

Counselling Strategies for Preventing Early Girl-Child Marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study investigated the counselling strategies for preventing early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Three research questions were answered and descriptive survey design was adopted for the study.

Methodology: The population of the study consisted of 250 Counsellors in all the five local government areas in Afikpo Education Zone. The entire population was used in the study because the number was manageable by the researchers. The instrument used in collecting data for the study was a structured questionnaire titled Counselling Strategies for Preventing Early Girl Child Marriage Questionnaire (CSPEGCMQ). The instrument was dully validated by experts in the Department of Guidance and Counselling and Measurement and Evaluation, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Arithmetic mean was used for data analysis.

Findings: The result showed that family pressure, poverty, unwanted pregnancy, conspiracy, broken homes, peer pressure, virginity syndrome, unhappy home, and misconceptions are the cause of early girl-child marriage as agreed by the respondents. The results also indicated that cervical cancer disease, school dropout, hatred for the men, sex outside marriage, early widowhood, frustration, intolerance and divorce are all consequences of early girl-child marriage.

Conclusion: The results equally reviewed that all the items in section C of the instrument are counselling strategies for preventing early girl-child marriage. The study recommended among others, that counsellors in conjunction with the parents should mount campaign through seminars, workshops.

Keywords: Counselling, Strategies, Preventing, Girl-child, Marriage.

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Introduction

No society can exist without the existences of family units. Marriage is a key structure in most society. This is because marriage creates a family which is the most basic social unit upon which society is built. Hence, both marriage and family created status roles that are sanctioned by society.

Marriage is a union in which emotional and sexual needs are full filled with the existence of father, mother, and children. According to Havilland, Prins, McBride and Walrath (2011), marriage is called matrimony or wedlock and it is a culturally recognized union between people called Couple. Starkweather and Hames (2012) defined marriage is a relationship between one or more men and one or more women recognized by the society as having a continuing claim to the right of sexual access to one another. In addition, Ibezim (2016) opined that marriage is a union of a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation. Anderson (2013) noted that marriage exists to bring a man and a woman together as husband and wife to be father and mother to any children their union produces.

The major idea in the above definitions is that marriage is done for the purpose of companionship, childbearing and sexual satisfaction, among others. However, in every social setting and culture, there are some basic norms, ideas, rules, regulations, code of conduct and belief that guides the people of the area. Notwithstanding that its definitions vary between cultures and religions marriage is an institution in which interpersonal relationship, usually sexual matters are acknowledged or sanctioned. However, for the purpose of this study, marriage is defined as a formal union between two people of the opposite sex that creates a family tie and carries legal, social, religious and emotional rights and responsibilities. For instance in some cultures, marriage is recommended or considered to be compulsory before pursuing sexual activities. Marriage on its own is good, but involving in it before due time may be detrimental to the individual.

Early marriage according to Nakpodia (2012), is an act of getting married to an individual who is not fully matured, be it male or female. Ango (2011) defined early marriage as either marriage of an adolescent girl or boy to a matured man or woman and this happens at puberty when the individual is getting matured. Molokwu (2000) observed that early marriage occurs below the age of 18years, when the individual is physically, socially, academically and emotionally immature to cope with the challenges of life. It is the act of a boy or girl (amateur) getting married to a matured man or woman and it is usually between the age of one to eighteen (1-18years). For the purpose of this study, early marriage is the marriage of an individual who is not fully matured be it male or female.

In Nigeria, people especially those in rural areas still engage in early girl child marriage because they believe that putting a girl in a family way makes her responsible and reduces the risk of engaging in sexual behaviour (Udochukwu, 2020). According to Nigeria Health Watch (2020), early marriage is a widespread practice in Nigeria, with more than a third of girls in nation ending up in child marriages and 22 million married before the age of 18. Hence, the Nigeria has the highest number of child brides in Africa.

Studies have shown that early marriage can be caused by various factors (Robin, 2014). Golube (2019) in his study observed that the causes of early girl child marriage include greed, poverty, prevention of social problems and promiscuity. Some parents give out the girl-child in marriage believing that their supposed in-law will get to solve all their problems, send their daughter to school, and provide them and their entire family with all they need.

Therefore, poverty, broken homes, family pressure, unwanted pregnancy, peer pressure, unstable homes, ignorance and cultural beliefs seem to encourage early marriage of the girl-child. This is in line with the report by Musaazi (2002) who noted that early marriage could be as a result of cultural training girls receive which pay more attention to household duties such as helping as house wife and a mother thus suppressing the vocational and educational ambitions of the girl-child. Babatunde (2014) concluded that early girl child marriage is encouraged by deeply held beliefs, traditions and religions that do necessarily

lend themselves to dissuasion through rational arguments.

Anagbogu (2005) opined that people that indulge in early marriage believe that the act decreases promiscuity among the girl child. This uninformed belief seems to place heavy societal burden on the girl-child. Nigeria Health Watch (2020) emphasized that that child marriage negatively affects and violates the fundamental rights of women and girls. However, a result of ignorance and selfish interest of the people, they forget the devastating effect early marriage has on the girl child as well as the society in general. Regrettably, the girl-child has no will power to resist the offer and rather yields to the parents' selfish and insensitive request (Nwokolo, 2010). Undoubtedly, this practice is detrimental to the wellbeing of the girl-child.

