

ADVANCING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN POLICY REFORM TO PREVENT EARLY MARRIAGE AND PROMOTE GIRL-CHILD PROTECTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Despite the presence of laws, policies and interventions to protect children and education of the girl child in Nigeria, early marriage is still a major public health, social development and human rights problem. The practice continues to cause girls unfavourable health outcomes, impact on their education, economic dependence, gender inequality and violations of their basic rights. Governments, development partners, civil society organizations, and community leaders have taken steps to respond to early marriage through a number of initiatives; however, there is still too little meaningful involvement of young people in the policy process, implementation, and monitoring of these steps. This policy brief looks at the implementation of the Nigeria government policy on youth engagement in addressing early marriage and strengthening girl child protection in Nigeria. The report is based on qualitative data gathered from youth leaders, religious leaders, traditional leaders and community stakeholders, and draws out some of the key drivers of early marriage and the barriers that prevent youth from participating, the policy gaps, and opportunities for change. The results show that poverty, cultural norms, lack of parental education, gender inequality and late school attendance are among the primary factors perpetuating early marriage. The participants noted that if given proper support and opportunities, youth can be great advocates for girl-child education, for community awareness, for policy implementation and for social transformation. The policy brief proposes to institutionalize youth participation in child protection systems, enhance youth-led advocacy initiatives, increase access to education for girls and create sustainable systems that amplify the voices of youth in the policy process at all levels.

Keywords: Early Marriage, Child Protection, Youth Participation, Girl-Child Education, Policy Reform, Nigeria, Youth Advocacy, Social Development

1. Introduction

Globally, early marriage remains one of the most persistent obstacles to sustainable development, gender equality and child protection in many developing countries including Nigeria. The practice is generally known as any formal or informal association with a person under eighteen years of age, and is considered a violation of basic human rights and a major public health and social development issue (Walker, 2012; Raj & Boehmer, 2013). Although there are international agreements, including the Sustainable Development Goals, to eradicate child marriage, millions of girls around the world are still being married before their 18th birthday, especially in countries with low and middle incomes, where poverty, social norms, and gender inequalities are entrenched (Nour, 2009; Yaya et al., 2019). Despite the prohibition on marriage at early ages by the law, early marriage is still prevalent in Nigeria among several regions and communities because of the intertwined cultural norms, poverty, low educational attainment, religious beliefs, gender inequality and social pressures (Efevbera et al., 2017; John et al., 2019).

Girls from impoverished families, rural areas and low educational status have been found to be at a greater risk of experiencing this practice (Hotchkiss et al., 2016; Osakinle & Tayo-Olajubutu, 2017). Early marriage has a wide range of repercussions that affect not only the girl herself, but the family, community and the country. Early marriage

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is associated with factors that affect girls' educational attainment: school dropout, adolescent pregnancy, maternal health risks, intimate partner violence, economic dependence, and the girls' lack of opportunities for social and economic development (Nour, 2009; Wodon et al., 2017). While governments, development partners and civil society organisations have introduced a range of interventions such as legal measures, community sensitisation programmes, educational support initiatives and advocacy campaigns, evidence indicates that more direct engagement with young people themselves is needed for sustainable progress towards ending early and forced marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2020; Malhotra et al., 2011). Young people make up a significant share of Nigeria's population, and they know what it is like to be a young person living in Nigeria. They can challenge harmful norms and encourage positive behaviour change by being actively involved in awareness creation, community mobilization, peer education, advocacy, and policy implementation (Villa-Torres & Svanemyr, 2015; Patton et al., 2016).

The importance of meaningful youth participation to the effectiveness of policies, as well as to the ownership of programmes and accountability in public health and social development interventions is now widely acknowledged (Patton et al., 2016; Oliver et al., 2022). Youth can be strong advocates for the protection of girls through their work on education, community dialogue, identifying vulnerable girls, and providing support to monitor girl-child protection policies. They can also play a role in translating and making policies more relevant to the lived experiences of adolescents, ensuring policies are relevant and responsive (Villa-Torres & Svanemyr, 2015; Mmari et al., 2018). This policy reform report narrates how to increase youth engagement in policy reform processes and how to enhance youth leadership in girl-child protection policy development in Nigeria. The report aims to add to the national agenda for preventing early marriage, promoting girls' rights and creating sustainable social development by moving young people away from the mindset of passive recipients and towards active stakeholders (John et al., 2019; Wodon et al., 2017).

