

# THE BURDEN OF EARLY MARRIAGE

*E. A Nwoke; B. O. Nwankwo ; U. M Chukwuocha and S. N. O. Ibe*

## **Abstract**

Early marriage is the marriage of children and adolescents below the age of 18 years. Some are forced into the union while some are too young to take decision. Marriage takes place for economic, cultural, religious, social and emotional reasons. The consequences of early marriage are instability of marriage, poor health, fistula and related problems, having too many children, school dropout and less education and the impact on the wellbeing of children. Out of these problems the fistula stands out to be the most dominant and severe one.

## **Introduction**

Marriage is the institution whereby men and women are joined in special kind of social and legal dependence for the purpose of founding and maintaining a family (Frat, 2007). Early marriage is the marriage of children and adolescents below the age of 1-8 years. United Nations for Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocent! Research Center (2001), noted that the practice of marrying girls at a young age is most common in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in parts of West and East African regions and South Asia ( End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) International, 2007). Also it noted that marriages of female adolescents between sixteen and eighteen years of age are common in Latin America and Eastern Europe. In India, Guttmacher (1996), reported that 45% of girls are married before their eighteenth birthday and that wedlock are tied before they reach the age of eighteen the legal age of marriage. The number easily crosses 50% in eight other Indian states.

ECPAT International (2007), further opined that some are forced into this union; others are simply young to make informed decision. Consent is made by somebody else on the child's behalf. The child does not have the opportunity to exercise her right to choose. For this reason, early marriages are also referred to as forced marriages. In its most extreme form, forced marriages are as a result of abductions. In Uganda, young girls are abducted and forced to marry senior leaders of Gorilla movement known as Resistance Army. The marriages are used as reward and incentives for the soldiers (ECPAT international, 2007). Marriage takes place for economic, cultural, religious, social and emotional reasons. In many countries, especially among poor, migrant or displaced communities, marriage at a young age is common. Usually, the girls marry early though it can happen to boys as well.

UNICEF (2007), in its document on Child Protection From Violence, Exploitation and Abuse reported that in developing countries, around 65 million women age 20-24 years were married in union before the age of 18 years. Thirty million of them live in Asia. In countries like Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger and Uganda, more than 50 percent of women entered into marriage or into a union before their eighteenth birthdays. Child marriage occurs frequently in rural settings than in urban settings. UNICEF (2007) further reported that according to Demographic Health Survey in 2003 in Burkina Faso for instance, 63% of rural girls were married before 18 years compared to 22% of urban girls. Girls living in the 20% poorest of households were more likely to get married at an early age than those living in the wealthiest 20%. In Peru, 45% of women were married by age 18 among the poorest 20%, compared to 5% among the richest 20% (UNICEF, 2007).

## **Causes of Early Marriage**

Early marriage is seen as a strategy for economic survival where poverty is acute. It is also on the increase in response to poverty inflicted by the economic sanctions that has been imposed on the country. The risk of exploitation is great. A recent study of five poor villages in Egypt found out that young girls were being married to old or much older men from the oil rich Middle Eastern Countries via brokers (ECPAT International, 2007). Fear of HIV infection has encouraged men in most countries to seek younger partners. Early marriage is one way to ensure young girls are

protected. In rural Albania, families encourage their daughters to marry early to avoid the threat of kidnapping. In conflict torn Somalia, families marry their daughters to Militia members in exchange for protection for the girls as well as themselves.

UNICEF (2007), stated that parents choose to marry off their daughters for a number of reasons; poor families may regard a younger girl as an economic burden and her marriage as a necessary survival strategy for her family. They may also think that child marriage offers protection for their daughter from the danger of sexual assault, or more generally offer the care of a male guardian. UNICEF (2007), noted that Child marriage may also be seen as a strategy to avoid girls becoming pregnant outside marriage. This document further reports that gender discrimination can also underpin child marriage. Girls may be married young to ensure obedience and subservience within their husband's household and to maximize child bearing.

### **Early Marriage and Education**

Lewis (2001) in his work on early marriage and education observed that traditionally, people in Mpika village in Zambia value marriage more than education of the girls. A girl said I stopped school because I married at 14 years. He further reported that Zambians are still a long way from achieving the education for all goals of equality in education for girls and boys. One of the barriers for achieving this goal is early marriage, or marriage of school age children.

Women with primary education are less likely to be married as children than those who received no education. For instance, in Zimbabwe, 48% of women who had attended primary school had been married by the age of 18, compared to 87% of those who had not attended school. Again, Child marriage is associated with high level of fertility (UNICEF, 2007).