Various consequences have been attributed to the early girl-child marriage. For instance, Nwoye (2011) stated that some of the consequences of early girl child marriage are complications and death during pregnancy and child delivery, abuse and forceful sexual relationship due to their unequal power, increased risk in contracting sexual transmitted infections like human immune virus (HIV), gonorrhea, staphylococcus, cervical cancer, obstetric fistulas, premature child delivery and divorce. Divorce might occur when the child think she has come of age to make choice of what she wants or when they think and believe the person they are married to is not their spec. More so, the negative effect of this ugly trend are evident as it leads to emotional and mental distress, infidelity, intolerance school dropout, early widowhood, frustration and hatred for the man (Bala 2013). Hence, it has become imperative to proffer enduring solutions to the menace of girl-child marriage particularly in Ebonyi State, Nigeria in general.

Consequently, overcoming early girl-child marriage requires strategies for girl-child empowerment, change in social and cultural norms, adequate legal reforms and effective policy actions. With regards to this issue, the Nigerian review draft decree put the marriageable age of the girl child at 18years. United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2001) on the rights of the child recommended that children should not be separated from their parents before 18years, unless it is necessary. But despite the above recommendations, girl-child marriage is prevalent in Ebonyi State. Since, early girl-child marriage is a societal and legal problem, the need to explore effective measures for preventing the scourge cannot be overemphasized. Primped and Amadi (2011) advocated the need to adopt counselling strategies that will appeal to the conscience of the girl-child and their parents in preventing early girl-child marriage.

Egenti (2012) in her study on the premarital counselling strategies against early marriage of the girl-child discovered a striking devastating effect of early marriage on the girl-child as well as society. However, the researcher believes that with effective counselling which is been offered by professional counsellors, the problem of early girl child marriage would be nipped on board.

Counselling is a helping service which involves trained therapist and client(s) working together to understand the clients' problem and overcoming it (Oguzie, Oguzie, Nnadi, Mokwelu & Obi, 2019). Ifelunni (2013) defined counselling as a personal relationship between a counsellor and the counsellee in which the counsellor helps the counsellee to learn satisfying attitudes and behaviour necessary for solving his or her problems. Practically, counselling is usually a face to face, and one on one confidential interaction in which the counsellor helps the client to understand and overcome their concerns in a confidential and threat free environment.

A critical look at the above lines of definitions indicates that counselling may serve as a veritable tool for eradicating the problem early girl-child marriage. Nwokolo (2010) emphasized that counselling against early marriage of the girl-child is very necessary if our nascent democracy would move forward. Since the ultimate goal of counselling is to develop the human person into a well-adjusted, efficient and productive individual, the present study therefore sought to determine the counselling strategies for preventing early girl-child marriage in Ebonyi State.

Purpose of Study

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the counselling strategies for preventing early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State. Specifically, the study determined the:

1. Causes of early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State.
2. Consequences of the early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State.
3. Counselling strategies for preventing early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the causes of early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State?
2. What are the consequences of the early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State?
3. What are the counselling strategies for preventing early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State?

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted descriptive survey design. According to Nworgu (2015), a survey research design is one in which a group of people or items are studied by collecting and analyzing data from only a few group of people or items considered to be the representative sample of the entire group. Descriptive survey study involves collection of data and describing in a systematic manner the characteristics, features or facts about a given population.

Study Population

The study was carried out in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State. The population of the study was 250 Counsellors, and the entire population was used for the study because of its manageability.

Data Collection Tool & Validity

The instrument used in collecting data for the study was a self-structured questionnaire titled: Counselling Strategies for Preventing Early Girl Child Marriage Questionnaire (CSPEGCMQ). It is a 24 items questionnaire designed on a 4point likert type scale of: Strongly Agreed (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD). The instrument was face validated by three experts, two in Department of Guidance and Counselling and one in the Department of Measurement and Evaluation, all from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The instruments was validated by three research experts made up of two in Department of Guidance and Counselling, and in Department Educational Measurement and Evaluation all in Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State. The experts examined the instrument in the terms of relevance, appropriateness of the items and made necessary corrections which were affected by the researchers and the corrected version of the instrument was used for the data collection. Cronbach alpha statistic was used to test for the stability and internal consistency of the instruments which yielded a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.78.

Technique and Analysis

Data for the study was collected through direct delivery method (DDM) of the instrument to the respondents with the help of three research assistants. Arithmetic mean was used for data analysis. A benchmark mean of 2.50 was used for making decisions. The decision rule was that any response item that scored a mean of 2.50 and above was considered as having attracted positive responses, while items that scored less than 2.50 were regarded as having attracted negative responses.

Presentation of Results

Research questions 1: What are the causes of early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State?

