decades. However, this development is still unequal and sluggish in comparison. On the one hand, disparities in geography and social class continue to greatly affect the level of development of women's education between Nigerian states. However, in terms of women's education, North Central particularly in Nigeria continues to lack behind the rest.

Girls' education has been a hot button subject for many years. This remains a concern in some areas, particularly in North Central Nigeria. The issues with girls' education in North Central Nigeria, in particular, girl children are being schooled traditionally to become good housewives and are prepared for marriage

below the age of eighteen years. Some believes that religion forbids a girl child from going to school. These have relegated the development of the girl's- child below the expected level of development if schooled, which has also made the development of the society where they belong and the nation to be under developed. It is said that training a girl- child is equivalent to training a nation because of the impact of the girl- child on herself, the family, and society she finds herself, if she is educated. As such, this study intends to investigate the influence of early marriage on the enrolment and retention of girl-children in Federal Government Unity Colleges in North-Central Nigeria.

The main aim of this study was to examine the influence of early marriage on enrolment and retention of girl-child in Unity Colleges of North-Central Nigeria. Specifically, this study intends to;

1. examine the influence of early marriage on the enrolment of girl-child in Unity Colleges of North-Central Nigeria;
2. determine the influence of early marriage on retention of girl-child in Unity Colleges of North-Central Nigeria.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the influence of early marriage on the enrolment of girl-child in the Unity Colleges of North-Central Nigeria?
2. What is the influence of early marriage on the retention of girl-child in the Unity Colleges of North-Central Nigeria?

The following null hypotheses were also formulated and tested at a significance Level of 0.05

$H0_1$: Early marriage has no significant influence on the enrolment of girl-child in the Unity Colleges of North-Central Nigeria

$H0_2$: Early marriage has no significant influence on the retention of girl-child in the Unity Colleges of North-Central Nigeria.

Methods

This study adopted the expost facto research design method. This design is considered most appropriate for the present study which seeks to investigate the influence of early marriage on the enrolment and retention of girl- child in Unity Colleges of north-central zone of Nigeria. The design, according to Nworgu (2015), focused on how actions that have already occurred can predict certain causes. To this end, the researcher cannot manipulate or modify actions or behaviors that have already occurred, or the specific traits and characteristics a participant embodies. Furthermore, this type of design seeks to locate a cause-and-effect relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Therefore, in this study, a sample representative of the entire study population was used.

The population of the study comprises of 15, 177 female students from twenty- nine (29) Federal Government Unity Colleges in north central Nigeria. North Central Nigeria consists of six (6) states and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja. The states are Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau states. The choice of these populations is to assemble schools with similar structures and also to assemble respondents who are exposed to similar cultures, religions, and all the other indices of the study, how early marriages influences girl child enrolment and retention in Federal Government Unity Colleges in North Central, Nigeria.

Table 1: Population of the Study

S/N	States	Schools	Number of Students
1	FCT- Abuja	Federal Government Girls College Abaji	675
		Federal Govt College of Sci. & Techn. Orozo	367
		Federal Government College Kwali	416
		Federal Government Gils College Rubochi	559
		Federal Government Girls College Garki	853
		Federal Government Girls College Bwari	684

2	Benue	Federal Government College Makurdi	245
		Federal Government Girls College Gboko	772
		Federal Govt College of Sci. & Techn. Otukpo	331
3	Kogi	Federal Government College Kabba	397
		Federal Government Girls College Obangede	706
		Unity Secondary School Lokoja	356
		Federal Govt College of Sci. & Techn. Otobi	445
4	Kwara	Federal Government College Ilorin	381
		Federal Government Girls College Omu-Aran	1020
		Unity Secondary School Offa	404
5	Nasarawa	Federal Government Girls College Akwanga	773
		Unity Secondary School Lafia	466
		Federal Government Girls College Keana	623
		Federal Govt College of Sci. & Techn. Doma	258
6	Niger	Federal Government College Minna	338
		Federal Government Girls College Bida	793
		Unity Secondary School Kotongora	451
		Federal Govt College of Sci. & Techn. Kuta	323
		Federal Government Academy Suleja	361
		Federal Government Girls College New Bussa	593
7	Plateau	Federal Government Girls College Jos	556
		Federal Government Girls College Langtang	620
		Unity Secondary School Pankshin	411
		Total	**15, 177**

