

23 SOCIO-CULTURAL, ECONOMICAL AND ORGANISATIONAL DETERMINANTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN CAMEROON

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INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a global problem that cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. The practice has decreased globally over the last thirty years, although it remains common in rural areas of Cameroon and amongst the poorest of the poor. In Africa, 42% of girls are married before the age of 18, and as such they are often socially neglected, with little education, low self-esteem and no skills and opportunities for personal development. Hence, these girls are trapped in the vicious cycle of ignorance, poverty and disease.

The biggest number of child brides resides in South Asia, but nations with higher rates of early and forced marriages are in Africa.² In fact, of the 41 nations with prevalence of over 30% globally, 30 are in Africa. Therefore, child marriage is predominant across Africa, not just Cameroon. Plan International, an international NGO, states that 10 million girls under the age of 18 marry each year. BBC News has reported data from 22 Sub-Saharan African countries with the highest rates of teenage girls either married or cohabiting. These countries include: Mali, Niger, Uganda, Burkina Faso and Cameroon. Marriage rates for 15 to 19-year-old girls in Cameroon were 41%, the fifth highest of 22 African countries surveyed.³ However, Niger is said to be the country with the highest prevalence rate of child marriage at 75% of all girls.⁴ It is estimated that 14 million girls under the age of 18 marry each year and by 2020, 142 million girls will be married by their eighteenth birthday, if current trends continue.⁵

Child marriage in Magba (in Noun Division in the West Region of Cameroon) has become a cultural norm acceptable to most men and women, and it is reinforced through various values and practices which are detrimental to the well-being of women and girls. One such practice is the rite of passage from childhood to maturity, which is not determined by the age of the girl, but by menstruation, breast

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 - 2 UNICEF. 2005. *Early Marriages: A Harmful Traditional Practice: A Statistical Exploration*. Online at: https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_26024.html
 - 3 Monekosso T. 2001. "Africa's forced marriages", *BBC News*, 8 March.
 - 4 Jongizulu S. 2012. *Causes and consequences of early marriage in Lusikwini*, MA Thesis, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, 24.
 - 5 UNICEF. 2012. *Partnering with Religious Communities for Children*. Online at: https://www.unicef.org/eapro/Partnering_with_Religious_Communities_for_Children.pdf

development and physical appearance. Secondly, the practice of fattening, where girls of marriageable age who are not mature physically are secluded in a room and fed with nutritious food for about two weeks or more so that they can grow fat. Child marriage in Magba is therefore considered normal and is continuously carried out due to ignorance.⁶

In many communities where child marriage is practised, there is son preference. Girls are seen as an economic burden in their families. That explains why they are given out for marriage at a tender age to ease economic hardship by transferring the “burden” to the husband’s family. Patriarchal values and the desire to control female sexuality also underscore the existence of child marriage, even in the twenty-first century. The patriarchal system dictates how a girl should behave and dress and with whom to interact without a corresponding influence for the boy. Hence families closely guard their daughters’ sexuality and virginity in order to protect the family honour. Girls who have relationships or become pregnant outside of marriage are shamed for bringing dishonour to the family.⁷

Many communities therefore practise child marriage because it is a traditional practice that has happened for generations. But harmful traditional practices like child marriage are often linked to each other. In southern Ethiopia, child marriage follows the practice of female genital mutilation, which is a rite of passage to womanhood. Traditional practices often go unquestioned because they have been part of a community’s life and identity for a very long time. Even though, Graça Machel, widow of Nelson Mandela, postulates that “traditions are made by people and people can unmake them.”⁸

Socio-cultural and customary laws perpetuate child marriage even in the twenty-first century in Cameroon, ignoring the fact that child marriage is a violation of human rights, compromising the development of girls and often resulting in early pregnancy, social isolation, little or no education, poor vocational training and skills, and loss of self-esteem, such that their voices may never be heard. This reinforces the gendered nature of poverty – the “feminisation of poverty”. Boys are also affected by child marriage, but the impact is severe on girls. This is compounded by the fact that Cameroon has not adhered to Article 6(b) of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women (Maputo Protocol), which states a minimum age of marriage at 18 for both boys and girls.⁹

6 Achu FN and Asonge NA. 2014. “Child marriage in rural Cameroon: The case of Magba in West Cameroon”, *International Research Journal of Business Management* 7(1):50-59.