Lewis (2001), further observed that the gender inequality present in all aspects of the society, including education, leads to girls often lacking life skills and negotiating power. Therefore, while most boys have a say in when and who they marry and what they do once they are married, many girls do not have the chance to make these decisions. The physical, emotional and social effects of early marriage vary, but one of the most common outcomes is the withdrawal of girls from formal education. Most often, husbands of the young wives are older and expect their wives to follow tradition, stay at home and undertake household and child care duties. The girls are unable to go against their husbands' wishes and the husband's family may refuse to invest their scarce resources on the woman's future educational intention. Schools often have the policy of refusing to allow married or pregnant girls or girls with babies to return to school (Lewis, 2001). Even when they permit girls to return, the school environment, rules, timetables, and physical conditions make it too difficult for the girl to attend school, and perform her duties as a wife and a mother at the same time. Bullying and abuse by teachers, pupils and other parents can further reduce the girls' self confidence and sense of security, forcing them to give up on schooling.

When girls drop out of school to get married, it affects the community as a whole and the future generations. Girls, who marry young, inevitably have children early, and have many children, because their knowledge of contraception is poor and their power to negotiate its use is weak. Lewis (2001), noted that children of young uneducated mothers are less likely to have a good start to their education, do well in class or continue beyond the minimum schooling. Their daughters especially are likely to drop out, marry young and begin the cycle again. Early marriage therefore, can be a significant barrier for communities seeking to raise education levels and break the circle of poverty. It is not just girls who see their life chances reduced by early marriage, in Nepal, a study showed that the boys also marry early because of family and economic pressures. Some can carry on with school, but some are forced to drop out so that they can earn money to support their parents, wife and children. Lewis, in his study reported that a boy, Nirajan, married at eleven years after his sister married and left home. There was no one to do the house work, so he had to find a wife who could help the family. Guttmacher (1996), also stated that education and age at first marriage are strongly associated both at the individual level and at the society level. A woman who has attended secondary school is considerably less likely to marry during adolescence.

### **Consequences of Early Marriage**

Child marriage is a violation of human right, compromising the development of girls and often resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation. Young married girls face onerous domestic burdens, constrained decision-making and reduced life choices (UNICEF, 2005). Frat (2007), stated that the rapid increase in the number of early marriages over the past several years coupled with the extremely high rate of divorce within this same group make this subject extremely important. If you are a teenager and you are seriously considering an early marriage, there are a number of potential problem areas of which you should be aware, so that if you do decide that this is the best course of action, you should be alert to the possible difficulties which could lie ahead.

First, the problem of adequate financial support is obvious. Although money does not buy happiness, it is true that a tight financial situation can create tensions which can undermine an otherwise happy relationship. While some financial problems are to be expected in almost any marriage, it is important to take time to think sensibly, so that such problems will not destroy what could otherwise be a beautiful relationship, if not undertaken prematurely. Abiy (2007), stated that in Ethiopia, the problems of early marriage are instability of marriage, poor health, fistula and related problems, having too many children, school dropout and less education and the impact on the wellbeing of children were put as the major consequences of early marriage. Out of these problems the fistula stands out to be the most dominant and severe one.

Since the girls in the regions are married at an earlier age when they are not physically mature, they face physical problems like fistula at the time of birth, which, as a result becomes the reason to be chased away and alienated. At the time of birth, her body that is beside her womb hurts and makes a hole which allows passage of her excretions. She cannot control any of her excretions, which creates bad odour. This fistula problem results to her being stigmatized and alienated. She is made to live apart from the family in a separate house at a distance from the family's residence. Abiy further noted that out of the victims of this problem, only few were lucky to receive treatment at the fistula hospital in Addis Ababa. Many who had no nearby fistula specialized hospital died. A victim said, My husband chased me away when I suffered from fistula problem. Even the society used to say. You neither died nor survived". Fortunately, I got treatment and became well. This time my husband asked me to be with him again, but I chased him in my own turn.

To alleviate the problem, additional fistula centers were tried to be established in Bahir Dar and Mekele hospitals, but Doctor Mengistu said "that constructing additional fistula hospitals is not a sustainable solution for the problem, rather it is better to create awareness and enforce the law. In the previous Ethiopian civil code, the minimum age for marriage was 15 years until the recent Ethiopian Revised Family law, which puts age 18 as the minimum legal age for marriage". Despite this, the enforcement of the law has got challenges from the society and the executive body, and even from the judiciary system. A girl cannot sue the accountable persons for her early marriage, as she would be told by the local police that it is not fair to sue the persons as they are culturally right. Against all odds, NGOs like Pathfinder are trying to break the ice. The efforts of the NGOs have prevented or annulled more than 12000 early marriages for boys and girls between July 2005 and October 2006 (Abiy, 2007).