Source: Federal Ministry of Education, Abuja

The sample size of the study was 375 SSII female students from the eight (8) selected Federal Government Unity Colleges in the zone. The sample size was obtained using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) methods of sample size determination. The study adopted a multi stage sampling procedure to select the

sample size for the study. In the first stage, four states were selected using a simple random sampling technique and the selected states were Benue, Nasarawa, Niger and the FCT- Abuja. A simple random sampling technique was employed in order to provide every state with an equal chance of being selected for the study. The names of the states were written on pieces of papers, folded, and put in a container, shuffled and the researcher drew the school with replacement (i.e., balloting with replacement). In the second stage, eight (8) schools were purposively selected from the four sampled states, with two each from the eight (8) selected states mostly Federal Government Girls Colleges. In the final stage, a proportionate random sampling technique was used to select 375 SSII female students from the eight sampled schools for enumeration. Table 2 presents the sample used in this study.

Table 2: Sample of the Study

S/N	States	Schools	No. of Students	Sample
1	Benue	Federal Government College Makurdi	245	17
		Federal Government Girls College Gboko	772	54
2	Nasarawa	Federal Government Girls College Akwanga	773	54
		Federal Government Girls College Keana	623	44
3	Niger	Federal Government Girls College Bida	793	56
		Federal Government Girls College New Bussa	593	42
4	FCT-Abuja	Federal Government Girls College Garki	853	60
		Federal Government Girls College Bwari	684	48
		Total	**5,336**	**375**

An instrument tagged "Early Marriage, Enrolment and Retention of Girl Child Questionnaire (EME&RGCQ) was developed by the researcher to obtain data from the female students of Federal Government Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria and Proforma for the Collection of data on Girl-Child Enrolment and Retention in Federal Government Unity Colleges in North Central Nigeria. The instrument which consists of five (5) items was designed based on 4 a point likert

scale of Strongly Agree (SA= 4), Agree (A= 3), Disagree (D= 2), and Strongly Disagree (SD= 1). It was clustered in to two segments of early marriage and enrolment of girl children and then early marriage and retention of girl children in Federal Government Unity Colleges in North Central Nigeria.

The researchers visited the sampled schools with an introductory letter from the Educational Foundations Department, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, seeking permission to conduct research in the sampled schools, with the help of three research assistants selected from the teachers of the sampled schools. The instrument was administered and retrieved on the spot for analysis. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while the null hypotheses were however tested at a significance level of 0.05, using t- test. The choice of using t- test was that the researchers intends to find out the mean differences between two variables; independent variable (early marriage) and dependent variable (enrolment or retention). In answering the research questions, any weighted mean below 2.50 will be considered disagree, while above will be considered agree. In testing the null hypotheses, if the p-values were found to be less than 0.05, the null hypotheses were rejected while for those greater than 0.05 were accepted or retained.

Results

Research Questions One: What is the influence of early marriage on enrolment of girl child in Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria?

Table 3: Description Statistics on the Influence of Early Marriage on Enrolment of Girl Child in Unity Colleges of North Central

Early Marriage on Enrolment	SA	A	D	SD	X	Std.D
There has been a significant increase in the number of girl child enrolled into secondary school despite call for early marriage.	150	95	50	80	2.84	1.17
There is no need to educate the girl child since she will get married and her needs will be taken care of by the husband.	145	100	59	71	2.85	1.13

Sensitization program and other supporting packages for girl child by NGOs is good for girl child education.	139	90	58	88	2.75	1.18
Desire for bride price influences girl child education, despite WHO interventions.	119	127	71	58	2.85	1.05
Information and advocacy on the value of girl child education has positively contributed towards changing perception of girl child education.	141	114	53	67	2.88	1.11
Grand Mean					**14.14**	**5.64**
Average Mean					**2.83**	**1.13**

Table 3 shows the mean rating of students on the influence of early marriage on enrolment of girl child in Federal Government Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria. The result shows that with an average mean of 2.83 which is more than 2.50 used as benchmark mean and average standard deviation of 1.13, respondents agreed that early marriage has an influence on enrolment of girl child in Federal Government Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria.

Research Questions Two: What is the influence of early marriage on the retention of girl child in the Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria?

