CULTURAL AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE: LESSONS FROM BORNO STATE, NORTH-EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract. This qualitative study examines cultural and social determinants of child marriage in Borno State, North-East Nigeria, focusing on push and pull factors sustaining the practice. The objective was to generate locally grounded evidence for culturally responsive interventions. The research collected data through focus group discussions with adolescent girls, parents, and community members, as well as key informant interviews with community and religious leaders across various Borno communities.

Findings reveal communities define puberty onset as adulthood, expecting girls to marry upon menstruation. The parents, primarily the fathers, are the arbiters of marriages as the same is considered a shield against possible dishonour and protection from shame, premarital pregnancy, and misbehaviour. Poverty further promotes early marriages for families to lessen the economic burden.

The recommendations include fostering parents' and adolescents' understanding of puberty and adolescent development, engaging religious and traditional leaders to shift harmful community norms, strengthening legal enforcement

mechanisms and implementing economic empowerment programmes for vulnerable families. These integrated interventions are essential to break the cycle of child marriage and improve the prospects of girls in Borno State.

Keywords: Child Marriage; Cultural Norms; Borno State; Adolescent development.

Introduction

Nigeria has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. Recent data suggest that approximately 30% of young women aged 20–24 years in Nigeria were married before the age of 18, a decline from approximately 44% a few years previously[1]. This equates to almost four out of ten girls being married before adulthood, although the trend is slowly improving[2]. Nigeria also ranks third globally in the absolute number of child brides, with an estimated 24 million girls and women married in childhood[3]. Despite this decrease in the prevalence of child marriage, progress has been uneven and slow, and the rate in Nigeria remains higher than the global average of approximately 1 in 5 (20%)[4]. In sub-Saharan Africa overall (the region which now has the highest prevalence of child marriage anywhere in the world, at 31%), declines have been more modest, underscoring the challenge Nigeria faces as part of this region[5].

Several researchers have investigated child marriage across sub-Saharan Africa. Their findings have linked early marriage to poverty, entrenched cultural

1 "Nigeria Takes Bold Steps to End Child Marriage and Protect the Rights of Children", 16 February 2024, https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/press-releases/nigeria-takes-bold-steps-end-child-marriage-and-protect-rights-children#:~:text=Child%20marriage%20remains%20a%20critical,with%20little%20or%20no%20education.

2 *Ibid*.

3 "Nigeria Takes Bold Steps to End Child Marriage and Protect the Rights of Children", *supra note*, 1.

4 "Girl Goals: What Has Changed for Girls? Adolescent girls' rights over 30 Years", UNICEF DATA, March 6, 2025. https://data.unicef.org/resources/girl-goals-report/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_id=Girls+Goals+&utm_campaign=Girl%20Goals%20Report%20Final&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Mailjet .

5 *Ibid*.

traditions and limited access to education[6,7]. In conflict-affected regions such as North-East Nigeria, researchers have emphasised how insecurity, displacement, and gender norms intensify the risk of child marriage[8,9]. However, limited qualitative research has been conducted that captures the lived realities, reference groups and social norms influencing child marriage within Borno State in North-East Nigeria.

This study aimed to address these gaps, using participatory qualitative methods to understand how individuals and communities perceive, rationalise and normalise early marriage. It explored the push and pull factors influencing child marriage, identified key reference groups that reward and sanction the norms that exist around child marriage and community norms that reinforce or challenge the practice, and analysed the norms, contradictions and other factors influencing child marriage. The findings will help to inform culturally grounded, community-led responses that promote the well-being and rights of adolescent girls.

Bronfenbrenner's social ecological framework is a useful model for exploring the many determinants of child marriage in Borno State, Nigeria[10]. This framework puts forward the idea of a dynamic interaction between a person and their setting, which includes many systems. The microsystem refers to the individual and their immediate setting; the mesosystem refers to the interaction between

6 Adeniyi Olakiitan, et al., „Modelling Determinants of Time to Age at First Marriage Among Nigeria Women: Stratified-Extended Cox Model.", *Nig. J. Pure & Appl. Sci.* 3, no. 1 (Feb. 2024). https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.48198/NJPAS/23.B26 . www.njpas.com.ng.

7 Quentin Wodon, Minh Cong Nguyen, and Clarence Tsimpo, „Child Marriage, Education, And Agency In Uganda", *Feminist Economics, Taylor & Francis Journals* vol. 22(1) (2016). DOI: 10.1080/13545701.2015.1102020.

8 Laura Dean, et al., „"He is suitable for her, of course he is our relative": a qualitative exploration of the drivers and implications of child marriage in Gezira State, Sudan", *BMJ Global Health* 4 (May 2019). https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2018-001264.

9 Fatai Ayiki Azeez, et al. "Exclusion of the female child from primary education: exploring the perceptions and experiences of female learners in northern Nigeria", *Education* 3-13 (Jan. 2024). https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2308307.

10 Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

microsystems; the exosystem refers to the indirect environment, which includes policy and support systems; and the macro system refers to the culture and the society's values. This model can be used to consider the interplay of individual, relational, community and social factors in child marriage and explore the complex issues that sustain child marriage and the broader social context. By examining determinants of child marriage at multiple levels, from the individual to the social, it is possible to develop target interventions that will empower communities, protect children and ultimately reduce the practice of child marriage.