2. Problem Statement

Nigeria has passed the relevant legislations and policies aimed at child protection from early marriage and implementation has proven to be challenging to the success of these policies. There is a general lack of awareness of existing laws and a lack of effective enforcement, especially in rural and under-serviced areas. Furthermore, cultural values and social norms often clash with the provisions of law, which can hinder compliance and enforcement. There is a lack of participation of young people in policy formulation, implementation and monitoring as one of the major shortcomings of the current interventions. Youth are often the focus of programmes, rather than strategic partners who can engage in influencing community attitudes, supporting policy implementation and social accountability. Evidence from stakeholder consultations shows that many youths are constrained from being able to be active and meaningful participants, due to poor leadership opportunities, limited advocacy skills, limited access to decision making platforms, resistance of older generations to the culture, poor access to funding, and fear of challenging traditions. These hurdles hinder young people's capacity to be effective in supporting prevention of early marriage and protection of girls. Sustainable social change may be restricted unless youth engagement is institutionalized through deliberate political change. There is thus an immediate need to build systems to enhance youth advocacy, education, mentoring and partnerships in child protection efforts.

3. Methodology

This policy brief was developed based on qualitative information gathered through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with a Youth Development Association Chairperson, a Religious Leader and a Traditional Leader who have extensive experience in community development, youth empowerment, child protection and public health advocacy. Participants' experience ranged from 8-20 years in working with young people and community-based programmes.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to include stakeholders who have relevant knowledge and experience of youth engagement, child protection, education and implementation of policy. Semi-structured interview guides were used to guide the in-depth discussions on the current situation of early marriage, factors that perpetuate early marriage, the effectiveness of the existing laws and policies, opportunities for the involvement of youth, factors that hinder their involvement and priorities for policy reform.

Data was gathered with face-to-face interviews and was meticulously recorded for analysis. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the information obtained. Responses were analysed, coded and thematised around the key thematic areas of drivers of early marriage, the effectiveness of current policies, opportunities for youth engagement, barriers to engagement, and policy recommendations.

The results were crosscut by stakeholder category to find similarities and areas of agreement. The existing literature and national child protection frameworks as well as international best practices were used to gain further insights into participation and protection of the girl-child. This evidence is used to develop the policy recommendations from this report.

4. Situational Analysis

Early marriage is a complex issue which impacts the lives of girls in numerous communities in Nigeria in terms of their health, education, economic status and social development. While child marriage is not widespread anymore, it persists in different forms and is deeply embedded in and resistant to socio-cultural and economic-related trends and norms. This study has revealed that the awareness of the adverse effects of child marriage has significantly increased in many communities. Stakeholders noted that improved education opportunities and public enlightenment campaigns, as well as child protection interventions, have played a role in the reduction of the practice over time. Despite these advances, early marriage remains, especially for vulnerable households who lack social support services, are poor or have low educational levels.

Early marriage is an indicator of structural inequalities towards girls and young women. Girls are still at risk of child marriage and its impact due to gender discrimination, lack of access to education, and low status in the economy, as well as the non-enforcement of child protection laws. Combating these challenges will not only rely on legal changes, but also on interventions by communities that will involve youth as agents of change. The study shows that youth are a valuable, but underutilized resource in efforts to prevent early marriage. They are seen as good agents of change because of their presence, their level of awareness of the current communication channels and their influence on social norms. But there is limited institutionalisation of youth participation in child protection and policy reform processes.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Prevalence of Early Marriage and Community Perceptions

The findings show that while early marriage is still occurring in many communities, stakeholders continued to report a decline in the incidence of early marriage compared to past years. Participants put down this downturn to greater awareness and awareness campaigns by government and non-governmental organizations, and better access to education.

The Chairperson of the Youth Development Association indicated that although awareness has increased, early marriage still takes place and added that, in some instances, families that are struggling economically and have little education experience it. Likewise, the Religious Leader noted that while there has been some impact of awareness, there are families that still see early marriage as a viable way to address economic challenges and social issues. The Traditional Leader also stated that traditional marriage had decreased but still exists in some families, where poverty and traditional beliefs still mould decision making.