7 United Nations Population Fund. 2012. *Marrying too young: End child marriage*. New York: UNFPA. Online at: <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MarryingTooYoung.pdf>

8 International Centre for Research on Women and Girls Not Brides. 2015. “Taking action to address child marriage, the role of different sectors: Economic and workforce development brief”. Online at: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/4.-Addressing-child-marriage-Econ-growth.pdf>

9 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, *adopted by* the 2nd Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Union, Maputo, CAB/LEG/66.6 (Sept. 13, 2000); reprinted in 1 Afr. Hum. Rts. L.J. 40, *entered into force*

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Religion is often used as a defence mechanism to sustain child marriage in Cameroon and elsewhere. This explains why it is predominant among Muslims in the northern part of Cameroon, where young girls are still sent into marriages with traditional rulers, *lamibes*, who may have ten or fifteen wives. Child marriage is also practised among the Bacheve, Oliti and Assumbo clans in Akwaya, a division in the Southwest Region where girls under the tender age of five years, without their knowledge, are faced with the reality of child marriage at about the age of 10 when their supposed suitors come for them.

However, the Cameroon Association for the Protection and Education of the child (CAPEC), in collaboration with the social welfare commission of the Mamfe Diocese and including local traditional and civil authorities, are addressing this harmful practice. Because of the importance attached to customs and traditions, laws protecting women are often not respected, as girls are married off by their families by the age of 12. According to local tradition, the future and dignity of a girl in Cameroon is secured only in her marital home. Girls are advised to marry at a young age and consequently forced to finish their schooling early. The negative effects of early marriage in many communities extend beyond just the girls concerned and affect the children to whom they gave birth.¹⁰ Young girls are more often victims of vesico vaginal fistula (VVF) and are vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS and STDs from their older husbands, along with experiencing unwanted pregnancies, premature births and other pregnancy related complications which may result in death.

Girls drop out of school to get married and a few make a decision to marry after getting pregnant, though some succumb to parental and communal pressure to be married off.¹¹ Orphanhood is increasingly pushing the girl child into early marriage to be supported by the husband, though in many instances this turns out not to be the case. National efforts toward challenging and eradicating harmful practices, such as early marriage, affecting girls' education requires the broad community involvement and coordination among community-based institutions, including key decision-making bodies, such as regional councils as well as institutions at grass root level such as community associations, councils of elders, religious leaders, youth centres, school clubs and other local community organisations.¹²

The study in this chapter examines the socio-cultural, economic, political, religious and organisational determinants of child marriage and its attendant effects on girl's education, health and development. Other sections of the chapter include an

Nov. 25, 2005. Online at: <http://www.achpr.org/instruments/women-protocol> [hereinafter AU Women's Protocol].

10 UNFPA, *Partnering with Religious Communities for Children*.

11 Andiwo DA. 2002. "The girl under siege". Paper presented at the meeting of the Women's Congress, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda.

12 Emirie G. 2004. "Society-State Relations and Contemporary Global Issues", Unpublished Modular Teaching Material for CvEt.122 course at Kotebe College of Teachers Education (KCTE), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

introduction; a conceptual framework; child marriage in international law, national law and policy; social and economic determinants of child marriage; the effects of child marriage; child marriage a tool for protection and security; socio-cultural and religious values of child marriage; child marriage and coping strategy in Cameroon. It concludes by examining and proposing recommendations for ways in which the practice of child marriage can be addressed.

CHILD MARRIAGE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Child marriage is a gendered phenomenon. It affects more girls than boys and is perpetuated by gender inequality and unbalanced power relationships at all levels of the society. Nigerian Law professor Carol Arinze-Umobi, defines child marriage as a union of an adult male and a girl less than eighteen years as husband and wife.¹³ In her view, marriage to her is a contract where the two or more parties create obligations that are enforceable. However, in child marriage this is not the case; the consent of the child is ignored and her parents enter into agreement for her. In the analysis of a desktop review on West Africa and Cameroon conducted by two researchers Louise Wetheridge and Laetitia Antonowicz,¹⁴ child marriage is defined as a formal or informal union, including legal, religious or customary marriage of anyone under the age of 18. Noteworthy is the fact that child marriage also constitutes forced marriage, in recognition that children under 18 are not able to make a fully informed choice about whether to marry; thus, such marriages must be viewed within a context of force and coercion.

The literature on child marriage reveals the lack of a universally accepted definition for the age of marriage. In other words, one of the difficulties revolving around the understanding of child marriage is with regard to its definition. The concept is not as simple and straightforward as it may appear. Attempts to define child marriage raise two principal questions: What constitutes “marriage”? What constitutes “child marriage”?¹⁵ The UN defines a child as anyone under the age of 18, but there is no single definition of the term “child” worldwide, and there are variations within countries. For example, across the United States, different states have different definitions of a “child”. According to the cultures of many countries, a girl is only a child until she begins menstruation. That is why, in many countries, child marriage can be interpreted as the marriage of a girl who has not yet reached puberty. Given the different definitions of who is a child, some organisations prefer to use the term “early or forced marriage”. A forced marriage in this context refers

13 Arinze-Umobi DC. 2008. *Domestic violence against women in Nigeria: a legal anatomy*. Onitsha: Folmech Printing and Publications and Pub. Coy Ltd.