1. The Specific Context of North-East Nigeria and Borno State

North-East Nigeria comprises six states, including Borno, and has experienced persistent sociopolitical and economic challenges, driven by structural inequality, poverty, weak governance and low indicators for human development[11]. Borno State is located in North-East Nigeria. The capital, Maiduguri, lies roughly in the centre of the state and has the highest population of any city in the state, estimated to be more than 500,000. Borno State was created from the former Northeastern State, in 1976. The state was further split into two with the creation of Yobe State in 1991. Borno State covers an area of approximately 57,799 km^2 and has an estimated population of 4,171,104[12]. It is bordered to the north by Niger and Chad, to the west by Yobe and Gombe States, to the south by Adamawa State and to the east by Cameroon. A large part of Lake Chad also borders the state to the northeast. The population is predominantly Muslim, with the Kanuri ethnic group the most dominant of the several tribes found in Borno State. Similar to many states in the northeast of Nigeria, the population is sparse, with nucleated hamlets and

11 United Nations Development Programme, „Integrated Community Stabilization in North East Nigeria", https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/NGA/UNDP_Prodoc_Integrated_Community_Stabilization_and_Resilience_Programme.pdf.

12 National Population Commission (NPC), *Population and housing census of the Federal Republic of Nigeria: National and state population and housing tables (Priority Tables Vol. 1)* (Abuja, Nigeria: National Population Commission, 2006).

rural areas, and occupations that are predominantly agricultural in nature. Borno State is administratively divided into 27 local government areas (LGAs).

Since 2009, Borno State has been the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency, resulting in the displacement of more than two million people, widespread insecurity and the disruption of essential services such as education, healthcare and social welfare systems[13]. The conflict has also contributed to the breakdown of family structures and community cohesion, further exacerbating vulnerabilities among women and children[14]. Numerous internally displaced persons (IDP) camps have been established across the state, hosting hundreds of thousands of individuals[15].

Despite Nigeria's federal enactment of the Child Rights Act (CRA) in 2003, Borno State delayed adoption and resisted key provisions, viewing the CRA as a foreign imposition that conflicted with local cultural and religious values[16]. When the Borno State House of Assembly finally passed the Child Protection Law in 2022, lawmakers deliberately excluded the definition of a child, arguing that the federal law's age specification was inconsistent with local traditions. As a result, the state has yet to fully enforce the law, leaving considerable legal and normative gaps in the protection of children's rights[17]. These intersecting challenges create a complex environment in which harmful traditional practices, particularly child marriage, are normalised and perpetuated, especially in rural and displacement-affected communities.

13 „Nigeria Situation Report", *OCHA*, 17 June 2023. https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/nigeria/nigeria-situation-report-17-june-2023.

14 O'Connor R, Betancourt TS, Enelamah NV. „Safeguarding the Lives of Children Affected by Boko Haram: Application of the SAFE Model of Child Protection to a Rights-Based Situation Analysis", *Health Hum Rights*. 23(1) (2021 Jun): 27-41. PMID: 34194199; PMCID: PMC8233023.

15 „Nigeria", IDMC - Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/nigeria/.

16 I. Ogunniran, „The Child Rights Act Versus Sharia Law in Nigeria: Issues, Challenges and A Way Forward", (2010). https://ir.unilag.edu.ng/handle/123456789/6528.

17 Shettima Lawan Monguno, „Special report: The need for the Borno State Child Protection Law to be fully implemented", *Radio Ndarason International,* 11 MARCH 2024. HTTPS://NDARASON.COM/EN/SPECIAL-REPORT-THE-NEED-FOR-THE-BORNO-STATE-CHILD-PROTECTION-LAW-TO-BE-FULLY-IMPLEMENTED/.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Setting

This qualitative study was conducted between November and December 2023 in selected conflict-affected communities in three LGAs in Borno State: Maiduguri Metropolitan Council, Konduga and Jere. These LGAs host large populations of IDPs, with camps and host communities in areas such as Gwange, Dalori and Dalla Lawanti. The region has been greatly impacted by the Boko Haram insurgency, resulting in widespread displacement, the breakdown of social services and heightened vulnerability of children and youth. These contextual dynamics mean that Borno State is an important setting for examining the sociocultural and economic drivers of child marriage and related vulnerabilities.

2.2. Study Population

The study population consisted of individuals with direct or indirect experiences of and perspectives on child marriage, including adolescents and key community stakeholders. Participants were purposively selected to reflect a range of age groups, marital statuses, gender roles and community leadership positions.

The study generated data using two qualitative methods: open-ended vignette and story-based focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). We conducted a total of 20 FGDs across the three LGAs with four key participant groups: unmarried adolescent girls (six FGDs), married adolescent girls (four FGDs), mothers-in-law (four FGDs) and male and female caregivers (six FGDs). Through these discussions, participants shared community narratives and beliefs related to child marriage.

In addition, 18 KIIs with community leaders, caregivers, women leaders and religious figures helped reach influential groups in the community. These interviews provided deeper insights into the social, cultural and institutional factors

that influence child marriage and the role of reference groups in shaping community norms. FGD were also used with adolescent participants and caregivers to elicit their lived experiences, particularly concerning street-involved children and the intersection of child marriage with poverty and family dynamics.

2.3. Data Collection Process

The data collection process followed a structured and guided approach. The research team adopted a qualitative methodology and employed the Social Norms Exploration Tool to explore the cultural and social dimensions of child marriage. Two primary methods were used to collect data: FGD and KIIs. The FGD involved participatory group discussions based on semi-structured, open-ended stories to elicit community beliefs and social norms. KIIs were conducted with community gatekeepers, including traditional leaders, religious figures, caregivers and women leaders, to gain deeper insights into cultural expectations and institutional factors shaping child marriage practices.

