

## **Influence of Early Marriage on Girl-Child School Enrolment and Retention in Nigeria: Implications for Guidance**

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### **Abstract**

*The study examined the influence of early marriage on girl-child school enrolment and retention in Nigeria: Implications for Guidance. The study looked at early marriage, causes of early marriage, influence of early marriage on girl-child enrolment and retention, challenges facing girl-child education in Nigeria, consequences of early marriage and girl-child education in Nigeria. The study concluded that there is a strong, detrimental relationship between early marriage and girls' access to education. Efforts to address this problem must include a multifaceted approach, combining community sensitization, strong legal frameworks, financial support and accessible education systems tailored to the needs of at-risk girls. The study therefore recommended that government should enforce existing laws that prohibit child marriage and ensure compliance through stronger monitoring and accountability mechanisms; collaborate with local authorities, traditional leaders and law enforcement to ensure child protection laws are respected at the community level; government at all levels should provide free or subsidized education for girls, especially in rural and underserved areas, to reduce financial barriers to schooling; counsellors in collaboration with schools should conduct awareness campaigns to educate parents, religious leaders and communities about the harmful effects of early marriage on girls' education and well-being; government should establish alternative education programmes, as such evening classes or vocational training to accommodate girls who dropped out due to early marriage. Also, with the help of trained counsellors, provide psychosocial support and counselling services to help married girls return to school and rebuild their confidence.*

**Key Words:** *Early Marriage, Girl-Child, Enrolment, Retention and Guidance*

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### **Introduction**

The issue of early marriage and its implication on girl-child education has become an issue of great concern to the society. The institution of marriage as the integral union of a man and a woman for socio-economic, psychological and procreation motive is as old as the history of man on earth. According to Bayisenge (2015) early marriage also known as child marriage is defined as any legal marriage or cohabitation between two parties in which one or both parties is or are below the age of 18 years. However, in sub-Africa region, the issue of early marriage is common with females who are physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and child bearing. According to Elujekwute (2011) child marriage involves either one or both spouses being children and may take place with or without formal registration and under civil, religion or customary laws. Phinney (2008) observes that marriage is primarily meant for people who attained the age of 18 years and above and are physically, socially and psychologically mature, capable of handling social and economic situations. International Centre for Research on Woman (ICRW, 2010) reports that

early marriage has many negative consequences on the girl-child as well as the society in which she lives, ranging from educational stagnation, poverty, health care to maternal mortality and among others.

Elujekwute (2011) further maintains that early marriage is a violation of human rights in general and of girl's rights in particular. Early marriage has profound physical, emotional, intellectual and psychological impacts on the girl-child development. This hinders effective and efficient educational development and productive opportunities of individuals for national growth and development. Bunch (2018) states that marriage at early age of one's life conflict with his/her academic pursuit. Therefore, married women are bound to achieve less in education or not to continue with formal education. However, every society and culture have some basic norms and beliefs that guide the people. In Northern Nigeria for instance, early marriage of the girl-child is permissible but comes with grave consequences. One of which led to school dropout and gender violence within the marriage union. There is growing evidence that the incidence and prevalence of early marriage is retarding the growth of the girl-child especially those from less-privileged background and thus constituting a stumbling block to the progress of enrolling and retention at both primary and secondary school (Loaiza & Wong, 2012).

Early marriage significantly impacts school enrolment and retention rates in Nigeria. Early marriage often leads to school dropouts, truncating the educational aspirations of young girls. According to World Bank (2011), marrying between the ages of 15 and 17 primarily affects secondary education enrolment and retention. Early marriage is a marriage or informal union under age 18 years and a manifestation of gender inequality, resulting in lifelong negative consequences for the education, health, well-being, and rights of millions of adolescent girls (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021). Early marriage is widespread in Nigeria; according to Oyekola (2024), the country ranks 10th in Africa with a high rate of child marriage (43% out of 20). The Association for Reproductive and Family Health (ARFH) asserts that early marriage has an impact on a child's physical development, with consequences including early pregnancy, dropping out of school, health problems, domestic abuse, a lack of empowerment, and social isolation. One of the most agonizing and unsettling issues in Nigeria is early marriage, a practice where parents compel their young children, particularly their females, to marry, sometimes to a complete stranger.