14 Wetheridge L and Antonowicz L. 2014. “Child marriage in West Africa and Cameroon: A Desk Review”. Plan WARO. Online at: <https://www.frauenrechte.de/online/images/downloads/fruehehen/Plan-WARO-Child-Marriage.pdf>

15 UNICEF. 2001. “Early marriage: Child spouses”, *Innocenti Digest* 7. Online at: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/291-early-marriage-child-spouses.html>

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to a marriage “conducted without the valid consent of one or both parties and is a marriage in which duress – whether physical or emotional – is a factor”.¹⁶

John Lewis, an anthropologist, has argued that,¹⁷ marriage was not based on romance of affection as it is today. In primitive communities, an unmarried person as old as seventeen or eighteen was seen as inadequate, irrespective of whether the person was a boy or girl. The lower the economy, the more necessary it was that everyone be married, so as to function effectively in productive work. The young began participating in general adult activities at an early age, learning the technique of hunting and fishing or women’s work. These activities prepared both boys and girls for marriage. Marriage was based on reciprocal obligations between two clans, validated by economic exchanges and mutual services and sometimes accompanied by magical and religious ceremonies. This correlates with the anthropological definition of marriage as an institution based on economic organisation, concerned with division of labour, care of women during pregnancy and nursing and the protection and education of children.¹⁸ The reasons why girls are married are diverse, and parents sometimes believe that through marriage, they are protecting their daughters and increasing their economic opportunities. In this study, the concept of child marriage refers to a situation where a child under the age of 18 enters into marriage.¹⁹

CHILD MARRIAGE IN INTERNATIONAL LAW

The Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC), Article 1, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Article 2, both define a child as a human being below the age of eighteen years.²⁰ Practising child marriage in Cameroon in the twenty-first century is a blatant infringement of the rights of the child stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of which Cameroon is a signatory. Apart from the CRC, Cameroon is also a signatory to other international conventions as indicated below. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that “Marriage should be entered only with the free and full consent

16 United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2006. “Forced Marriage: A wrong not a right”. Online at: <http://rightsofwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Response-to-A-wrong-not-a-right.pdf>

17 Lewis J. 1982. *Anthropology made simple*. London: William Heinemann.

18 Lewis, *Anthropology made simple*.

19 The study examines secondary data, desktop review of literature from books, articles and documentary analysis of some case files relating to child marriage in the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and the Family and other NGOs and CSOs dealing with sexuality and violence against women.

20 Convention on the Rights of the Child, G.A. res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), entered into force Sept. 2, 1990, art 1; African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990), entered into force Nov. 29, 1999, art 2.

of the intending spouses.”²¹ Therefore, consent cannot be free and full when one of the parties involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) states that, “The betrothal and marriage of a child shall have no legal effect and all necessary action, including legislation shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage.”²²

Child marriage was also identified by the Pan-African Forum Against the Sexual Exploitation of Children as a type of commercial sexual exploitation of children.²³ Article 6 on the Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age of Marriage and Registration of Marriage builds on many existing human rights instruments,²⁴ the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)²⁵ and CEDAW. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women (Maputo Protocol) in Africa requires the consent of both parties to the marriage at a minimum age of 18 and calls for the registration of marriages in order to be legally recognised.²⁶ These provisions pose a challenge to African states, many of which have personal law systems that allow marriage before the age of 18, especially for girls. Moreover, given the inequality of bargaining power between men and women and fathers and daughters, it is likely that girl children will continue to be married against their will. Of the states participating in the drafting of the Maputo Protocol, only Tunisia and Sudan placed on record their objections to having 18 as the minimum age of marriage – they were the only states telling the truth about child marriage.²⁷

Marriage is a rite of passage to adulthood that calls for celebration. It provides an opportunity for social prestige and demonstrates to friends and family that a

21 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. res 217A(III), U.N. Doc. A/810 at 71 (1948), art 16(2).

22 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, G.A. res 34/180, 34 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 46) at 193, U.N. Doc. A/34/46, *entered into force* Sept. 3, 1981, art 16(2).

23 United Nations General Assembly. “Pan-African Forum for Children. Africa Fit for Children. The African Common Position as Africa’s Contribution to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children. Declaration and Plan Of Action”, PANAF/FORUM/CHD/DOC.10/REV.2. Online at: http://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/cap_children_2002.pdf

24 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, opened for signature and ratification by G.A. res 1763 A (XVII) of 7 November 1962, *entered into force* Dec. 9, 1964, in accordance with art 6.

