

The Prevalence, Determinants and Perceived Effects of Girl-Child Marriage among Married Women in Osioma Ngwa Local Government Area, Abia State.

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INTRODUCTION

Girl-child marriage, a practice defined as any formal marriage or informal union where the female is under the age of 18. Girl-child marriage is a public health concern that represents a profound violation of human rights and a significant impediment to the development of young girls [1,2]. Child marriage perpetuates gender inequality, disproportionately impacting girls [3]. The practice has devastating consequences on the lives of millions of girls worldwide such as sexually transmitted infections, poor reproductive outcomes, intimate partner violence and mental ill health.

Across the globe, one in every 5 girls below 18 years is married, with the prevalence ranging from 23% to 19% in the past decade. Over 640 million women alive today were married as children [4]. In Africa about 30 million girls got married before 18 years, with the practice being worse in West and Central Africa, where nearly 4 in 10 young women were married before age 18. This prevalence has remained constant for the last ten years [5]. In the Sahel belt the prevalence is as high as 70% [4]. Lower levels of child marriage are seen in Eastern and Southern Africa at 32%.

Nigeria has one of the highest rates of child marriage globally with about 22 million girls and women affected with significant regional variations [6]. Current reports show that about 30% of girls in Nigeria are married before the age of 18, and 12% are married before the age of 15 [7]. This high prevalence is not uniform across the country, with significantly higher rates in the northern regions and rural areas [8].

The causes of girl-child marriage are complex and multifaceted. Poverty is a significant driver, as families may view early marriage as a means of economic survival. The level of education of the parents also play a role[8]. Cultural and traditional beliefs contribute to the practice, with some communities viewing early marriage as a way to preserve family honor or ensure social status [8,9]. Lack of access to quality education, particularly for girls, further exacerbates the problem, as girls who are out of school are more vulnerable to early marriage [5]. Additionally, inadequate enforcement of existing laws and policies contributes to the persistence of this practice, as the Child Rights Acts prohibits marriage before age 18 [10].

The health consequences of girl-child marriage are severe. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 globally [11]. Early marriage significantly increases the risk of maternal mortality and morbidity, as young girls' bodies are not fully developed for delivery. Childbirth before age 19 leads to obstetrics complications [12,13]. Furthermore, early marriage often leads to psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and social isolation [14]. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 aims to end this harmful practice against the girl child by 2030 [15].

In Nigeria more than 40% of women between ages 20 and 24 were married before 18 years with varying prevalence across regions. The prevalence of girl-child marriage is about 12% in the southern part and about 60% in the north-west region of the country [3,7]. About 43% of married women between 15 -49 years were married before 18 years [16]. In the southeastern Nigeria, the prevalence is about 33% and the prevalence of high adolescent fertility rates was reported to be the highest in the south [17]. This highlights the need for regional strategies to address the root causes of the practice, including poverty and gender inequality.

While national statistics provide a broad overview, there is a critical need for localized research to understand the specific dynamics of girl-child marriage in Abia State and, particularly, in Osisioma Ngwa Local Government Area (LGA). The socio-cultural and economic context of this specific community may present unique challenges, factors that contribute to their vulnerability and opportunities for intervention. It is crucial to understand the specific context within the LGA to develop effective strategies to combat this harmful practice and safeguard the future of young girls in the community in line with eradicating early girl marriage by the year 2030 [18]. Although the state has adopted Child Rights Acts since 2006, its implementation is weak and this study would possibly assess the effectiveness of its implementation [19].

This study aims to determine the prevalence determinants and perceived effects of girl-child marriage among married women in Osisioma Ngwa LGA, Abia State, Nigeria.

Methods

The study was a descriptive cross-sectional design of all married women in Osisioma Ngwa LGA in the southern part of Abia state in south-eastern Nigeria. The LGA presents a mix of rural and periurban communities with a projected population of about 321,000 across 10 wards. Farming and trading are the major occupations of the people [20].