According to UNICEF (2014), out of the 10 countries with the highest rates of early marriage, seven are in Sub-Saharan Africa including Nigeria. It is estimated that 700 million women will be married before age 18 by 2050 and that Sub-Saharan Africa will surpass South Asia on the number and global share of child marriage. Even by doubling the current rate of decline, in 2050, Sub-Saharan Africa will account for 47% of the total child marriage in the world (UNICEF, 2014). This makes focusing on the issue of early marriage critical and important to improving access to quality education for the girl-child and the importance of research which helps to map out the scale of the problem, but also produce insights into the factors affecting girl-child enrolment and retention in Nigeria.

Omotayo (2014) states that, girls who have dropped out of school or not been enrolled in the first place are likely to be pushed into early marriage and this usually prevents them from starting or resuming their education. Bayisenge (2015) states that early marriage is due to various factors such as, the search for economic survival, protection of young girl, peer group and family pressures, sexuality, wars, civil conflicts, socio-cultural, religious values and

controlling female behaviour among others. Early marriage is a violation of girl's human rights as it deprives her from freedom, opportunity for personal development and other rights in the society. This practice stands in direct conflict with the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) such as the promotion of basic education, fight against poverty, the prevention of HIV/AIDS and reduction of maternal mortality rate (UNICEF, 2015).

Poor enrolment and retention of the girl-child in schools in Nigeria are a major educational challenge and it needs urgent attention. Economic, politics and parents are dominant factors considered by many scholars in explaining this educational issue. Parents are in the dilemma of sending or retaining their children in schools due to poor social-economic status among others. Ben-Kalio, Oguche and Usman (2024) stated that enrolling and keeping a child in school irrespective of gender or location involves decision making after considering many variables which include parental beliefs and expectations about the value of education. Parents' perceptions on the relevance of schooling to real life survival needs also influence their decisions on enrolment and retention in schools. The issue of early marriage in Nigeria has become so frequent that it has become a stumbling block standing on the educational advancement of majority of girls. This study is therefore motivated to examine the influence of early marriage on girl-child school enrolment and retention in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The concepts used in the study will be defined, explained and described.

#### **Early Marriage**

Early marriage otherwise referred to as child marriage is the marriage before 18 years of age. The term "early marriage" is used to refer to both formal marriages and informal unions in which a girl is given out in marriage before age of 18 (UNICEF 2005). Similarly, UNFPA (2006) defines early marriage and child marriage, any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing. Ango (2011) defined early marriage as marriage of an adolescent girl to a matured man or vice-versa and this happens at puberty when the individual is getting matured. The marital age according to Molokwu (2012) is above the age of 18 years, when the individual is physically, socially, academically and emotionally matured to cope with the challenges of marriage. The Nigerian review draft decree put the marriageable age of the girl-child at 18 years. Also, the UNICEF (2001) on the rights of the child recommends that children should not be separated from their parents before 18 years unless it is considered necessary.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the most comprehensive international bill of rights for women, states that any marriage of a child should not have any legal status. The Committee that monitors this convention states further in General Recommendation 21 (Article 16(2)) that the minimum age for marriage for both male and female should be 18 years, the age when "they have attained full maturity and capacity to act". Most early marriages are arranged and based on the consent of parents and often fail to ensure the best interests of the girl-child. Early marriages often include some elements of force. Kyari and Ayodele (2014) noted that early marriage is the practice of marrying a young girl (generally defined as below the age of eighteen) to an adult. It is a situation where female adolescents and teenagers are married to adult husbands, in these instances, sometimes, the men can be twice their ages and these females become child brides. Delprato and Akyeampong (2017) viewed early marriage as child marriage, which means legal

or customary marriage between two people, of whom one or both spouses are below the age of 18.

### **Causes of Early Marriage in Nigeria**

Relative contribution of socio-economic background, indiscipline and cultural values (factors) are some of the causes of early marriage on educational development of the girl-child in Nigeria.