25 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, G.A. res 2200 A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, *entered into force* Mar. 23, 1976.

26 AU Women’s Protocol.

27 Banda F. 2006. “Blazing a trail: The African Protocol on Women’s Rights comes into force”, *Journal of African Law* 50(1):72-84.

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milestone has been reached.²⁸ Moreover, marriage helps adults and not children to stabilise their personality, gain self-esteem and personal security. Unfortunately, the fundamental human rights of girls are compromised in child marriage. A young girl's right to exercise consent, recognised as a principle of law in Roman times and enshrined in international instruments, is abrogated.²⁹ Parents and heads of families make marital choices for daughters with little regard for personal implications.

Various solutions have been proposed, such as increasing the marriage age to 18 or even 21, making education compulsory until the age of 18 and ensuring that resources are in place, for example, by giving parents grants to encourage them to keep their girls in particular, in school, criminalising early and forced marriage and holding any marriage before the age of 18 to be null and void. Registration, as a solution, has the triple benefit of checking to ensure consent, that children under 18 are not being married and of course of providing legal certainty about the existence of the marriage. However, the vast majority of marriages on the continent are not registered, and there is little state involvement because marriage is regarded as a private arrangement between two families. It may be that an approach that promotes registration, but does not penalise those who fail to register, may constitute a more realistic approach. It would be unfortunate if an instrument designed for the protection of women led to their legal disenfranchisement.³⁰

CHILD MARRIAGE IN NATIONAL LAW AND POLICY

In Cameroon, the Civil Status Registration Ordinance (CSRO) states, "No marriage may take place if the girl is younger than 15 or the boy younger than 18, unless the president of the Republic grants an exemption for a serious reason. Only the president of the Republic may determine if the reason is serious."³¹ The practice of giving away girls for marriage before the age of 15, after which they must start reproducing children, is prevalent among certain ethnic groups in Cameroon. The principal reasons for this practice are the girls' virginity and the bride price. It is obvious from the above law that there is a gender disparity between the age to marry for girls and for boys in Cameroon (minimum age for girls is 15 and 18 for boys), which is contrary norm of equality for both boys and girls in marriage contained in the Maputo Protocol, to which Cameroon is a signatory.

28 Cherlin AJ. 2004. "The deinstitutionalisation of American marriage", *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66:848-861.

29 UNICEF. 2012. *Partnering with Religious Communities for Children*. Online at: <http://www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/files/partnering-w-religious-communities-for-children-unicef.pdf>

30 Banda, "Blazing a trail: The African Protocol on Women's Rights comes into force".

31 Republic of Cameroon, Civil Status Registration Ordinance, Article 52 of Order No. 81-02 of 29 June 1981.

In addition to the gender disparity in national registration, there is a huge cloud of confusion emanating from the fact that the Cameroon Penal Code criminalises forced marriage in stating:

- (1) Whoever compels anyone to marry shall be punished with imprisonment for from five to ten years and with fine of from CFAF 25,000 to CFAF 1,000,000.
- (2) Where the victim is under the age of 18, the punishment may not be less than 2 years imprisonment, whatever the mitigating circumstances.
- (3) Whoever gives in marriage a boy or a girl under 18 shall be punished as under the two last foregoing subsections.
- (4) Upon conviction the court may deprive the offender of parental power and disqualify him from being the guardian or curator of any person for the time prescribed by section 31(4) of this code.³²

How can this section be effectively implemented when the CSRO sets the minimum age at 15 for girls. There is a need for a harmonisation of these laws, unless Cameroon does not view child marriage as forced marriage.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

It is estimated that the impact of early marriage on literacy and education attainment in Africa is high. In the preferred specification of the model, each additional year of early marriage reduces the probability of literacy among women who married early by 5.7 percentage points, the probability of having at least some secondary schooling by 5.6 points, and the probability of secondary school completion by 3.5 points. In fact, one of the causes of child marriage is lack of money to further and complete children's education. Therefore, child marriage is seen as an opportunity for girls to continue schooling through their husbands.³³ According to Carol Arinze-Umobi, in Nigeria, virginity at marriage is considered absolutely essential.³⁴ Therefore, girls are married off at extremely young ages, frequently to men who are older than them. Child brides end up with a high rate of illiteracy. The time they would have been using to go to school is spent at home as housewife.

Child marriage is associated with lower education and economic status of girls. Child brides are less able than older or unmarried girls to access schooling and income generating opportunities or benefit from education or economic development programmes. Girls already in school are often forced to terminate their

32 Cameroon Penal Code. Law No. 65-LF of 12 November 1965 and Law No. 67-LF-1 of 12 June 1967, revised in 2016, sec 356.

33 Arinze-Umobi, *Domestic violence against women in Nigeria*. The above assertion suggests the fact that child marriage is used as a weapon to prevent premarital sex. Many societies prize virginity before marriage and this can manifest itself in a number of practices designed to protect a girl from unsanctioned sexual activity.