Two wards were selected using simple random sampling from the 10 wards. Clusters of women such as churches, market women and women's groups were identified, from where all eligible women who gave their consent were recruited into the study. Married women who were not from the LGA and those who were 50 years and above were excluded from the study, in order to focus on reproductive age group and reduce recall bias.

A pretested, structured questionnaire designed by the researchers was used for data collection. The instrument has three sections: socio-demographic information, perceived causes of early marriage and its potential effects of the marriage.

The questionnaire was interviewer- administered by trained research assistants. Each respondent was interviewed face-to-face in a private setting, and this process took place within the month of June 2025. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the commencement of the interview. All data were treated with strict confidentiality.

The collected data were checked for completeness and consistency, then cleaned and analyzed using STATA version 17 [21]. Variables were summarized using frequency and percentage for categorical data. The relationship between the outcome and the independent variables was determined using chi-square at a 5 % level of significance. Multivariable logistic regression was used to determine predictors of early marriage in the population. Results were presented in chart and tables.

Results

A total of 323 married women were recruited from the LGA and analysed, 71% (230/323) of them were married before 18 years old.

Fig. 1: A pie chart showing the distribution of married women according to age at marriage.

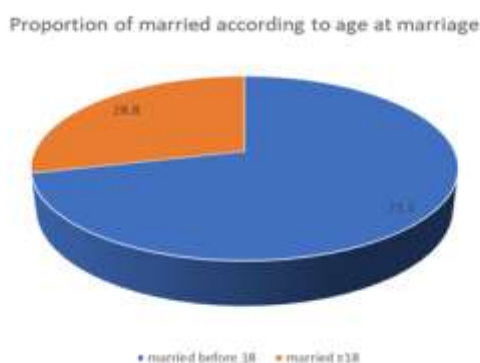


Table 1 indicates that 83% of married women aged 18 and below were married before turning 18, a significantly higher rate than those aged 19 and above. Both groups had similar education levels. The proportion of unemployed individuals was significantly higher among those who married early. The majority of respondents identified as Christian, with no significant relationship between religion and early marriage. Maternal education level differed significantly, with mothers of those who married at 18 and above more likely to have tertiary education. Similarly, fathers of those who married at 18 were more likely to have tertiary education.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Married Women Respondents (N=323)

Characteristics	Married before 18 years (n=230)	Married at 18 years & above (n=93)	Statistical indices
Age Group (years)			
9-18	50 (83.3)	10 (16.7)	$X^2=5.285$
19- 60	180 (68.4)	83 (31.6)	P value=0.022+
Age (years) Median (Range)	34.4 (9-57)	37.4 (18-62)	
Education			
No Formal Education	50 (83.3)	10 (16.7)	$X^2=5.396$
Primary Education	75 (69.4)	33 (30.6)	Df=3
Secondary Education	85 (68.0)	40 (32.0)	P value=0.145
Tertiary Education	20 (66.7)	10 (33.3)	
Occupation			
Self Employed	80 (61.5)	50 (38.5)	$X^2=34.117$
Private/Public Employment	10 (40.0)	15 (60.0)	Df=3 P value<0.0001+
Unemployed	125 (86.2)	20 (13.8)	
Student	15 (65.2)	8 (34.8)	
Religion			
Christianity	218 (72.4)	83 (27.6)	$X^2=3.197$
Others(Islam& traditional)	12 (50.0)	10 (50.0)	P value=0.074
Mother's Level of Education			
No Formal Education	65 (72.2)	25 (27.8)	$X^2=9.821$
Primary Education	100 (76.9)	30 (23.1)	Df=3
Secondary Education	60 (66.7)	30 (33.3)	P value=0.020+
Tertiary Education	5 (38.5)	8 (61.5)	
Father's Level of Education			
No Formal Education	90 (90.0)	10 (10.0)	$X^2=51.558$
Primary Education	80 (80.0)	20 (20.0)	P value<0.0001+
Secondary Education	50 (50.0)	50 (50.0)	
Tertiary Education	10 (43.5)	13 (56.5)	