The results indicate that while awareness campaigns have yielded good results, the process of shifting long-enduring social norms demands multi-stakeholder, coordinated efforts and a sustained approach. These factors suggest that, while awareness is a necessary component, it is not sufficient since early marriage continued, reflecting the need for complementary interventions based on social and economic vulnerabilities.

5.2 Drivers of Early Marriage

Poverty and Economic Hardship: While some factors mentioned by certain groups were present for only a few respondents, poverty was the one that was most commonly mentioned by all groups. The participants cited that when a family is struggling financially, they may see marriage to ease their financial burden. Sometimes parents think that if they put their daughters to marriage young, they would not be responsible to take care of them as they would not

have to look after the girl and provide for her anymore. The results suggest that economic insecurity can affect parent decision making and is a strong driver towards girls' vulnerability. Persistent poverty may make it important to put immediate survival needs first for daughters before longer term opportunities for education and development. Consequently, many girls are withdrawn from school and married before their maturity. The discovery is consistent with other evidence indicating that poverty continues to be one of the most powerful drivers of child marriage worldwide. Policy responses must, therefore, include poverty reduction strategies, social protection programmes and economic empowerment interventions to vulnerable households.

Educational Barriers and School Dropouts: Access to education and school dropout were consistently cited as factors that are driving the child marriage. Girls who drop out of school may be viewed as marriage-ready, especially among cultures that don't highly value girls' education. The Religious Leader also highlighted the need to advocate for the education of girls as a means of prevention of early marriage. Likewise, the Traditional Leader emphasized the importance of educational empowerment in safeguarding girls from harmful practices and enhancing their future. Education is not just a protective measure against early marriage, it also channels to empower economically, to gain leadership and to move forward socially. Policies to tackle child marriage, therefore, need to focus on school retention, school attendance, on scholarship programmes and supportive school environments for girls.

Cultural Norms and Traditional Beliefs: Traditional practices and cultural norms remain a factor in attitudes to early marriage in many communities. Some families, the participants explained, interpret early marriage as a culturally acceptable practice that helps maintain family honour, shield girls from what they consider to be potential dangers in their moral choices and enhance social connections. The Traditional Leader mentioned that some families still think that by marrying a young girl, they are securing her and are not burdened with money issues. Likewise, the Religious Leader remarked that erroneous beliefs about family honour and social protection are a factor to the practice's sustainability. The results show the need to involve traditional and community leaders in policy implementation. Culturally sensitive approaches that promote child protection and respect community values and encourage discussion on harmful practices are needed to sustain change.

Gender Inequality and Social Expectations: Gender inequality was a major driver of early marriage by stakeholders. There remains a significant level of discrimination in the ability of many girls to access the education system, decision making opportunities and economic resources. Girls are more likely to be expected to marry and take care of the children than to get good grades in school and pursue a career. The results have indicated that gender norms contribute to the attitudes of the family, and these attitudes influence girls' futures. Policy interventions should therefore seek to tackle a wider problem of gender inequality by way of education, advocacy, legal protection and empowerment programmes to increase the opportunities for girls and young women.

Effectiveness of Existing Laws and Policies: The participants agreed that Nigeria's laws and policies have provisions to prevent child marriage and protect child rights. The stakeholders were largely inclined to the view that the laws set a crucial ground for tackling the issue of early marriage and protecting girls. But participants voiced concerns about implementation issues. The Chairperson of the Youth Development Association (YDA) said that many of the community members are not aware of the existing laws, which reduced the impact of the laws. The Religious Leader also commented that enforcement is inconsistent and needs to be increased with improved public education. The Traditional Leader emphasized the need to work together between government agencies, traditional leadership, religious leaders and communities to enhance compliance and implementation of the policies.

The results indicate that legal changes are not enough for the eradication of early marriage. To implement effectively, public awareness, community ownership, institutional coordination and accountability mechanisms must be established to ensure that policy commitments are followed up at the community level. In addition, the participants noted

the need for ongoing interaction with local actors, who shape community attitudes and behaviours. Building government–community linkages will help to drive awareness, bolster enforcement and boost public backing of child protection policies.