34 ICRW. 2014. "Literature review: drivers of delayed marriage and pregnancy". UNICEF: WARO. Unpublished.

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education when they marry early. Therefore, child marriage excludes or prevents further education of girls and reinforces poverty.³⁵ Limited mobility, household responsibilities, pregnancy, raising children and other social restrictions for married girls prevent them from taking advantage of education or work opportunities. Education is widely credited as the most significant factor for delaying girls' age of marriage.³⁶

World Bank experts Minh Cong Nguyen and Quentin Wodon use the contemporaneous and past incidence of child marriage in the area where a girl lives as instruments of measurement, and also find that in Africa each year early marriage reduces the probability of literacy by 5.6 percentage points, and the probability of secondary school completion by 6.5 points, with the impact probability of having at least some secondary education being slightly larger.³⁷ Finally, using data from India and considering measures toward the fulfillment of the right to education recently adopted there, Nguyen and Wodon use determine that each year of early marriage reduces the fulfillment of the right to education measure by about 3.2 percentage points out of the 100% that would indicate successful achievement of the right to education.

In Burkina Faso, like Cameroon, multiple socio-cultural and religious factors contribute to the persistence of child marriage, but these differences depend on the area or ethnic community considered. In some areas, the root causes of child marriage include gender roles and social expectations, prevailing conceptions about Islamic law, and the fear of pregnancy before marriage. In other areas the cost of schooling plays a larger role.³⁸ This is fundamental in the Northern regions of Cameroon where religion and culture prepares the girl child for marriage rather than schooling to keep her chaste.

THE EFFECTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Early marriage has serious health, economic and social implications for young brides, for the well-being of the family, and for society as a whole. Early marriage

35 Save the Children. 2004. *Children Having Children: State of the World's Mothers 2004*. Westport, CT: Save the Children. Online at: http://www.savethechildren.org/atf/cf/%7B9def2ebeb-10ae-432c-9bd0-df91d2eba74a%7D/SOWM_2004_final.pdf

36 Mathur S, Greene M and Malhotra A. 2003. *Too Young to Wed: The lives, rights and health of young married girls*. Washington, DC: ICRW. Online at: <https://www.icrw.org/publications/too-young-to-wed-2>

37 Nguyen MC and Wodon Q. 2012. "Estimating the Impact of Child Marriage on Literacy and Education Attainment in Africa, mimeo". Washington, DC: The World Bank. Online at: <http://allinschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/OOSC-2014-QW-Child-Marriage-final.pdf>

38 Gemignani R and Wodon Q. 2014. "Child Marriage and Girls' Education Burkina Faso: A comparison across Three Communities", in Wodon Q (ed). *Child Marriage and Education in Africa*. Washington, DC: UNICEF. Online at: <http://allinschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/OOSC-2014-QW-Child-Marriage-final.pdf>

poses many dangers to young girls' health, which includes complications during early pregnancy and multiple births, which can lead to reproductive health risks, especially obstetric fistula and infant and maternal death. Child brides have less prenatal care and are more susceptible to suffer from anaemia than adults, which greatly increases the risk and complications linked to pregnancy and eclampsia than women who wait until the age of 20 to bear children.³⁹ The negative effects of early marriage extend beyond the girls concerned and affect the children to whom they give birth.⁴⁰ Early pregnancy can have harmful consequences for young mothers and their babies. Babies of mothers younger than 18 tend to be premature and have low body weight, and such babies are more likely to die in the first year of life.

Obstetric fistula, a constant leakage of urine following early and difficult childbirth, is among the worst of the non-fatal health outcomes. Young girls suffering from fistulas are abandoned by their husbands and become social outcasts from their communities. Complications from pregnancy can affect psychosocial well-being, for example, leading limited autonomy and decision-making ability and reduced opportunities to develop psychological and social skills necessary to make strategic decisions and life choices in young brides. Young mothers' abandonment, especially if they become social outcasts due to reproductive health problems resulting from early pregnancy complications, further reduces access to educational opportunities and other life choices. It can also lead to married girls' denial of access to education, lack of concentration if they do enroll in school and to dropping out school. In general, lack of access to formal schooling and life skills training for girls and women has negative repercussions in the economic and social life of their communities.