Studies have also shown that many girls who are forced to marry early suffer from prolonged domestic violence. Furthermore, early marriage is often linked to wife abandonment. This plunges young girls into extreme poverty and increases the risk of her entering or being forced to enter into commercial sex trade (ECPAT International, 2007). In Bangladesh, poverty stricken parents are persuaded to part with their daughters through promises of marriage, or false marriages, which are used to lure the girls into prostitution abroad. Police in Cambodia said that hundreds, perhaps thousands of young women have been lured to Taiwan with promises of marriage to wealthy men, only to find themselves sold to brothel owners. (ECPAT international, 2007).

In South Asia, early marriage is a social norm, and marriages are expected to result in child birth within a few years of couples living together. Early marriage almost always leads to early child bearing. Population Reference Bureau (PRB) (2000), reported that it is generally accepted that child bearing among women aged 15-19 years doubles the risk of death due to pregnancy related causes compared to women in their twenties. Hospital based studies in Nepal, have shown an association between teenage pregnancy and pregnancy induced hypertension and anaemia. The work of Malla and Shrestha (1996), found that foetal loss and abnormal deliveries were higher among teen mothers. The percentage of pregnant women attending antenatal care is low in Nepal, probably due to lack of adequate services. Also in urban areas where health facilities are within easy reach, pregnant adolescents attend antenatal facilities at lower rates than adult women (Adhikari & Amatya, 1996).

Several studies from Nepal have documented poorer outcomes for children born to adolescent mothers compared to older mothers. The Natal Family Health Survey (NFHS) found that neonatal mortality among children of adolescent mothers was 73% higher than children of older mothers and 125% higher than children of mothers aged 30-39 years (Nepal Ministry of Health, 1996). Studies have also found a 25%-66% higher incidence of low birth weight among children of adolescent mothers (Dali, 1989; Adhikari & Amatya, 1996). Dali and Pradhan (1992) in their study noted that children of older adolescents (aged 17-19years), fared better than those born to younger adolescents (aged 16 years or younger) when outcomes such as low birth weight and pre- term birth are compared.

In addition to health consequences, early marriage and child bearing have consequences for women's education. The 1996 NFHS found a gender difference in schooling levels. Only 15% of male

adolescents had never attended school compared to 53% of female adolescents. Women who marry early in their teens tend to have even fewer educational opportunities and a higher dropout rate (Nepal Ministry of Health, 1996). In the 1996 NFHS, 32% of women who had dropped out of school cited marriage as the reason for discontinuing school. The 1996 NFHS also revealed a close relationship between education and childbearing among adolescents. 32% of illiterate adolescents had already begun childbearing, compared to only 10% of those who had secondary education. Adhikari (2007), noted that women who marry early and begin childbearing in adolescence are expected to have a higher total fertility rate. The author further opined that until the adolescent marriages can be delayed, adolescent friendly contraceptive services may help keep down fertility rates.

### **International Comparisons**

Most studies from developing countries, including Dali and Pradhan (1992); Malla and Shrestha (1996); and Adhikari and Amatya (1996) from Nepal; Ambedkar (1999), and Verma and Das (1997), from India; Alam (2000), from Bangladesh; Weerasekara (1997), from Sirilanka; Kumbi and Isehek (1999), from Ethiopia; and Adedoyin and Adetoro (1989), from Nigeria, have shown that pregnancy in adolescence results in poorer obstetric outcomes compared to pregnancy during adulthood. However, studies from developed countries are not so definite. Explanations for the difference between developing and developed countries findings possibly include the availability and quality of prenatal care and poor nutritional status of adolescent girls in developing countries. The work by Kurz (1997) concluded that primiparity, continued growth during pregnancy, quality of obstetric antenatal care and poor socio-economic status are major risk factors associated with poor outcomes of adolescent pregnancy. This was supported by World Health Organization analysis of 25 studies, which found an association between pre-teen birth and the mother's nutritional status. That analysis concluded that women with pre-pregnancy weight and height of less than 45kg and 145cm, respectively, were more likely to bear low birth-weight or premature infants (World Health Organization, 1995).

Studies by Schuler (2002), showed that many parents in Sub-Saharan Africa believe that early marriage will shield their adolescent daughters from HIV/AIDS epidemic while Clark (2006), suggested the opposite. Most researchers saw premarital sex as the problem and marriage as the solution. While Clark (2006), observed that married adolescent girls face higher risks of HIV infection than sexually active unmarried girls. She found three reasons for this, first, marriage effectively means the end of condom use. Clark said both because of the desire to become pregnant and because condoms are taken as a sign of distrust. Secondly, sexual frequency rises dramatically with marriage. Thirdly, married girls at a given age have husbands who are older and more sexually experienced and therefore, more likely to be infected than boyfriends of single girls. For all of these reasons Clark, explained, "Girls fare far worse after marriage than before.