6. The Role of Youth in Promoting Girl-Child Protection

The one thing that this study highlights is the potential role of youth in preventing early marriage and promoting girl-child protection. Throughout, stakeholders made clear that young people have strengths which make them well suited to be change agents, teachers, and advocates. The Chairperson of the Youth Development Association said that young people can be peer educators, community volunteers, mentors and social media advocates. Awareness raising, community dialogues and peer support activities can foster positive attitudes towards education and child protection among young people. The Religious Leader highlighted the positive role of youth as positive role models who can positively influence their peers to stay in school and respect the rights of girls. Likewise, the Traditional Leader commented to the audience that young people can also contribute to awareness campaigns, to mentor younger children, and to promote positive values within a culture that promotes education and responsible citizenship.

These results show that youth engagement is not limited to involvement in awareness-raising events. Youth have a very supportive role in policy implementation, programme monitoring, advocacy campaigns, and mobilisation. Their participation can increase the effectiveness of these programmes, increase community ownership and increase the sustainability of intervention to protect girls. Furthermore, youth engagement provides opportunities for leadership development, civic participation and social accountability. Incorporating youth into active roles within child protection programmes can help create a new generation of child protection advocates who will help drive the agenda for gender equality and child protection.

7. Policy Gaps Identified

The results identify a number of weaknesses in the current policy and governance frameworks which hinder progress towards preventing early marriage and protecting girls. There is a significant lack of institutionalized mechanisms for youth's participation in child protection. While there is a growing appreciation of the need for youth participation in policy development, implementation and monitoring, opportunities for youth participation remain scarce at practice level. For many communities, the involvement of youth is largely informal and not legally structured. Another gap is in regards to lack of investment in youth leadership development. Current interventions tend to be geared towards creating awareness but fail to offer ongoing opportunities for capacity development to build the skills and competencies of young people to become advocates, leaders, communicators and policy makers. This restricts their ability to effectively involve in reform processes.

The study also found a lack of coordination between government, educational institutions, community organisations and youth groups. Inconsistent implementation strategies can lead to multiple actions being carried out, poor use of resources and a lack of programme impact. Another major gap in policies is inadequate public understanding of child protection legislation. Compliance and enforcement is limited as many community members may not be aware of legal provisions on child marriage and protection of girl-child. There is therefore a need to increase the capacity of public education to close the policy-intention/community-practice gap. Lastly, participants pointed to the lack of sustainable sources of funds for youth-led projects. Many young people have a passion and dedication to advocacy activities, but lack the financial resources needed to scale and sustain their interventions.

8. Policy Reform Framework

This policy brief outlines a five-pillar framework to promote comprehensive reform of the situation of youth engagement in the prevention of early marriage and promotion of girl-child protection. The first pillar is on institutionalizing youth participation in the policy processes. Government must formalise mechanisms to ensure that young people are

represented in child protection committees, education boards, local development councils and other appropriate governance bodies. These should be mechanisms that allow youth voices to be heard across the entire policy development, implementation and monitoring process.

The second pillar focuses on youth capacity building. Training programmes and structures should be put in place to build the skills of advocacy, leadership, communication, monitoring and policy engagement in young people. Capacity building should be provided through schools, youth organisations, community groups and digital platforms. The third pillar is about creating awareness and advocating for the community. Support youth-led campaigns to enable community dialogues, school outreach activities, social media engagement, and peer education activities to challenge harmful norms and advocate for girl-child education.

The fourth pillar is related to educational empowerment and protection of vulnerable girls. Policies should be strengthened to increase school retention programmes, scholarship schemes, mentorship programmes and supports to overcome barriers that prevent girls from completing their education. The fifth pillar focuses on accountability, monitoring and collaboration. There is a need for a multi-sectoral approach that involves government agencies, traditional institutions, religious bodies, civil society and youth monitors to track progress, assess outcomes and hold responsible those responsible for implementing child protection policies.

9. Implementation Strategies

Coordination between various sectors and various levels of governance is needed to ensure effective implementation of the proposed reforms. Relevant federal ministries and agencies should create a set of guidelines to embed youth involvement in child protection and education programmes. National policies should set minimum standards for youth engagement and then resources should be made available to help implement that with states and local governments.