Prior to conducting the data collection, the principal investigator and an expert in the use of vignette and story-based focus group discussions conducted a two-day intensive training session for eight research assistants. These assistants were selected based on their prior experience in social research, fluency in local languages and familiarity with the sociocultural landscape of Borno State. The training covered the background and objectives of the study, the use of vignettes for FGD and KII guides, and the exploration of underlying social norms around child marriage. Role-play exercises were incorporated to ensure the team could apply participatory techniques effectively and ethically in the field. The training also emphasised ethical standards, particularly around informed consent and assent procedures, confidentiality, sensitivity when engaging adolescents and vulnerable groups, and cultural appropriateness.

2.4. Funding and Ethical Considerations

At the time of the study, the principal investigator served as the Senior Child Protection Technical Advisor for Save the Children Nigeria. He leveraged the organisation's broad community presence and trusted relationships to facilitate access and community engagement. The research team obtained informed consent from all participants to ensure voluntary participation and avoid any form of coercion or influence. For minors aged 10–17 years, the team also secured consent from their guardians and assent from the children.

We informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study for any reason without penalty or consequence. We removed all personal identifiers from the data to protect privacy and confidentiality and stored these data securely. The data were used solely for academic research purposes. To ensure participants' comfort, particularly during sensitive discussions about child marriage, we implemented appropriate safeguarding measures. Throughout the study, all ethical tenets were duly observed.

3. Findings

3.1. Introduction

This report presents a thematic analysis of the findings from FGDs and KIIs related to child marriage. The study collected data from adolescent girls (both married and unmarried), parents/caregivers, child protection workers and community leaders, to examine why child marriage persists and how individuals experience it. The data were organised and analysed around key themes, including social, cultural, economic and legal factors and how these factors influence the practice of child marriage. The study also highlights participants' perceptions and experiences, identifies notable gaps or contradictions in viewpoints and emerging trends, and offers recommendations based on the findings. The key findings

are summarized below.

3.2. Sociodemographic Characteristics

The table 1 summarises participant profiles including their age, gender, marital status, level of education, economic activities and geographic location. It reflects a purposeful selection of key stakeholder groups relevant to the study's focus on child marriage, including adolescent girls (unmarried and married), caregivers, mothers-in-law, and community gatekeepers such as religious and traditional leaders. While the table highlights the core sociodemographic traits of each group, the total sample involved 20 FGDs and 18 KIIs, as described in the methods section.

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant group	Number of sessions	Age range	Gender	Marital status	Level of education	Occupation/ economic status	Geographical location
Unmarried adolescent girls (FGDs)	6 FGDs	Mid-teens (approximately 13–18 years)	Female	Unmarried (single)	Some primary or secondary schooling (many still in school or recently left)	Students or responsible for domestic chores; financially dependent on their families	Dala Lawanti, Dalori, Gwange (communities)
Married adolescent girls (FGDs)	4 FGDs	Mid-to-late teens (approximately 15–19 years)	Female	Married (child brides)	Limited formal education (often left school early, around primary level)	Primarily homemakers; some caring for children (no formal employment)	Dalori, Gwange (communities)
Mothers-in-law (FGDs)	4 FGDs	Adults, approximately 30–50 years	Female	Married	Low level of formal education (little or no schooling)	Homemakers; some involved in small trading or farming	Dalori, Gwange (communities)
Female caregivers/ parents (FGDs and KIIs)	3 FGDs	Adults, approximately 30–50 years	Female	Mostly married (mothers)	Low level of formal education (often only primary schooling)	Homemakers or small traders; low-income households	Dala Lawanti, Gwange (communities)

Male caregivers/parents (FGDs and KIIs)	3 FGDs	Adults, approximately 30–50 years	Male	Married (fathers)	Low-to-moderate level of education (some may have primary/secondary)	Small-scale jobs (e.g. farming, labourer, trader); low-income	Gwange (communities)
Community and religious leaders (Bulama etc.) (KIIs)	18 KIIs	Older adults, approximately 40–60 years	Male	Married	Variable (some basic education or informal education)	Community leadership roles (often elders); may also be farmers/traders	Local community (e.g. ward leader in their area)

3.3. Reference Groups That Reward and Sanction the Norms That Exist Around Child Marriage

The decision to offer up a child for marriage primarily lies with the father, followed by the child's mother. Findings from the main population (married adolescents) showed that 55.1% of respondents stated that their fathers made the decision regarding their marriage, while 36.7% stated that their mothers took the decision. Siblings determined just 2% of the cases, while an uncle influenced the remaining 4%.

3.4. Exploring the Pull and Push Factors for Child Marriage

A mix of social expectations, cultural traditions, economic hardship and weak legal enforcement influences child marriage in Borno State. Families often feel pressure to conform to community norms, viewing early marriage as a way to protect their daughters and uphold their family's honour. Cultural and religious beliefs further legitimise the practice, while poverty drives families to see marriage as a financial relief. Although laws on child's right exist, poor enforcement limits their effectiveness. Participants shared a range of personal experiences that reflect both the normalisation of child marriage and the desire for change. The pull and push factors influencing child marriage are outlined below.

Social dynamics and norms in the community were found to heavily influence

the practice of child marriage. Participants across FGDs consistently noted that pressure to conform to social expectations was a major driver. Families often felt compelled to marry off girls early to align with what is considered 'normal' in their community. The following discusses the social factors that influence child marriage.