Early marriage also exacerbates the spread of HIV/AIDS and STDs from older husbands, as well as leading to unwanted pregnancies, premature births and other pregnancy-related complications which may result to death. In her novel, *Born before her time*, Cameroonian writer Margaret Afuh tells the story of a young girl forced into marriage with an old man of about sixty years. When the girl refused to have sexual intercourse with her supposed husband, her own parents tied her legs open for him to have sex with her forcefully.⁴¹ Spousal age difference reinforces the powerlessness of the girl, because older husbands of child brides are sexually experienced, and having had more sexual partners in their lifetime increases the chances that they may be HIV positive. The age difference between the child bride and her spouse is further compounded by power imbalance between women and men and makes open communication about sexual relations, including negotiating condom use, difficult.⁴²

39 Mathur S, Greene M and Malhotra A. 2003. *Too Young to Wed: The lives, rights and health of young married girls*. Washington, DC: ICRW. Online at: <https://www.icrw.org/publications/too-young-to-wed-2>

40 UNICEF, *Partnering with religious communities for children*.

41 LUKMEF-Cameroon. 2015. *Break the Silence: Community Manual on Ending Gender Based Violence*. Limbe: LUKMEF.

42 Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law. 2009. *The impact of the Protocol on the rights of women in Africa on violence against women in six selected Southern African countries: An*

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Child marriage robs a girl of her childhood – time necessary to develop physically, emotionally and psychologically. Early marriage inflicts great emotional stress, as the young woman is removed from her parents' home to that of her husband and in-laws.⁴³ Her husband, who will invariably be many years her senior, will have little in common with a young teenager. It is with this strange man that she has to develop an intimate emotional and physical relationship. She is obliged to have intercourse, although she might not be developed physically. Child brides also perform heavy amounts of domestic work, being under pressure to demonstrate fertility and responsible for raising children while still children themselves.

CHILD MARRIAGE: A TOOL FOR PROTECTION AND SECURITY

Parents often see child marriage as protective and loving and not a form of abuse, greed and neglect as most studies suggest. According to Fareda Banda, a Law lecturer, in insecure regions and nations, such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Niger, political insecurity results physical threats and economic insecurity, especially for girls, in ways that become pressing challenges for parents to combat.⁴⁴ This is especially true in circumstances of conflict, terrorism and war.

Aisha's case is a case in point. A *Christian Post* reporter, Stoyan Zaimov reports the case of Aisha, a 14-year-old girl kidnapped by the Islamic radical group Boko Haram in Nigeria and forced to marry one of its fighters.⁴⁵ The young girl narrates her story thus: "I was taken from my home when my town of Bama was set on fire by Boko Haram. They put the gun to my father's head and set they would kill him if he didn't let me go. Then they took me." She was sexually abused and forced to marry a Boko Haram radical while in captivity. In such a context, most parents will prefer that their daughters are married off early to somebody they know will protect and guarantee security than to a complete stranger in societies under extreme pressure. This is also one way to ensure that a girl is "protected" or placed firmly under male control, that she is submissive to her husband and works hard for her in-laws, that the children she bears will be "legitimate" and that bonds of affection between couples do not undermine the family unit.⁴⁶

Advocacy Tool. Online at: http://www.chr.up.ac.za/chr_old/centre_projects/gender/Violence%20against%20women%20for%20website.pdf

43 LUKMEF, *Break the Silence*, 22.

44 Banda F. 2015. "Gender Equality and Family Laws in Africa", United Nations Expert Group Meeting, 14-15 May. Online at: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm15/Bandapaper.pdf>

45 Zaimov S. 2017. "14 Y-O Pregnant Girl Who Escaped Boko Haram Sees Unborn Child as a 'Gift from God'", *The Christian Post*, 8 April.

46 UNICEF, "Early marriage: Child spouses".

During wars and conflicts, parents and guardians resort to child marriage as a protective mechanism or survival strategy.⁴⁷ These children are sometimes married off to warlords or other authorities. Natural disasters like flooding in the North Cameroon may lead to child marriage in circumstances of abject poverty. Parents feel that their children will be better off and safer with a male guardian. For example, in conflict torn Uganda and Somalia, some families married their daughters to militia members in order to defend family order or “secure” protection for themselves and their girl.⁴⁸ In such circumstance, it is evident that parents marry their daughters young because they feel it is in their best interest and to ensure their daughters’ safety in areas where girls are at a high risk of harassment, physical or sexual assault and humanitarian crises.

CHILD MARRIAGE, SOCIO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUES

Traditionally, the families in Cameroon exercised strong control over love affairs, relationships and marriage. Marriages were mutual contracts drawn up for the mutual interest of the parents or extended family involved, and romantic love was accorded an insignificant place in marriage. Social class, background, religion, and ethnicity were taken into account as criteria by parents selecting their children’s spouse. “In many cases the prospective partners were not acquainted with each other, and in many cases they were betrothed in childhood. Girls could live with the bridegroom’s family, where she was trained to assume her role of a wife and mother at puberty.”⁴⁹ The expression of sexuality was traditionally supposed to happen in marriage for girls.