- i. **Socio-Economic Background:** Early marriage is believed to have been caused by many factors, according to Owobamigbe, Oni and Sunday (2025), poverty is one of major factor underpinning early marriage in Nigeria, where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older sometimes even elderly man, is a family survival strategy and may even be seen as in her interest. In most instance, the bride's family may receive gifts from the groom or the groom's family as the bride price for the daughter. Economic support is also another cause of early marriage. For instance, to give out the girl-child of any age to marriage in search for economic survival of the family, some families used the price money to train male children with the belief that they are the ones to take over the affairs of their family. This practice allowed some female children to get married without secondary education. Njokuwu (2013) observes that high rate of poverty in the society has deprived many Nigeria children of their right to acquire quality education and other benefits as citizens of the country. Njokuwu further maintains that socio-economic background of female students; lack of money to pay school fees and afford other educational needs as well as the basic needs of live in the family contributed significantly to the early marriage among female students. This is one of the reasons why many young female students drop out of school, jumped into early marriage and could not continue with education but found hawking along streets and open places to earn a living. Low income to cater for the demand of family needs in Nigeria influenced many parents/guardians to abet the girl-child for early marriage.
- ii. **Indiscipline:** The term discipline is defined by Trumers (2008) as respect for rule of law, school rules and regulations as well the maintenance of an established standard of behaviour. This implies self-control, restraint, respect for oneself and among others. A behaviour that contradicts the above becomes indiscipline, disobeying or going contrary to normal behaviour. Zubaida (2011) states that indiscipline is major problem among female students in Nigeria. The author maintains that indiscipline among female students results from a combination of factors that are intrinsic and extrinsic. Most young girls abandon education and rush into marriage because of the inability of their family to sponsor their education while some is as a result of immoral behaviour (unwanted pregnancy). Due to high level of poverty most female students who drop out of school for marriage, belief or are convinced that they will continue with their formal education later in life. However, Elujekwute (2011) states that female education after marriage is dependent on the sympathy of the husband, many husbands are adamant in training their wives either because of economic factor, social or cultural factors. Elujekwute further maintains that even the fortunate women who had the opportunity find it difficult to combine academic work with marital or domestic challenges. Nevertheless, indiscipline among female students also contributed significantly to the cause of early marriage in Nigeria. Bayisenge (2015) states that female students who lack moral virtues engaged into premarital sex and become victim of early marriage as a result of unwanted pregnancy. Most of these female students who could not marry either carry out abortion which claims their lives or drop out of school to nurse their babies. This

has jeopardized opportunities of many young girls to acquire higher education in Nigeria.

- iii. **Cultural Values (Factors):** Cultural values as predictor is another cause of early marriage in Nigeria. The traditional perception of women in Northern Nigeria for instance affects the girl-child education. However, according to Elujekwute (2011) many ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria are fast moving away from their cultural norms, believe and practices to embrace westernization for meaningful growth and development. In another development, according to Wegh (2013) it is the culture of Tiv and Hausa people for instance to give out their girl-child of any age to marriage for economic support of the family. Some families used the money to train their male children with the belief that they are the ones to take over the affairs of their family. These practices allowed some female children to get married without secondary education. Udeozor (2014) states that traditional perception of women in Nigeria affects the level of attention given to girl-child education, often and times emphasis is laid on educating their male counterpart.
- iv. **Family Alliances:** Marriage is a union between two families and some parents lure their girl-child into marriage in order to consolidate family alliances. According to a report by UNIFPA (2014), some marriages in Africa and Asia are seen as a means of strengthening the relationships between families, while in some cases, the children are betrothed even before birth.
- v. **Kidnapping:** The rising case of insecurity in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria has seen the rise of kidnapping and other criminal vices. This has seen young girls kidnapped on their way to school or at school premises and thereafter forced into marriage by their captives. The case of abduction and eventual forceful marriage and impregnation of some of the Chibok girls in the northern part of Nigeria is a typical example of this (Ben-Kalio, Oguche and Usman, 2024).
- vi. **Limited Educational Attainment of Parents:** Africa is a continent that is still developing and as such most countries have a significant population that lack educational qualification and form of training. This therefore, exposes them to a lot of societal superstitions and misinterpretations of marriage. As a result, this makes them gullible to any superstition or misconceptions that have been passed down from generation to generation regarding early-child marriage. According to Oguejioffor (2020), the education of parents greatly affects the timing and type of union.
- vii. **Limited or Lack of Access to Health Information Services:** This is a serious contributory factor to the continuous practice of early marriage. This is because parents who engage in this practice are not fully abreast with the consequences of early marriage on their daughter. These include confinement to household roles, sexual abuse, discontinuation of education, exposure to maternal death, Vesico-Virginal Fistulae (VVF) and sexually transmitted diseases. According to (WHO, 2018), adolescent mothers aged between 10 to 19 are at risk of experiencing eclampsia, systematic infections as well as puerperal endometritis when compared to older mothers.