3.4.1. Preservation of Family Honour

Parents fear that an unmarried adolescent girl might engage in premarital relationships or become pregnant, which could bring stigma. Giving up a girl for marriage at an early age is seen as a way to '*protect the family name and the girl's dignity*', as one parent/caregiver FGD participant explained. Families believe that a husband's household is the 'proper' place for a maturing girl, safeguarding her from immoral behaviour. Another caregiver/parent opined that '*We do it so our daughters will not bring shame or get pregnant under our roof.*'

This caregiver's remark corroborated the community's concern with family honour and reputation.

'*Here, the parents make all the marriage decisions for the girl. She cannot choose for herself.*' (Male community leader, KII)

'*Back in our day, girls did not choose their husbands – the family decided. Even now, the parents mostly decide when and who she will marry.*' (Mother-in-law, FGD)

3.4.2. Peer and Community Pressure

In several FGDs, participants mentioned seeing their neighbours and relatives marry off their daughters as soon as they reached puberty. According to an unmarried adolescent, '*All the girls in our community are married as soon as they reach puberty – that is how things have always been.*' This statement captures the social expectation that early marriage is the norm and reinforces the pressure

on families to follow suit. It creates an expectation that '*we should do the same*'. Families worry that if they delay, the community will gossip or consider the girl 'too old' and undesirable for marriage later. Thus, social approval and the avoidance of criticism push families towards early marriage. One married adolescent girl stated that '*I wanted to continue my schooling, but my parents arranged my marriage when I was 15.*' This quote illustrates the loss of educational opportunities as a direct consequence of adhering to social norms favouring early marriage.

'*I did not want to marry at that age, but I had no choice. My family arranged it, and I could not refuse my parents.*' (Married adolescent girl, FGD)

3.4.3. Gender Role Expectations

Traditional gender norms dictate that a girl's primary role is to become a wife and mother. Many parents (especially older women such as mothers-in-law) conveyed the belief that once a girl can physically bear children, she should start her household. For girls, continuing education or pursuing a career is not a typical part of the social script in these settings. Instead, qualities of being obedient and managing a home are emphasised from a young age, preparing girls for marriage.

'*I was 16 when I had my first baby. It was not easy – I suffered a lot because my body was not ready.*' (Married adolescent girl, FGD)

'*These young girls face many problems after marriage. Some even have complications during childbirth because they are too young.*' (Community leader, KII)

'*I am not happy in this marriage. I miss my friends, and life is very hard with a baby at such a young age.*' (Married adolescent girl, FGD)

3.4.4. Protection in an Insecure Environment

In communities affected by insecurity or displacement, marrying off a daughter can be viewed as a form of protection. Some caregivers indicated in KIIs that during times of conflict or instability, they preferred to see their daughters

married so that '*a husband can look after her*' in uncertain times. While not purely a social custom, this reflects a social response to external threats, using marriage as a shield to ensure a girl's safety and survival through a husband's support.

These social factors demonstrate that child marriage is often a collective decision shaped by what families perceive to be socially acceptable and safe for their daughters. The weight of community norms and fear of social sanctions can override individual considerations of a girl's personal development.

3.5. Cultural Factors Influencing Child Marriage

Closely intertwined with social norms are the deep-rooted cultural and religious beliefs that encourage early marriage. Participants frequently referenced 'tradition' as a justification for the practice.

3.5.1. Deep-Rooted Traditions and Norms

In the communities studied (i.e. Dala Lawanti, Dalori and Gwange), for generations it has been customary to marry in adolescence. Elders in FGDs (especially the mothers-in-law groups) described child marriage as '*how it has always been*'. Culturally, a girl's transition to womanhood is often marked by marriage soon after puberty. Deviating from this pattern can be viewed as rejecting one's cultural heritage. For example, one older female participant shared that in her youth, '*all the girls were married by 15; it was expected and accepted.*' According to a caregiver/parent participant, '*After her first menstruation, what is she waiting for? She is a woman now.*' This reflects the cultural belief that physical changes mark the transition to adulthood, making early marriage acceptable. It is a longstanding tradition that puts pressure on younger generations to follow suit.

Another participant acknowledged that child marriage was deeply embedded in cultural identity: '*In our tradition, marrying at a young age is a sign that you respect our customs. It has been like this for generations.*' The following statement

from a community leader illustrates how religious interpretations can be used to justify early marriage: '*Religious teachings say that once a girl is mature enough, her marriage is almost inevitable – it is a blessing, not a curse.*'

3.5.2. Religious and Moral Interpretations

Many community members tie the practice of child marriage to religious or moral reasoning. In predominantly Muslim communities, some interpret religious guidelines as permitting marriage once a girl is mature, to prevent sin (Zina). KIIs with community leaders and religious figures revealed that while not all endorsed child marriage, there was a common perception that Islam condones it as long as the girl has reached puberty. This religious framing gives the practice a sense of legitimacy. However, some participants noted that community members often interpret cultural practices through religion. Some religious leaders actively advocate for greater education and later marriage, yet entrenched local customs limit their influence.

3.5.3. Bride Price and Marriage Rituals

Culturally, exchanging a bride price or dowry is an important aspect of marriage in the community. Marrying off a daughter is a family affair and a community celebration that follows traditional rituals. This cultural importance placed on the marriage event itself can incentivise earlier marriage. Parents gain social status when their daughters marry 'respectably' with proper rites. In the FGDs, some parents mentioned pride in seeing their daughter become a bride within the culturally appropriate timeframe. The desire to fulfil these cultural rituals at the expected age contributes to the persistence of child marriage.