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics on the Influence of Early Marriage on Retention of Girl-Child in Unity Colleges Secondary Schools of North Central Nigeria

Early Marriage on Retention	SA	A	D	SD	X	Std.D
Early marriage has affected the girl child education with drop out and low enrollment into secondary school.	130	113	68	64	2.82	1.09
Early marriage is not an impediment to the girl child education and retention.	133	115	56	71	2.83	1.11
Early marriages have a hand in impeding education access and retention in secondary schools.	139	138	57	41	3.00	.981

The girl child should marry early to be more productive or fertile to produce children.	121	121	70	63	2.80	1.07
Girls should be married to prevent them from bringing shame to the family by getting pregnant.	181	114	44	36	3.17	.978
Grand Mean					**14.62**	**5.23**
Average Mean					**2.92**	**1.05**

Table 4 shows the mean rating of students on the influence of early marriage on retention of girl child in Federal Government Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria. The result shows that with an average mean of 2.92 which is more than 2.50 used as benchmark and average standard deviations of 1.05, respondents agreed that early marriage has an influence on girl child retention in Federal Government Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria.

Testing of the Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated and tested at a significance level of 0.05.

Hypothesis One: Early marriage has no significance influence on the enrolment of a girl child in the Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria.

Table 5: T-test Analysis on the Influence of Early Marriage on Enrolment of Girl- Child in Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria

Variable	N	X	Std.D	Df	T	P-value
Early Marriage on Enrolment of girl	375	14.133	3.018	374	-90.675	.000

T-test significant since p < 0.05 level of significance

Table 5 shows the influence of early marriage on enrolment of girl child in Federal Government Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria. The result shows that with t (374) = -90.675; p <.05 (.000) implying that early marriage has a significant influence on girl child enrolment in Federal Government Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria. The formulated hypothesis was therefore rejected since the p-value is less than.05 alpha level.

Hypothesis Two: Early marriage has no significant influence on the retention of girl child in the Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria.

Table 6: T-test Analysis on the Influence of Early Marriage on Retention of Girl- Child in Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria

Variable	N	X	Std.Dev.	Df	T	P-value
Early Marriage on Retention	375	14.624	2.762	374	102.516	.000

T-test significant since p < 0.05 level of significance

Table 6 shows the influence of early marriage on retention of girl child in Federal Government Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria. The result shows that with (374) = 75125; p<.05 (.000) which implies that early marriage has a significant influence on girl child retention in Federal Government Unity Colleges of North Central Nigeria. The formulated hypothesis was therefore rejected since the p-value is less than 05 alpha level.

Discussion

Findings from research question one and null hypotheses one revealed that early marriage has significant influence on the enrolment of female students in the Unity Colleges in north central Nigeria. Cultural and socioeconomic status such as early marriage, poverty, religion, uneducated parents, gender inequality and child labour are the causes of low enrolment and recurrent withdrawal of females with poverty as the major factor. This finding has agreed with the findings of Onyango (2018) which indicated that socio-cultural norms and practices such as value attached to bride wealth influenced parents to marry off their daughters before maturity. Maritim (2022) supported the findings by Onyango stating that families in the lower socio-economic structures marry off their daughters in order to provide economic support in terms of bride wealth to the family.

Analysis of results from research question two and the null hypothesis two also revealed that early marriage has significant influence on the retention of female students of Federal Government Unity Colleges of North central, Nigeria. Odaga (2022) also concurred with this finding adding that African tradition and

culture requires that girls be married off to qualify as good African women. This made members of the household to usually struggle to socialize their daughters to master skills of being good wives. The result of this is early drop out of school. Abagi (2021) also stated that marriage- oriented socialization has made some girls withdraw from school for marriage. Although early marriage is disregarded, there is a general fear of missing husbands after attaining higher education because of the men's suspicion of the learned girls.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study therefore concluded that early marriages are common phenomena in the north central zone of Nigeria and in most African societies where some socio-cultural norms and practices such as value attached to bride wealth influenced parents to marry off their daughters before maturity or before completing their secondary education which has negative impact on enrolment and retention of female students from Federal Government Unity Colleges in the area. This is because re-entry into education after early marriage is always difficult if not impossible. The study therefore recommended among others that there is need for Government at all levels to come up with legislation that will protect the right of girl- child by forbidding marrying the girl- child before the age of 18 or age of maturity to safeguard their education.

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