A priest representing the Ethiopian Orthodox Church argued that “These days with Western ideas spreading everywhere girls stay unmarried as late as 30. It is very scientific and modern but in our church it is prohibited. Such girls are neither clean nor blessed.”⁵⁰ Tradition, religious and cultural practices treat girls/women as commodities good only for the kitchen. Because of the importance attached to customs and traditions, laws protecting women are often not respected, as girls are married off by their families by the age of 12 with the government of Cameroon paying little or no attention.

Despite the provisions of the Constitution of Cameroon, the supreme law of the country, which that guarantees the inalienable and sacred rights of “all human beings without distinction of race, religion, sex, belief”, there is overt discrimination against women in Cameroon. There is lack of will on the part of the government to instill a culture of gender equality, as stipulated by the constitution. Women are

47 Save the Children, *Children Having Children: State of the World’s Mothers 2004*.

48 Banda, “Gender Equality and Family Laws in Africa”.

49 Getnet T. 2006. *Bleak prospects: Young men, sexuality & HIV/AIDS in an Ethiopian Town*. Leiden: African Studies Centre.

50 Getnet, *Bleak prospects: Young men, sexuality & HIV/AIDS in an Ethiopian Town*.

23. Socio-cultural, economical and organisational determinants of child marriage

constantly deprived of opportunities to empower and liberate themselves from the constant dependency on men – a practice that has been ongoing for several generations.⁵¹

It is sad to note that “the cultural and religious foundations of the people establish a clear-cut hierarchy between men and women” by restricting men and women from sharing the same privileges, especially with regards to customary matters.⁵² Although the Constitution guarantees equal rights for all Cameroonian people, discriminatory customary laws and traditional practices which violate the rights of women and girls remain acceptable and enforced by the courts despite other legislative enactments to the contrary – no wonder the discrimination in the minimum age for marriage for girls. There is need for political will, including among religious leaders, whose focus is basically on sexual purity – but, interestingly, only among girls. This acts as a spur for parents to marry their daughters off early under pain of being spoiled.⁵³

Louise Wetheridge and Laetitia Antonowicz indicated that Islamic countries and communities with majority Muslim populations tend to have higher rates of child marriage.⁵⁴ Similarly, Siziwe Jongizulu⁵⁵ posits that more than 60% of women are married before 18 in Mali, Cote d’Ivoire, Niger, Chad, and Central African Republic, which have majority or significant minority Muslim populations.⁵⁶ According to Carol Arinze-Umobi, among the Muslims in Nigeria, “The consent of the bride to be is immaterial, as the Muslim law had made provision for fathers to validly contract marriages on behalf of their virgin daughters without their consent, age not considered.”⁵⁷ Child marriage is, however, practised in Christian, Hindu and secular countries, suggesting that child marriage is not linked only to one religion globally.⁵⁸

CHILD MARRIAGE AND COPING STRATEGY IN CAMEROON

Organising projects to address issues pertaining to child marriage and girls’ formal schooling at the local level requires an integrated and collaborative effort of the government, the local community, the local school, and civil society organisations concerned with tackling major barriers to girls’ formal education. It also requires

51 Galega S and Tumnde M. 2004. “Reversing decades of gender injustices in Cameroon”, in Mbaku and Takougang (eds). *The leadership challenge in Africa: Cameroon under Paul Biya*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

52 LUKMEF, *Break the Silence*, 22.

53 Banda, “Gender Equality and Family Laws in Africa”.

54 Wetheridge and Antonowicz, *Child marriage in West Africa and Cameroon*.

55 Jongizulu, *Causes and consequences of early marriage in Lusikwini*.

56 Wetheridge and Antonowicz, *Child marriage in West Africa and Cameroon*.

57 Arinze-Umobi, *Domestic violence against women in Nigeria*.

58 Wetheridge and Antonowicz, *Child marriage in West Africa and Cameroon*.

the need for networking with groups whose activities focus specifically on harmful traditional practices, girls' education, and the overall well-being of girls and women. Schools are actively involved in prevention of early marriage.