'*In our tradition, marrying young is a sign that you respect our customs. It has been like this for generations.*' (Female caregiver FGD participant)

3.5.4. Cultural Notions of Readiness

There are cultural indicators (beyond the age in years) that signal a girl is ready for marriage, for instance, the onset of menstruation or even reaching a certain physical stature. Participants noted that in their culture, a girl is often considered an adult after her first menstrual cycle. One caregiver said, '*After that, what is she waiting for? She is a woman.*' Such cultural notions override chronological age. Even if a girl is just 13 or 14 years old, these markers can lead the community to view her as an adult who should assume an adult role through marriage.

'*In our community, once a girl reaches puberty, we consider her ready for marriage. It is our tradition.*' (Mother-in-law, FGD)

'*People here believe a girl should not wait too long to marry. If she stays too long in her parents' house, people will start talking, bringing shame.*' (Female caregiver, FGD)

'*Some parents think marrying a girl off early will protect the family's honour so she doesn't get pregnant out of wedlock.*' (Community leader, KII)

3.6. Economic Factors Influencing Child Marriage

Economic hardship emerged in the transcripts as one of the most potent drivers of child marriage. Participants from poorer households candidly discussed how financial pressures influenced their decisions.

3.6.1. Poverty and Financial Insecurity

Many families struggle to meet basic needs, and raising children (particularly educating them) is costly. In the FGDs with caregivers, parents admitted that marrying off a daughter reduced the financial burden on the household. One father noted that with many children to feed:

'*…if one is married, that is one less mouth for me to worry about.*' (Male

caregiver, FGD)

'*Because of poverty, some parents marry off their daughters early – it is one less mouth for them to feed.*' (Female caregiver, FGD)

'*My parents were struggling, so they married me off at 14. They thought my husband's family would take care of me.*' (Married adolescent girl, FGD)

Early marriage is thus used as a coping mechanism for poverty, as the girl becomes the responsibility of her husband's family. This is particularly acute in contexts of displacement or where there is a loss of livelihoods (as some participants in conflict-affected areas mentioned), where parents feel that they 'cannot afford' to keep adolescent girls at home.

3.6.2. Bride Price as Income

The practice of offering a bride price (where the groom's family gives money or assets to the bride's family) creates a direct economic incentive for early marriage. Several participants acknowledged that low-income families may see marrying a daughter off as an opportunity to obtain much-needed money or livestock. For impoverished households, the bride price can help 'offset' debts or finance the needs of younger siblings. Although not all families marry their daughters off purely for money, the bride price tradition does economically reward child marriage in a way that influences decisions in times of hardship.

'*We simply cannot afford to keep all our children in school. Marrying her off means we get some money through the bride price.*' (Male caregiver, FGD).

This statement highlights how financial pressures and economic incentives (the bride price) drive decisions around early marriage.

3.6.3. Cost of Education vs. Marriage

Participants frequently contrasted the cost of keeping a girl in school with the perceived 'benefit' of marriage. Sending a girl to secondary school entails

expenses including fees, uniforms and transport – expenses many cannot manage. As one caregiver put it, '*We do not have the means for her schooling, so marriage is the next option.*' If a family must choose where to invest limited resources, they often prioritise the education of sons or other needs, assuming a girl's future will be secured through marriage.

'*I had to drop out of school when I married at 15. I wish I could have continued my education.*' (Married adolescent girl, FGD)

'*If a girl is not in school, people next think of marriage. Many parents here do not see the value of a girl attending school.*' (Women's leader, KII)

'*I want to finish my schooling before marriage. I have seen my friends who married early and had to leave school – it affected their future.*' (Unmarried adolescent girl, FGD)

In essence, poverty forces a trade-off: education becomes a luxury, and early marriage appears to be the more affordable path for a girl's future.

3.6.4. Unemployment and Lack of Opportunities

Some adolescent girls themselves, in the FGDs, mentioned bleak economic prospects as a reason they acquiesced to early marriage. In communities with high levels of unemployment, even educated youth struggle to find jobs. This can diminish the perceived value of education for girls – if education does not guarantee employment, parents see less reason to delay marriage. Additionally, girls might feel that marrying a man with an income (however modest) provides more security than trying to find work as a young woman in an area with few opportunities. This economic realism contributes to the acceptance of the status quo.

Overall, economic deprivation greatly limits the choices of families and girls. Child marriage can appear to be a financial strategy for survival, making it challenging to eliminate without addressing the underlying poverty.

3.7. Legal and Policy Factors

The legal context regarding child marriage presents both a potential deterrent and a gap in enforcement. Discussions with community leaders and participants revealed a general awareness that there are laws about marriage age, but these laws often have little impact on actual practices.

3.7.1. Awareness (or a Lack of Awareness) of Legal Age Limits

Some participants knew that the official legal age of marriage is 18 years. For instance, a community leader interviewed in a KII mentioned the CRA, explaining that '*on paper, it forbids marriage under 18*.' However, many parents in rural areas and even some local leaders were either unaware of the specifics of the law or did not view it as relevant to their lives. In FGDs, when asked about laws, some caregivers responded that they '*had heard of something like that*' but were unclear about the details. Others admitted they did not know of any law at all that prohibits child marriage.

3.7.2. Weak Enforcement and Customary Practices

Even when laws exist, enforcement in these communities is minimal. Child marriages often take place through religious or customary ceremonies and are not officially registered, meaning they can easily evade legal scrutiny. Participants noted that there are no real consequences for families who marry off underage daughters – no one is monitoring or penalising these marriages. Local authorities might even attend the weddings as guests, implicitly blessing the union. One key informant (a women's leader) pointed out a contradiction: '*The government says 18, but our people marry earlier, and nothing happens.*' This lack of enforcement sends a message that the law can be ignored, reinforcing the power of tradition over statute.