Table 1: *Mean rating on the causes of early girl-child marriage.*

S/N	ITEMS	\bar{X}	Remark
1.	Family pressure from father, mother, siblings and other relatives.	2.83	Accepted
2.	Poverty or lack of finance in the girl's family and harsh situation.	2.65	Accepted
3.	Unwanted pregnancy by the family and the girl child	3.02	Accepted
4.	Conspiracy; parents force a man on their girl child who has no choice but to adhere	3.11	Accepted
5.	Broken homes; where the girl child is left at the mercy of the parents	2.88	Accepted
6.	Peer pressure; Trying to belong, that is marrying because their friends and age mates are getting married	3.13	Accepted
7.	Virginity syndrome; because of cultural attachment to virginity, the girls marry quickly to maintain it.	2.91	Accepted
8.	Unhappy home, where there is persistent discord in the girl's family	3.01	Accepted
9.	Misconceptions; if the girl child does not marry early, her beauty will Fade	2.53	Accepted
10.	Ignorance; lack of knowledge on the part of the parents and the girl child	2.35	Unaccepted

In table one, only item 10 obtained mean rating below 2.50. The remaining items had mean rating above 2.50. This shows that the rest of the items are causes of early girl-child marriage, except item 10.

Research Questions 2: What are the consequences of early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State?

Table 2: *Mean rating on consequences of early girl-child marriage*

S/N	ITEMS	\bar{X}	Remark
11.	Cervical cancer disease.	2.80	Accepted
12.	Early widowhood; where the girl child marries an old man who dies sooner or later.	2.59	Accepted
13.	School dropout; the girl is unable to continue her education due to marriage.	2.95	Accepted
14.	The girl hates the man as soon as she discovers that she made the wrong choice.	3.14	Accepted
15.	The girl looks for sex outside the matrimonial home.	3.25	Accepted
16.	Divorce due to immaturity.	3.12	Accepted
17.	Chances of fibroid because of early child birth.	2.84	Accepted
18.	Intolerance due to difference in age.	3.14	Accepted
19.	Frustration sets in.	2.81	Accepted

In table two above, the respondents rated all the items above 2.50. This indicate that they agreed that cervical cancer disease, school dropout, hatred for the men, sex outside marriage, early widowhood, frustration, intolerance and divorce are all consequences of early girl-child marriage.

Research questions 3: What are the counselling strategies of early girl-child marriage in Afikpo Education Zone of Ebonyi State?

Table 3: *Mean rating on the counselling strategies for preventing early girl child marriage.*

S/N	ITEMS	\bar{X}	Remark
20.	Developing warm relationship with the girl-child to help her discuss her problems which may be educational, vocational or social/personal problems	2.80	Accepted
21.	Seminars and workshops should be organized to explain to the girl child the consequences of early marriage.	3.01	Accepted
22.	Parents should be more enlightened of the girl-child behaviour in school and at home	3.05	Accepted
23.	Counsellors should use rapport and a friendly strategy to encourage the girl-child to study properly	2.94	Accepted
24.	Counsellors should encourage the girl that her future is in her hands, so that she should focus more on education in order to reach her optimal height	3.08	Accepted

Table three had all the respondents rated items 20 to 24 above 2.50. This indicates that all the items are among the counselling strategies that could be used to empower the girl-child to shun early marriage.

Discussion

The result as presented in table 1, should that in the respondents opinion family pressure, poverty, unwanted pregnancy, conspiracy, broken home, peer pressure and unhappy home are all causes of early girl child marriage. This supports the assertion of UNICEF (2001) and the findings of Oyedepo (2011). The implication of these statements Indicates that parents have important role to play in the girl child education. In table 2, the respondents rated all items as consequences of early girl child marriage, cervical cancer, early widowhood, school dropout, hatred for men, sex outsiders marriage, frustration, intolerance and divorce are the consequences of early girl child marriage. This is in line with Ango (2011) and Baba (2013) who highlighted the consequences in their own study earlier.

Finally, the result presented in table 3, showed that the respondents rated all counselling strategies, educating the child on the equal opportunity and social attainments, parents and counsellors showing affection to the girl child to enable her share her problems in all areas of life, counsellors using her personal experience to counsel the girl child, helping the girl child understand the intricacies in early marriage, organizing seminars, workshops to educate the girl child on the disadvantages of early marriage, letting the girl child know that her bright future is in her hands. This finding confirms the advocacy of Anagbogu (2005) and Molokwu (2015) who suggested the need to adopt counselling strategies that will appeal to the girl child to shun this menace. This is because the counsellors have acquired the necessary skills and techniques for premarital counselling earlier in the years of her training.

Conclusion

Counselling to prevent early girl child marriage is very necessary if our nascent democracy would move forward. This is because early marriage of the girl child creates gender imbalance in the educational, social and political sectors of the nation amongst others. Finally, if the counselling strategies are imbibed by the girls, then early girl child marriage in Ebonyi State will drastically end.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and the discussion that followed, the following recommendations were made:

1. Guidance Counsellors should organize public enlightenment programs in form of seminars and

workshops where the people will be sensitized on the need to discourage early marriage.

2. The counselling strategies identified in this study should be used by counsellors in discouraging early girl child marriage.
3. Counsellors should liaise with women associations in fighting the menace of early girl child marriage in Ebony State.
4. Education planners should include sex education in the school curriculum for proper orientation of the girl child.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflict of interest.


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