Table 2 shows that the predictors of early marriage were employment. Those who were unemployed had a higher odds of about 4-fold of being married early compared to those who were self-employed with aOR(3.9, 95%CI of (2.1-7.9), whereas those who were employed had a 60% decrease in odds of being married early compared to being self-employed aOR=0.41, 95%CI (0.18-0.95). Women whose mothers had a tertiary level of education had lower odds of early marriage compared to those with no formal education aOR=0.24, 95%CI (0.02-0.79). Women whose fathers had primary, secondary, or tertiary level of education had lower odds (aOR=0.44 95%CI(0.19-1.0), aOR=0.11 95%CI (0.05-0.24), and aOR=0.09 95%CI (0.04-0.21) respectively, of being married early compared to those whose fathers had no formal education.

Table 2: Predictors of early marriage among the respondents

Variables	Odd ratio	P value	95% CI
Age group (years)	Ref	0.022+	0.21-0.88
9-18	0.43		
19-62			
Level of education	Ref.	0.145	0.17-1.17
No formal education	0.45	0.143	0.17-1.14
	0.43	0.147	0.13-1.21
Primary	0.40		
Secondary			
Tertiary			
Occupation	Ref	<0.0001+	0.18-0.95
Self employed	0.42	<0.0001+	2.1-7.4
Private/public employed	3.91	0.213	0.45-3.0
Unemployed students	1.18		
Religion	Ref	0.074	0.19-1.1
Christianity	0.46		
Others			
Mother's level of education	Ref	0.184	0.67-2.4
	1.28	0.220	0.37-1.6
No education	0.77	0.020+	0.02-0.79
Primary	0.24		
Secondary			
Tertiary			
Father's level of education	Ref	0.013+	0.19-1.0
	0.44	<0.0001+	0.05-0.24
No education	0.11	<0.0001+	0.04-0.21
Primary	0.09		
Secondary			
Tertiary			

Table 3 shows a significantly higher proportion of those who married early were married more than 5 years ago. Those marriages were recommended by the family and those whose input about marriage were not considered were more likely to marry early. Most women in both groups have children, but the percentage of those with children is significantly higher for those married before 18.

Table 3: Marital status related characteristics of the respondents

Characteristic	Married before 18 years (%)	Married at 18 years & above (%)	Statistical indices
How long have you been married?			
Less than 1 year	10 (25.0)	30 (75.0)	$X^2=120.783$
1-5 years	20 (33.3)	40 (66.7)	Df=3
6-10 years	90 (90.0)	10 (10.0)	P value<0.0001+
Above 10 years	110 (89.4)	13 (10.6)	
Was your marriage recommended by your family?			
Yes	190 (77.6)	55 (22.4)	$X^2=51.558$
No	40 (51.3)	38 (48.7)	Df=1 P value<0.0001+
Did you feel your input was significant in the decision to get married?			
Yes	45 (41.7)	63 (58.3)	$X^2=69.060$ Df=1
No	185 (86.0)	30 (14.0)	P value<0.0001+
Do you have any children?			
Yes	220 (73.8)	78 (26.2)	$X^2=12.872$ Df=1
No	10 (40.0)	15 (60.0)	P value<0.0001+

Table 4 shows perceived causes of early marriage were financial situation of the family, the traditional belief/customs of the people, an attempt to avoid pre-marital pregnancy and placing less value on the girl's education and family decision.