3.7.3. Conflict Between National Law and Local Norms

In some cases, state or religious laws conflict with national law. For example, in northern Nigerian states, Islamic personal law allows marriage once a girl is deemed mature without specifying the age of 18 years as a requirement. Community members lean towards the legal framework that aligns with their customs. There is a gap between policy and practice – national policies are not fully internalised at the village level. Participants expressed that they considered the approval of family elders and religious leaders as the '*real authority*', rather than civil law. This means that even where legal frameworks exist, they do not effectively protect girls unless the community leaders endorse them.

3.7.4. Absence of Local Regulations or Advocacy

The transcripts also suggested that there were few local initiatives to formalise anti-child-marriage rules in the communities studied. For instance, none of the participants mentioned any community bylaws or consistent interventions by local officials to prevent underage marriages. The legal void at the community level, with no village-level enforcement committees or reporting mechanisms, represents an important gap. Some key informants advocated the creation of local guidelines (such as requiring proof of a girl's age before marriage), indicating that more localised policy action could help, but such measures are currently rarely implemented.

In summary, while legal statutes against child marriage exist on paper, their impact is diluted by poor dissemination, cultural override and lack of enforcement. The community operates largely under customary rules, highlighting a need to bridge the gap between formal law and traditional practice.

3.8. Perceptions and Experiences of Participants

The qualitative data collected were rich with personal stories and sentiments that illustrate how child marriage is perceived and experienced by those directly affected. Participants shared candid accounts across the FGDs and KIIs, from resigned acceptance to deep frustration. Below is a summary of the perspectives of different groups in their own words (paraphrased from the discussions).

3.8.1. Married Adolescent Girls

Girls who married in their mid-teens spoke about the abrupt change in their lives following marriage. Many described feeling isolated and burdened by adult responsibilities at a young age. For example, some had to immediately drop out of school to become wives. '*I wanted to continue my schooling, but my parents arranged my marriage when I was 15*', one girl shared, reflecting a common experience of lost educational opportunity. Married girls also discussed health and emotional challenges – early pregnancy took a toll on their bodies, and a few mentioned complications during childbirth that frightened them. They often had limited power in their new households; husbands or in-laws made the decisions. However, despite hardships, some expressed acceptance, saying they '*had no choice but to adapt*' and that, over time, they learned to manage their roles. Notably, several married girls voiced that they hoped for a different future for their daughters, indicating that while they endured their own situation, they were not keen to see the cycle repeat.

3.8.2. Unmarried Adolescent Girls

The unmarried girls (typically in school or hoping to stay in school) conveyed hope and anxiety about their futures. Many aspired to education and later marriage, seeing education as a path to a better life. They talked about dreams of

becoming nurses, teachers or other professionals – aspirations they knew could be cut short by an early marriage. '*I see what happened to my friend who married at 14 – she suffers now. I want to wait*', one girl explained. However, these girls also felt pressure from their families; some mentioned that marriage proposals started to come once they reached puberty. They experienced a constant worry that, at any time, their parents might decide to accept an offer. Some unmarried participants described trying to negotiate with their parents – for example, promising to behave or excel in school if their marriage could be postponed. Their perceptions highlight a generational shift: they were more aware of the drawbacks of child marriage (often through seeing peers' experiences) and thus more resistant, yet they remained mainly under their parents' control.

3.8.3. Parents and Elders (Mothers, Fathers and In-Laws)

Parents and older family members often viewed child marriage through a practical and protective lens. In the discussions, many parents defended their decision to marry off their daughters early as being in the girls' best interests. Parents often justified early marriage for their daughters because it was seen as a protective measure that aligned with local cultural and religious norms. They believed it preserved family honour by preventing premarital relationships and associated social stigma, reduced the financial burden on the household, and even offered a form of security in conflict or other unstable environments. They recounted stories of community girls who 'went astray' when not married at the expected age, emphasising marriage as a way to keep girls on a good path. A mother in one FGD said, '*We do it so our daughters will not bring shame or get pregnant under our roof.*' This encapsulates the protective intent the parents professed. At the same time, some parents (notably younger mothers or those with a higher level of education) expressed ambivalence or regret. A few admitted they felt sad about cutting short their daughters' childhoods but saw no alternative due to poverty or

social pressure. Mothers-in-law and elder women tended to be more staunchly in favour of tradition, although even among them, there were hints of recognition that times are changing (e.g. acknowledging that girls nowadays '*know more*' and sometimes resist). Fathers and male caregivers often focused on economic reasons when sharing their perspectives, sometimes speaking about survival and necessity rather than desire. Overall, while parents and elders may love their daughters, their perceptions are filtered through what they consider to be responsible parenting in their cultural context – which, unfortunately, often means arranging an early marriage.

3.8.4. Community Leaders and Key Informants

Local leaders (such as the '*Bulama*' or women's group leaders interviewed) provided a broader perspective, often acknowledging the negative impact of child marriage while also explaining why it continues. Several leaders noted that child marriage rates are slowly declining in comparison with those of past decades, but it remains common. They attributed any positive change to increased awareness due to NGO and government campaigns reaching some community members. One women's leader remarked that '*Some parents now hesitate; they come to ask me if they should wait a bit longer.*' This indicates emerging doubts about the practice, even if only slightly. Community leaders also recognised that '*old habits die hard*', describing feeling challenged in convincing elders who see child marriage as tradition. Notably, key informants highlighted the role played by a lack of resources – for instance, schools must be available and affordable if they are to encourage schooling. They empathised with parents' economic struggles, effectively echoing that preaching about the law or health risks has limited effect if the underlying issues are left unaddressed. These leaders generally saw both sides: they understood the harm child marriage does to girls and wished to change the norm, but they were also aware of the community's realities and the slow pace of

changing mindsets.