### **Conclusion**

Adolescent girls who delay marriage and child bearing benefit by completing their own growth first. They avoid putting themselves and their babies at risk of nutritional deprivation. As early marriage and childbearing are associated with less education and lower future income for the young mothers, programmes that keep girls in school should be promoted. The attainment of higher level of education by young women is expected to yield a greater use of reproductive health services and better employment prospects. Parents and community members should be informed of the adverse health and social consequences of early marriage and early childbearing. If marriage in adolescence continues, contraceptive use can delay child birth until the couple is physically, socially and emotionally ready to bear children thus, there is the need for adolescent-friendly family planning.

### **References**

- Abiy, S. (2007). *Ethiopia: Cause and consequences of early marriage*. Retrieved March 20, 2007 from [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)
- Adedoyin, M. A. & Adetoro, O, (1989). Pregnancy and its outcome among teenage mother in Ilorin, Nigeria. *East African medical journal*, 66(7) 448-452.
- Adhikari, R.K (2007). *Early marriage & child bearing: risks & consequences*. Retrieved March 20, 2007 from [www.google.cgn](http://www.google.cgn)
- Adhikari, N. & Amatya, A. (1996). Outcome of adolescent pregnancy. Paper presented at 8<sup>1</sup> Congress of Pediatrics, Kathmandu, Nepal.

- Alam, N. (2000). Teenage motherhood and infant mortality in Bangladesh: maternal age dependent effect of parity one. *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 32(2), 229-236.
- Ambedkar, N. N, (1999). Teenage pregnancy Outcome: A record base study. *Indian journal of Medical Science*, 53(1), 14-17.
- Clark, S. (2006). In Population Council, (2006). The risk of early marriage, News release, retrieved March 14, 2007 from [www. Google. com](http://www.Google.com)
- Dali, S.M. (1989). *A study of low birth weight at TUTH*, Kathmandu, TU Institute of medicine.
- Dali, S. M. & Pradhan, N. (1992). Obstetric performance of adolescent pregnancy at TUTH . *Journal of the Institute of Medicine*, 14(1), 13-19.
- ECPAT International, (2007). *Early marriage: Frequently asked questions about commercial sexual exploitation of children*. Retrieved April 27, 2007 from [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)
- Frat, F. (2007). *Thousands of essay & term papers: Teenage marriage*, retrieved March 14, 2007 from [www. google.com](http://www.google.com)
- Guttmacher, (1996). Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health worldwide through research, policy analysis and public education. *International family planning perspectives*, 22(4), 148-157 & 175. retrieved March 20, 2007 from [www.giuttmacher.org/pubs/iournals/2214896.html](http://www.giuttmacher.org/pubs/iournals/2214896.html)
- Kumbi, S & Isehek, O. (1999). Obstetric Outcomes of Teenage pregnancy in North Western Ethiopia. *East African Medical Journal*, 76(3), 138-140.
- Kurz, K. (1997). Health consequences of adolescent childbearing in developing countries, ICRW working paper number 4. Washington DC: International center for research on women.
- Lewis, I. (2001). *Early Marriage and Education*, Retrieved March 20, 2007 from [www.eenet.org.uk/newsletter/news7/page8.shtml](http://www.eenet.org.uk/newsletter/news7/page8.shtml)
- Malla, D. S & shrestha, P.L. (1996). *Adolescent pregnancy and its outcome*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Maternity hospital.
- Nepal Ministry of Health, (1996). *Nepal Family Health Survey*. Kathmandu: Nepal ministry of health, department of health services, family health division and New Era, Macro international Inc.
- Population Reference Bureau, (2000), *The World's Youth 2000*. Washington DC: Population Reference Bureau.
- Schuler, P. (2002). Safety of early marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa is a faulty presumption. *Chicago Chronicle* 22(3). Retrieved March 20, 2007 from [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)
- UNICEF Innocenti research center, (2001). Gender issues: Early Marriage. *Innocent digest*, 7 publisher IRC, 28. Retrieved March 14, 2007 from [www.Koogole.com](http://www.Koogole.com)
- UNICEF, (2005). *Early marriage: A harmful traditional practice*, retrieved March 14, 2004 from [www. google. com](http://www.google.com)
- UNICEF, (2007). *Child Protection from Violence, Exploitation and Abuse*, retrieved March 14, 2007 from [www.unicef.org/protection/index\\_early\\_marriage.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_early_marriage.html)
- Verma, V. & Das, K. B. (1997). Teenage primigravidae: Comparative study. *Indian Journal of Public Health*, 42(2) 52-55.
- Weerasekara, D. S. (1997). Adolescent pregnancies- Is the outcome different? *Ceylon Medical Journal*, 42(1), 16-17.

WHO, (1995).Maternal weight gain and pregnancy outcomes. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, Supply. 73.