### **Influence of Early Marriage on Girl-Child Enrolment and Retention**

The school is the most important institution outside the family involved in socializing young people into all dimensions of adult roles and responsibilities. Many years of schooling has been associated with many positive outcomes, including later age of marriage, healthier and better educated children (Ugboha & Ibuebue, 2019). However, early marriage inevitably denies children of school age their right to the education they need for their personal development



their preparation for adulthood, and their effective contribution to the future weltering of their family and society. Early marriage has a negative influence on girl-child school enrolment and retention. According to Nzenwata (2018), early marriage can cause severe problems like domestic violence, early pregnancy, health risk, social stigma, etc on the girl-child which will in turn affect her enrolment and retention in school.

Personal development of a girl-child education is aborted when her education is terminated for marriage. This does not only affect the girl but also affects the community and the future generation. According to Klasen and Pieter (2012), child marriage affects female labour force participation in the area of returns when they are actively employed. This is due to lack of education which has contributed to the increase in unpaid housework. Chaabn and Cumingham (2011) stated that female decrease in labour force participation has negative effects on the economic growth of the societies, as well as the women and their families. Indeed, married girls who would like to continue schooling may be both practically and legally excluded from doing so. Ugboha and Ibuebue (2019) noted that early marriage perpetuates the cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Around the world, more girls are enrolled in school than ever before. These girls are much likely to be married at an early age. However, sadly, school enrolment drops sharply after five or six years of schooling (WHO, 2009). Child marriage often results in girls leaving school, reducing their opportunity to learn and to gain skills that would enable them to start an income generating activity or to find a job. It thereby increases the likelihood of low levels of education and employment (UNICEF, 2011).

Mohammed and Abbati (2021) outlined the negative effect of early marriage on girl-child enrolment and retention:

- (1) **Reduced Enrolment Rates:** In communities where early marriage is prevalent, educating the girl-child may be considered unnecessary, leading to lower enrolment rates.
- (2) **Increased Dropout Rates:** girls who marry early often become mothers soon after, making it difficult for them to continue schooling due to parenting responsibilities and increased burden of household chores, leaving little or no time for education.
- (3) **Disruption of Academic Progress:** early marriage interrupts the continuity of education, reducing the chances of completing primary, secondary or higher education. Once the girl-child is out of school, it becomes challenging to re-enroll due to age, stigma or lack of support systems.
- (4) **Psychological effects:** early marriage can lead to mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety or depression, which can further affect the girl's ability to focus on or pursue education.
- (5) **Economic Consequences:** girl-child who drop out of school due to early marriage often miss out on acquiring the skills needed for better job opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty.
- (6) **Impact on Retention Rate:** schools in areas with high rates of early marriage may struggle to retain girls beyond primary school levels, as the societal expectations for marriage often outweighs the value placed on education.
- (7) **Wider Social Implications:** early marriage limits girls' educational opportunities, which has long-term implications for gender equality, economic development and the empowerment of women.

### **Challenges Facing Girl-Child Education in Nigeria**

Girl-child education has for a long time been influenced by many factors in Nigeria. The complications of the girl-child education start at home. It is at this level in the community that girls are educated differently from boys. The parents, siblings, relatives and even the neighbours see girls to be completely different from boys. They erroneously believe that, boys are more capable, more responsible and more significant to the society than girls. Although both girls and boys are brought up together at home and in the community but the girls are forced to grow up differently through this oppressive socialization. They are not given equal opportunities as boys to prove their capabilities. As a result, the girls grow up believing that they are completely inferior to boys just because they are girls. The prevalence of gender bias society will continue to bring set back on girl-child education, as well as social discrimination between girls and boys. The previous studies have provided evident that girl child education suffers from a lot of shortcomings. Some of the constraints facing girl- child education include stereotyped images, negative attitudes of teachers and parents' perception of the value of investing in girl education in African countries and Nigeria in specific, poverty, coupled with traditions beliefs have also adversely affected girl education (Garba, 2014). Poverty at house hold level forces the parents to make choices as to which child to enroll in school. Social, and cultural attitudes of the parents lead to boys getting favored while the girls are discriminated against (Grace, 2010).