The voices of the participants painted a complex picture: child marriage serves as both a source of distress and a survival strategy, depending on respondents' perspectives. Girls subjected to it essentially feel robbed of youth and opportunity, while those enforcing it feel they are making the best choice under challenging circumstances. However, it is important to note that there were seeds of change across all groups – murmurs of questioning the practice and hoping for alternatives – indicating that attitudes are not entirely static.

4. Gaps, Contradictions and Emerging Trends

Analysing the transcripts revealed several gaps and contradictions regarding how child marriage is viewed and addressed, as well as emerging trends that could influence its future in the community.

4.1. A Gap Between Awareness and Practice

There was a noticeable gap between knowing that child marriage can be harmful and changing behaviour. Many participants acknowledged the downsides of early marriage, such as health risks, the loss of education and emotional trauma, yet the practice persists. For example, some parents could list the negative consequences, and young girls clearly understood them, but this awareness often did not translate into action due to overpowering economic and social pressures. This gap suggests that knowledge alone (from awareness campaigns or personal observation) cannot break the cycle; structural support and viable alternatives must accompany awareness.

4.2. Legal Contradictions

As noted earlier, there is a stark contradiction between the formal legal framework and community norms. The community operates almost in a parallel

system, where a girl's 'eligibility' for marriage is governed by tradition rather than her age as per the law. This represents a disconnect between policy and reality. Even community leaders find themselves caught in this contradiction – they may sit on committees that aim to enforce laws, but in practice, they attend underage weddings to bless the union, thereby contradicting the laws they are aware of. This inconsistency undermines efforts to enforce anti-child marriage statutes and must be addressed through better alignment of the law with community engagement.

4.3. Generational Tensions

A subtle but important trend was the difference in attitudes between generations. Younger participants (adolescents) were more inclined to question child marriage, whereas older participants defended it. In some FGDs, this even led to mild debate, e.g. an unmarried girl expressed that she wanted to finish school, while an older woman responded that schooling was not necessary for a girl. These inter-generational contradictions indicate that norms are not monolithic. As more young people are exposed to education and global ideas (even in small ways, such as through radio programmes or NGOs), they start to challenge the old ways. However, in the end, they still defer to elders. The emerging trend here is that attitudes are slowly shifting among the youth, which could gradually change the practice if they are empowered to act on their beliefs.

'*Child marriage is widespread here, but people are now seeing that it brings many problems for the girls.*' (Male community leader, KII)

'*We are educating other families about the harm of early marriage. Some are starting to keep their girls in school, but changing old beliefs takes time.*' (Women's leader, KII)

'*I always advise fellow parents not to rush into marrying off their daughters. A girl should be mature and educated before marriage.*' (Female caregiver, KII)

4.4. Gender Contradictions

There was also a notable gendered contradiction: the burden of preserving family honour and economic stability falls on girls through marriage, whereas boys in the community are generally not expected to marry early. In the FGD some female participants questioned why boys are not married off or pulled out of school in the same way that girls are. This point often went unanswered by elders, highlighting an implicit double standard. It is an underlying tension – the community's norms protect boys' adolescence far more than that of girls, yet this inequality is rarely addressed openly. Recognising this could be a key to shifting perspectives, as some participants (especially younger ones) are starting to call out the unfairness.

4.5. Changes in Incidence of Child Marriage

Participants had mixed observations regarding whether child marriage is increasing or decreasing.Some key informants believed there to be a slow decline with fewer child marriages than in the past, crediting education and outreach activities. They noted that in certain families, girls married at 17 or 18 instead of 14 or 15, which is progress. Conversely, others pointed out that due to recent economic hardships and conflict (for example, displacement due to insurgency), some families resorted to even earlier marriages as a survival tactic. In areas hit by crisis, child marriage may have increased as communities became more desperate. These conflicting trends often exist side by side – where peace is present and development efforts are successful, child marriage tends to decrease, but where poverty and insecurity prevail, it can increase.

4.6. Lack of Support Systems

A recurring theme was the absence of support systems that might offer

alternatives to child marriage. This is a gap in services and interventions. For instance, girls who drop out of school due to marriage or pregnancy have no second-chance education or vocational training accessible to them, making marriage seem like the only path. Similarly, families in poverty have no safety net (such as cash assistance or scholarship programmes for girls) to ease the financial strain and encourage them to keep their daughters unmarried and in school. Participants indirectly pointed to this gap: whenever they mentioned 'no alternative', it was a sign that if external support existed, they might make a different choice. This highlights the need for community-level programmes as an emerging priority to prevent child marriage.

In summary, while the practice of child marriage continues, it is not without internal contradictions and signs of change. There is a tension between old and new ways of thinking and between what people know and what they do. These gaps and emerging trends suggest that the community is at a crossroads. With the right interventions, the negative cycle can be interrupted, leveraging the growing awareness and shifting attitudes among the younger generation.

5. Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that social, cultural, economic and legal factors, reinforced by influential reference groups and deep-seated norms, actively drive child marriage in Borno State. Drawing from the findings, I offer multi-level recommendations to address the root causes and promote sustainable alternatives.