Table 4: Perceived Causes of Marriage Among Married Women (N=323)

Cause	Married before 18 years (%)	Married at 18 years & above (%)	Statistical indices
Did your family's financial situation contribute to your decision to get married?			
Yes	160 (86.5)	25 (13.5)	$X^2=104.014$
No	10 (17.2)	48 (82.8)	Df=2
Maybe	60 (75.0)	20 (25.0)	P value<0.0001+

Did traditional customs and beliefs play a role in your decision to get married?			
Yes	130 (86.7)	20 (13.3)	$X^2=39.684$
No	50 (50.0)	50 (50.0)	Df=2
Maybe	50 (68.5)	23 (31.5)	P value<0.0001+
Do you think your family accepted your marriage because they place less value on a girl-child?			
Yes	110 (91.7)	10 (8.3)	$X^2=77.539$
No	25 (33.3)	50 (66.7)	Df=2
Maybe	95 (74.2)	33 (25.8)	P value<0.0001+
Were you married out to avoid the social shame associated with pre-marital pregnancy?			
Yes	135 (87.1)	20 (12.9)	$X^2=51.734$
No	30 (41.1)	43 (58.9)	Df=2
Maybe	65 (68.4)	30 (31.6)	P value<0.0001+
How influential was your family's decision in your marriage?			
Slightly influential	22 (62.9)	13 (37.1)	$X^2=54.982$
Moderately influential	40 (53.3)	35 (46.7)	Df=3
Extremely influential	150(88.2)	20 (11.8)	P value<0.0001+
Don't Know	18 (41.9)	25 (58.1)	

Table 5 shows that a significant proportion of women who married before the age of 18 were unable to pursue a career or academic advancement after marriage, compared to those who married at or after 18. Women who married early were less likely to have a goal to pursue business. Complications following pregnancy were significantly higher among those who married early. Relationships with family of origin and friends were more likely to become weaker or end among those who married early. Limited or no opportunities for earnings were significantly higher among those who married early.

Table 5: Perceived Effects of early Marriage among Married Women (N=323)

Effect Category	Married before 18 years (%) (n=230)	Married at 18 years & above (%) (n=93)	Statistical indices
After your marriage, were you able to pursue your career or academic advancement?			
Yes	25 (31.2)	55 (68.2)	$X^2=82.808$ Df=1
No	205 (84.4)	38 (15.6)	P value<0.0001+

After your marriage, were you able to pursue your business or trade goals?			
Yes	90 (60.0)	60 (40.0)	$X^2=27.100$ Df=2
No	70 (71.4)	28 (28.6)	P value<0.0001+
I never had such goals	70 (93.3)	5 (6.7)	
Did you have any complication during childbirth?			
Yes	200 (87.0)	30 (13.0)	$X^2=96.639$ Df=1
No	30 (32.3)	63 (67.7)	P value<0.0001+
How does your marriage affect your relationship with your family?			
My relationships remained the same	100 (66.7)	50 (33.3)	$X^2=26.079$
My relationships became weaker	80 (88.9)	10 (11.1)	Df=3
My relationships became stronger	35 (53.8)	30 (46.2)	P value<0.0001+
My relationships ended	15 (83.3)	3 (16.7)	
How does your marriage affect your relationship with your friends?			
My relationships remained the same	45 (66.2)	23 (33.8)	$X^2=51.558$
My relationships became weaker	110 (75.9)	35 (24.1)	Df=3
My relationships ended	50 (76.9)	15 (23.1)	P value=0.036
My relationships became stronger	25 (55.6)	20 (44.4)	
How does your marriage impact your opportunities for work or earning potential?			
It improved my opportunities for work or earning potential	20 (30.8)	45 (69.2)	$X^2=114.692$
It had no significant impact on my work or earning potential	40 (51.3)	38 (48.7)	Df=3
It limited my opportunities for work or earning potential	150 (93.8)	10 (6.2)	P value<0.0001+
I have not had the opportunity to work or earn money	20 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to describe the prevalence, possible causes, and effects of girl-child marriage among married women in Osisioma Ngwa LGA, Abia State, Nigeria.