The girls are compelled by high poverty level to abandon school because of lack of school fees, in favor of their brothers. Cultural practices such as early marriages and initiation rites practiced by some communities in some parts of Nigeria expose the girl-child to life styles not conducive to education. The initiation rites and female circumcision make girls to have attitudinal changes, perceiving themselves as adults ready for marriage. They view school as a place for children and therefore they drop out of school immediately after initiation rite. With early and sometimes forced marriage, the girl is compelled to abandon school to take up wifely and parental responsibilities at the expense of her Education. Another challenge to girl-child education is teenage pregnancy. This has forced many girls to drop out of schools to go and give birth and look after the young one. Unfortunately, there is no clear policy on readmission of the girl back to school after delivery. Only a small number of girls return to school, about 10% in Nigeria. School environment is another hindrance to the girl-child education. The teachers' attitudes and their teaching styles in class situation are sometimes hostile to the girl-child. Most teachers, probably due to their early childhood socialization, pay more attention to the boy students, leaving the girl to feel neglected and unwanted. This has negative effects on the girls' education (Oke, 2000). The girls are made to believe that they cannot perform as well as the boys in school and especially in the science subjects. The girls have continued to perform poorly in these subjects because of this belief, some have even dropped out from school. The transition rate for girls from primary to secondary schools in Nigeria is still very low.

### **Consequences of Early Marriage**

Early marriage of a girl-child may interrupt the education of the couples; this is particularly so because child bearing begins almost immediately after marriage. Couples need emotional stability to be able to cope with the strains and stresses of marriage and this could only be achieved by maturation. Early marriage of a girl-child may also have adverse effect on the family standard of living thereby causing tension and lack of interest in their marriage. Marriage contracted between two adolescents may have its peculiar problems, in order to discuss the consequences of early marriage, verily in assessing the prevalence many of the early marriages are unregistered and unofficial and are not therefore counted as part of any standard

data collection system. Very little country data exist about marriages under the age of fourteen (14) even less about those below ten (10). The customs surrounding marriages, including the desirable age and way in which a spouse is selected, depend on a society's view of the family: its role, structure, pattern of life and the individual and collective responsibilities of its members. The idea and function of state of constant evolution on early marriage as strategy for economic survival, poverty is one of the major problem of factor underpinning early marriage, that is to say, where poverty is acute a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older, sometimes, even elderly men, a practice common in the middle eastern and south Asians societies is a family survival strategy and may be seen as in her interest (Msheliza, 2013).

Other consequences of early marriage that makes a country to face economic difficulties and political instability, age marriage has barely risen and in the northern part of the country the average age has fallen since 1990. The early, marriage as an effect is in the sense that the strategy of high fertility when mortality decline due to health improvement and under pressure of urbanization and modernization, that is to say, the extended family starts to break up into nuclear components and some couples leave for the towns. Msheliza (2013) stated that individual wage labour replaces family-based children becomes a cost.

Finally, the consequences of early marriage is an issue, but young girls may endure misery as a result of early marriage and the number of those who would seek help, if they thought it existed, is impossible to calculate until more is known about their situation, there can be no reliable estimates of the scale of their predicaments or of the social damages that is called 'forward in upbringing they give to their children. About the girls and to a lesser extent boys is a wide ranging, within a right perspective, three of the major concerns are the denial of childhood and adolescence, the right of personal freedom and the lack of opportunity to develop a full sense of selfhood as well as the denial of psychological and emotional wellbeing, reproductive health and educational opportunity (Abubakar, 2020).

### **Girl-Child Education in Nigeria**

According to UNESCO (2014), Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, has over 200 million people and more than 250 ethnic groups. Although Nigeria has had a National Policy on Education since 1981, it has not been implemented effectively and efficiently due to rapid population growth, insufficient political will, a long period of undemocratic governance, and poor management of scarce resources. Women and girls have been most affected by these negative factors. The national literacy rate for females is only 56%, compared to 72% for males, and in certain states the female literacy, enrolment and achievement rates are much lower. For example, girls' net enrolment in Sokoto, one of the six target states under the UNICEF African Girls' Education Initiative, is 15%, compared to 59% for boys. The most important issue in any country is the number of girls that have access to education and quality of education they receive as measured by levels of retention and performance. Despite several efforts to increase enrolment and reduce gender gap. Significant increase in access to education still show declines in the overall proportion of girls enrolled at different levels of education system.