5.1. Individual and Family Level (Microsystem)

There is a need to strengthen parent and adolescent education regarding puberty and child rights by developing culturally appropriate education programmes that target parents, caregivers and adolescents to improve their understanding

of child development, reproductive health and the risks of early marriage. It is also important to promote positive parenting programmes through community-based initiatives that enhance parenting skills and prioritise children's education, emotional support and protection from harmful practices.

5.2. Peer and Community Level (Mesosystem)

Reference groups should be engaged to help transform norms. This could involve working with fathers, mothers-in-law, religious leaders and local influencers who are central to decision-making in marriage, to shift the narrative from 'protection through marriage' to 'empowerment through education'. Furthermore, community dialogue and social norm change campaigns should be facilitated.

5.3. Institutional and Legal Level (Exosystem)

Local enforcement of the Child Protection Law should be strengthened. This should include advocating for fully implementing the Borno State Child Protection Law, including its clear definition of a child and mechanisms for monitoring underage marriages. Local leaders should be supported in creating context-specific community rules that discourage child marriage and promote education as a rite of passage.

5.4. Structural and Policy Level (Macrosystem)

There should be investment in girls' education and economic empowerment. This could include scholarship schemes, conditional cash transfers and school feeding programmes that reduce the financial burden of keeping girls in school.

Provide second-chance opportunities: Develop vocational training and re-entry pathways for girls who have dropped out of school due to early marriage or pregnancy.

Design emergency-responsive social protection: In conflict-affected areas,

child protection should be integrated into humanitarian responses, ensuring girls are not married off as a survival strategy during displacement.

Conclusions

This study set out to explore the push and pull factors relating to child marriage in Borno State, identify the reference groups that shape norms around the practice, and analyse contradictions and contextual factors using a social–ecological lens. The findings revealed that while families and communities often justify early marriage as a means of protection or economic survival, the practice is deeply embedded in cultural expectations, reinforced by gender roles and facilitated by weak legal enforcement.

The study revealed generational shifts, with many adolescents resisting early marriage and desiring education and self-determination. However, they remain constrained by family decisions, social pressure and a lack of structural support. Community leaders also expressed increasing awareness of the harms, although they struggled to reconcile tradition with change.

The persistence of child marriage in Borno State is not due to ignorance alone but instead to a confluence of interrelated barriers to its ending: poverty, patriarchy, weak institutions and limited alternatives. Nevertheless, there was hope in the voices of some of the young girls, in the hesitation of some parents, and in the recognition by community leaders that the time for change is approaching.

Efforts must go beyond awareness-raising and focus on creating viable, culturally acceptable alternatives to break the cycle of child marriage. By engaging reference groups, addressing the structural drivers and empowering girls and families with real choices, it is possible to shift the social norms and power dynamics that sustain child marriage and to protect the rights, well-being and futures of adolescent girls in Borno State.

KULTŪRINIAI IR SOCIALINIAI VAIKŲ SANTUOKĄ LEMIANTYS VEIKSNIAI: BORNO VALSTYBĖS, ŠIAURĖS RYTŲ NIGERIJOS PAMOKA

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Santrauka. Tyrime nagrinėjami kultūriniai ir socialiniai vaikų santuokų veiksniai Borno valstijoje, Nigerijos šiaurės rytuose, ypatingą dėmesį skiriant šią praktiką palaikantiems veiksniams ir socialiniams, kultūriniams, ekonominiams ir teisiniams normoms, kurios daro įtaką bendruomenės požiūriui ir sprendimams, atskleisti. Tikslas – surinkti vietos lygmeniu pagrįstus įrodymus, kurie padėtų parengti kultūriškai jautrias ir tvarias intervencijas, galinčias pakeisti vaikų santuokų tendenciją regione.

Tyrimui buvo naudojamas kokybinis tyrimo dizainas, o duomenys renkami per fokus grupių diskusijas (FGD) su paauglėmis mergaitėmis, tėvais ir bendruomenės nariais bei pagrindinių informatorių interviu (KII) su bendruomenės ir religiniais lyderiais. Dalyviai buvo tikslingai atrinkti iš įvairių Borno valstijos bendruomenių, siekiant išsamiai suprasti vietos kontekstą.

Išvados rodo, kad bendruomenė brendimo pradžią apibrėžia kaip pilnametystės pradžią. Šiose bendruomenėse šeimos tikisi, kad mergaitės ištekės, kai tik prasidės menstruacijos. Sprendimas tekėti priklauso tėvams, ypač tėvui, kurie yra pagrindinė grupė, aktyviai stiprinanti šią normą, skatindamos ankstyvas santuokas kaip būdą apsaugoti mergaites nuo gėdos, nepageidaujamo nėštumo. Šeimos dažnai santuoką naudoja kaip korekcinę priemonę mergaitėms, kurias laiko užsispyrusiomis arba rizikuojančiomis užmegzti netinkamus santykius. Daugelis paauglių ir jų šeimų santuoką taip pat laiko praktiniu skurdo sprendimu, naudodamos ją pagrindiniams išgyvenimo poreikiams patenkinti ir tėvų priežiūros

naštai sumažinti.

Pagrindinės rekomendacijos apima tėvų ir paauglių supratimo apie brendimą ir paauglystės raidą gerinimą, religinių ir tradicinių lyderių įtraukimą į žalingas bendruomenės normas, teisinės kontrolės mechanizmų stiprinimą ir ekonominio įgalinimo programų pažeidžiamoms šeimoms įgyvendinimą. Šios integruotos intervencijos yra būtinos norint nutraukti vaikų santuokų ciklą ir pagerinti mergaičių perspektyvas Borno valstijoje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: vaikų santuokos, kultūrinės normos, brendimas, skurdas, intervencija.