Ending the practice and changing attitudes between families and societies, expanding opportunities for education, offering appropriate support to families and children and working to ensure that all children – girls and boys – are recognised as valuable members of the society. Mass media coverage, schools and researchers, vote laws that prohibit child marriage, in collaboration with traditional rulers.⁵⁹

In March 2011, young girls in Cameroon, with help from Plan International's Girls' Ambassadors programme, started escaping forced marriages and returning to the classroom.⁶⁰ Similarly, in Nigeria, some girls have exercised agency by expressing their desires to go back to school even after giving birth. Childbirth to them was not an obstacle to education. The 14 year-old-girl kidnapped by Boko Haram as earlier mentioned had this to say: "When I found out that I was pregnant, I was sad but now I realise it is a gift from God. Others that have experienced this are facing the world proudly. I want to go back to school one day to continue my education while taking care of my child." Likewise, Salamatu, an 18-year-old girl, was forced to marry against her will and ambitions to achieve a university education. Like many of her peers, she escaped the forced marriage and met student mentors from Plan International's girls ambassador programme, who persuaded her parents to allow her to complete school. Similarly, Danedjo's uncle wanted to marry her off at the age of 14 to a man in his mid-30s, as a second wife. A few months before the wedding, her friend Aisha, who is a social worker, helped her escape her uncle's house to avoid the marriage.⁶¹ Maimuna, a 16-year-old mentor had this to say: "I started mentoring in 2005. At first I doubted this will change the mentality of the Mbororo girls and their parents who attached much importance to early marriage. After participating in trainings and refresher courses, I realised a gradual change in the views of parents and the youth. Now, girls are in universities and given chances for a career."⁶²

The presence of Plan International's girls ambassadors programme in Cameroon is a significant coping strategy, because it educates parents and their communities with workshops and debates organised by student mentors. Parents, relatives, students and primary school children listen to girls talking about the importance of education and discuss school problems and other issues of concern. The project has changed the behaviour of mothers who often opposed their daughters' education. Now they advocate for their children (both female and male) going to school. The Girls' Ambassadors programme started in December 2004 with the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA) and is funded by USAID

59 UNICEF, *Early Marriages: A Harmful Traditional Practice: A Statistical Exploration*.

60 For information on Plan International's programme in Cameroon, see <https://plan-international.org/cameroon>

61 NGO, Association for the struggle against violence, Yaounde-Cameroon.

62 See <https://plan-international.org/cameroon>

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in Cameroon.⁶³ The aim of the organisation is to empower Mbororo women and improve their living standards in the Northwest region of Cameroon. The project is now working throughout the country. Providing scholarships and mentoring support to primary and secondary school girls and pays particular attention to regions with lower enrolment rates and the most marginalised groups – such as young, married girls deprived of the right to education.⁶⁴ Plan International supports and works with two minority groups in Cameroon, the Fulani in the Northwest Region and Baka girls in the East Region. The project has contributed to a clear drop in pregnancy and marriage cases.

CONCLUSION

There are three events in life that human beings celebrate, that is birth, marriage and death. Only one of these is a matter of choice, but early and forced marriage deprives the girl child from celebrating many other events and milestones in life. The girl child also deserves to celebrate, and this can only happen with the effective implementation of international and national laws condemning child marriage. The minimum age for marriage in Cameroon should change from age 15 to 18 to be in line with the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. Also, Section 356 of the Cameroon Penal Code, which punishes whoever gives away in marriage a female minor of below 18 years must be effectively implemented and not there for window dressing. Section 356, however, contradicts the Civil Status Registration Ordinance (CSRO), which sets the minimum standard for the girl at 15. A harmonisation of these laws will be to the advantage of the girl child.

Eradicating illiteracy and lack of education for girls is fundamental for Cameroon to connect with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDGs 2 and 3 on achieving universal primary education and promoting gender equality. Moreover, the government must implement viable options for parents not to marry their daughters off early, especially in the northern parts of Cameroon dominated by Muslims who are under constant attack from the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram, since marriage is for many the only career choice for girls particularly in conflict areas. Where marriage is regarded as a protective and security measure for the girls, it may offer the only possibility of financial security and acceptable context for childbearing and in conservative societies. This protective and security measures are sanctioned by culture and religion aimed at preserving family honour and girls' virginity.

A check on the socialisation process is also necessary to reduce child marriage. From a feminist perspective, sexual victimisation of girls is a function of male socialisation, because so many young males learn to be aggressive and exploitative of women. It is this exploitation of young girls by older men that triggers delinquent behaviour,

63 For more information on this programme, see <http://www.mboscuda.org>

64 See <http://www.mboscuda.org>

such as running away from home and prostitution, among girls who are victims of men's aggression. In contemporary times, matrimonial homes by child brides remain very common. This can lead girls to other societal ills, as earlier mentioned, if this situation is not curbed, given that many girls run away from marriages only to be sent back by their parents who regard child marriage as a safeguard against immoral or inappropriate behaviour.

Indeed, there is a need for concerted efforts from traditional rulers, religious leaders, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, researchers and communities to fight child marriage. Some efforts are already in place, but there is still much to be done to ensure the development and human rights of girls.