Governments should establish Youth Advisory Councils and Child Protection Committees at the state level to include youth. These should be used as forums for consultation, policy dialogue and programme monitoring. Provide community-based youth advocacy networks at local government level for community awareness campaigns; identification of vulnerable children; linking children to services; promoting school retention. Schools, traditional leaders, religious institutions and youth organisations should work together with the local authorities to develop context specific interventions.

Youth advocacy clubs and leadership programmes should be created in educational institutions to allow students to take an active role in child protection programmes. Child rights education and gender equality awareness should also be incorporated into extra-curriculum activities in the school. To bolster youth-led interventions, civil society groups and development partners should offer technical assistance, mentorship and financial resources to support interventions. Government and non-governmental actors will work together, ensuring programme sustainability and extending community reach.

10. Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

There needs to be a strong monitoring/evaluation system for the effectiveness of youth engagement efforts and for holding accountable. Monitoring should target the number of youth-led policy processes undertaken, youth-led advocacy activities undertaken, community awareness of child protection laws, school retention rates for girls and reported cases of early marriage. These indicators will help to give feedback on programme performance and outcomes.

There should be regular assessments of the effect of youth engagement on policy implementation, community attitudes and behaviour change. Youth representatives, government agencies, community leaders and independent stakeholders should all be included in evaluations. There should also be community feedback mechanisms to enable beneficiaries and stakeholders to raise concerns, make suggestions and help improve the programme. Monitoring and evaluation results should drive policy changes and resource decisions for the future.

11. Conclusion

The results of this study show that early marriage is still very much a problem in many communities in Nigeria that has an impact on girls health, education, rights and future opportunities. While some steps have been taken to raise awareness about the issue, some legal reforms have been made, and educational measures have been implemented, poverty, gender imbalance, cultural norms, and inadequate education continue to perpetuate the practice.

The study also shows that the youth have tremendous capacity to support early marriage prevention efforts and the protection of girl-child. Youth can be peer educators, mentors, advocates, community mobilizers and policy partners who can shape attitudes and behaviours in their community. They are however still limited in their ability to participate due to low funding, limited access to decision making processes, poor advocacy skills, cultural resistance and institutional support.

Increasing the involvement of youth in policy change is a key opportunity for improving child protection and fostering social change. Incorporating youth voices into the policy-making process, prioritizing youth leadership development, youth-led advocacy, and improving education for girls will make it more inclusive and effective to tackle early marriage.

A future in which every girl could complete her education, realize her potential, and make informed decisions about her life requires the active participation of young people as partners in policy reform and social transformation. Strengthening youth engagement is therefore not only a policy priority but also a critical investment in Nigeria's social and economic development.

12. Policy Recommendations

There should be a legally recognised youth representative in child protection committees and in child protection policy development processes at national, state and local government levels and this youth representation should be provided by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, Federal Ministry of Education, National Human Rights Commission and relevant child protection agencies.

State and local governments should establish Youth Advisory Councils as a forum to engage and involve young people in policy dialogues, programme implementation and monitoring on child protection and girl-child development.

Government to create and sustain youth advocacy clubs in schools and communities to carry out awareness raising, peer education, leadership development and child rights promotion programmes and activities.

The MIM should continue to support the retention measures of the schools with scholarship schemes, educational support programmes, mentoring and interventions to young girls who are at risk of early marriage.

Traditional/religious institutions should work with the government and youth groups to foster dialogue within the community, address negative cultural norms, and encourage community support for girls' education.

Institutional support (technical assistance, mentorship, advocacy training, and financial support) for youth-led child protection initiatives should be offered by development partners and civil society organizations.

Government to intensify public awareness creation on child protection laws and prevention of child marriage through community gatherings, radio programmes, social media, schools and faith-based organizations.

Community Child Protection Committees should be formed or strengthened involving youth representatives, women leaders, traditional leaders, religious leaders, educators, social welfare officers.

Specific funding mechanisms should be established to enable advocacy initiatives led by young people, community sensitisation and monitoring of early marriage and protection of vulnerable girls.

There is a need for a national monitoring mechanism to monitor youth enrolment in child protection programmes, track progress on the reduction of early marriage and assess the impact of policy interventions in Nigeria.

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