The prevalence of early marriage among married women in the LGA is high (71%). Parental education and employment were protective factors against early marriage. The drivers of early marriage in the community include family financial constraints, traditional beliefs, and the low value placed on the girl child. Marriage

decisions were strongly influenced by the family. Early marriage has negative effects on women's education, career, business, childbirth, affecting their relationships with friends and family members and limiting their opportunities.

The prevalence of early marriage among married women in the LGA was 71.2%, this is higher than the national average of about 43% of married women aged 15-49 reported by NDHS 2018 [16], and the 65% average in the south-east [22]. The mean age of marriage is 19.1 years. The trend of the prevalence of girl-child marriage among married women in the LGA has significantly dropped in the last 5 years, similar to the nationwide decline over the last decade [23]. Sustaining this trend could contribute significantly to achieving SDG 5. 3.

About 18% of respondents are still 18 years and below, with 83% of them were being married before 18 (child brides). Employment status is a predictor of early marriage, being unemployed three times the odds of being married before 18 compared to those who were self-employed, which is consistent with previous research [24]. Parental education particularly that of the father, was found to protect against early child marriage in line with other studies, that has shown that higher parental education levels reduce the likelihood of early marriage [25,26]. while some studies have shown identified education level and religion as predictors of girl child marriage these factors do not have significant impact in this possibly due to the low tertiary education levels in the population[8,26].

Economic hardship was identified as a major cause of early girl marriage, consistent with previous research on child marriage in Nigeria [27], where families view early marriage as a way to alleviate poverty. Traditional beliefs and practices were also found to drive girl child marriage in this study, as reported in other studies [17, 28, 29]. Fear of pre-marital pregnancy and its associated stigma often lead families to marry off their daughters to avoid shame, a finding supported by previous research [30].

The study reveal that family decisions strongly influence girl child marriages, with limited input from the girls themselves, consistent with previous reports [31].

Women who were married early reported negative effects such as hindrances to academic pursuits, limited career and business opportunities, similar findings have been documented in other studies [22, 32]. The fewer years of study, high fertility following early marriage can lead to lower lifetime earnings and increased financial dependence while also reducing female labour force participation [33].

Adverse maternal outcomes associated with girl child marriage, were also observed in this study with a strong relationship between early marriage and childbirth complications, often due to under-developed pelvic cavities contributing to high maternal mortality in this age group [34, 35].

Other negative effects of early marriage included strained or severed relationships with family and friends leading to social isolation and mental health issues. Studies have shown the social networks of young brides often due to new marital roles and responsibilities lead to social isolation from peers [36]. Social isolation can result in psychological issues like low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. Research had shown that early marriage is linked to lower psychological well-being, possibly due to increased risk of intimate partner violence, limited decision-making ability, and emotional abuse [37].

This study determined the prevalence of girl child marriage among married women less than 50 years in contrast to what is obtainable in most studies where the prevalence of girl child were determined among the girls below age 18. This study reflects the lifetime prevalence of women ever married under 18 years and are able to share their experience in terms of the perceived effect of their marriage. Whereas the other form of study will only provide current girl child marriages and its risks among the adolescents.

CONCLUSION.

The prevalence of girl child marriage in Osongma LGA was found to be unacceptably high, driven by factors such as poverty, traditional beliefs, and the avoidance of stigma related to pre-marital pregnancy. Decisions regarding early marriage were predominantly made by the family without the girl child's input. Higher level of

parental education and employment were found to be protective factors against this harmful practice. The associated negative consequences of this girl-child marriage included childbirth complications, social isolation, loss of career progression and lack of economic empowerment.

To combat girl child marriage, we must raise awareness in communities, promote girl child education, and enforce Child Rights Acts. Collaboration between NGOs, health agencies, and the Ministry of Women Affairs is essential to eliminate harmful practices like girl child marriage.

The limitations of this study include recall bias and social as the respondents may not remember their actual age and age at marriage and other experiences, girl-child marriage is a sensitive issue and social desirability bias may lead to under-reporting.

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