The gender gap has not narrowed across the continent of Africa. Some countries including Nigeria, Zambia, Uganda, Tanzania and many others, though have made significant progress in reducing the gender gap, still they have low enrolment for girls at all levels of education. Overall, in sub-Sahara, more than two thirds of eligible children are out of school, a majority of whom are girls (Forum for African Women Education, 2011). Forum for African Women Educationists (FAWE), a pan African non -government organization, that seeks to promote the



education of women and girls in Africa had done a lot to improve the education of the girl-child in Nigeria and other African countries. One of its programmes in Nigeria is the “Nigerian Girls into Sciences” (NIGIS) which is an action-oriented performance enhancement programme for girls at junior secondary level in Nigeria. Its primary goal is to expand interest, and improve performance in science among Nigerian girls. NIGIS project prompted the development of teaching manual in learning Science by Doing, based on the syllabus of Junior Secondary science in Nigeria, to learn Science by doing (LSD) is a guide for teaching integrated science in schools. Education is essential for improving women’s living standards and enabling them to exercise greater voice in decision making in the family the community, the place of paid work and the public arena of politics. Basic literacy and other basic skills are absolutely vital to women’s empowerment, and without the skills acquired in secondary education, women cannot obtain better paid employment.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This is hinged on social learning theory by Albert Bandura 1977.

#### **Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1977)**

Social learning theory was propounded by Albert Bandura in 1977, emphasizes the importance of observing, modelling, and imitating the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Social learning theory considers how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behaviour. In social learning theory, Bandura agrees with the behaviourist learning theories of classical conditioning and operant conditioning. However, he adds two important ideas: Mediating processes occur between stimuli and responses. Behaviour is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning.

Social learning theory is often described as the bridge between traditional learning theory (that is, behaviorism) and the cognitive approach. This is because it focuses on how mental (cognitive) factors are involved in learning. Bandura believes that humans are active information processors and think about the relationship between their behaviour and its consequences. Observational learning could not occur unless cognitive processes were at work. These mental factors mediate (i.e. intervene) in the learning process to determine whether a new response is acquired. Therefore, individuals do not automatically observe the behaviour of a model and imitate it. There is some thought prior to imitation, and this consideration is called mediational processes. This occurs between observing the behaviour (stimulus) and imitating it or not (response).

This theory provides an intellectual lens to view the problem of early marriage of the girl-child highlighted in this study. Social learning theory will help parents and teachers understand how early marriage affects the girl-child and how the girl create and modify meaning and the theory will also help educationist understand how parents perceive education of the girl-child on the various influence of early marriage on enrolment and retention.

### **Implications for Guidance**

Guidance programmes play a crucial role in checking the negative effects of early marriage on girl-child education.

#### **1. Policy Formulation**

- \* Education policies: governments and education ministries can use findings from various studies to implement compulsory education laws and enforce penalties for early withdrawal of girls from school.

- \* Child marriage laws: strengthening and enforcing laws against early marriage is critical, as legal back can delay marriage and keep girls in school longer.

- \* Free education programmes: providing free subsidized education, especially for girls, reduces financial pressure on families and minimizes the risk of early marriage.

## **2. Psychosocial Support**

- \* Counselling services: offering psychological support to married girls or those at risk can help them navigate their options and, where possible, re-enrol into school.

- \* Safe spaces for Girls: establishing clubs or groups where girls can discuss their challenges and access peer support fosters resilience and retention.

## **3. Educational Interventions**

- \* Retention programmes: developing support systems e.g. mentorship, scholarship and safe school environments help keep girls in school.

- \* Curriculum design: introducing life skills and reproductive health education can empower girls to make informed decisions about marriage and education.

- \* Alternative learning pathways: providing vocational training and adult education for girls who dropped out of school due to early marriage ensures they can still access education later.

## **4. Community Awareness and Advocacy**

- \* Community engagement: programmes that engage parents, religious leaders and traditional rulers can help shift cultural norms that perpetuate early marriage.

- \* Awareness campaigns: educating communities about the long-term benefits of girl-child education (e.g. reduced poverty and improved health outcomes) can change attitudes.

- \* Gender Roles Awareness: highlighting the value of educating girls in breaking cycles of poverty and increasing societal progress can motivate families to prioritize education over marriage.

## **Conclusion**

The study on the influence of early marriage on girl-child school enrolment and retention reveals a strong, detrimental relationship between early marriage and girls' access to education. Efforts to address this problem must include a multifaceted approach, combining community sensitization, strong legal frameworks, financial support and accessible education systems tailored to the needs of at-risk girls. Policies and programmes that delay marriage and encourage girls to stay in school are essential for promoting gender equality, reducing poverty and fostering long-term national development. Ultimately, ensuring that girls remain in school and are not forced into early marriage empowers them to reach their full potential, improving not only their lives but also the well-being of their families and communities. This study underscores the urgent need for collective action on break the cycle of early marriage and promote inclusive, quality education for all.

## **Recommendations**

In view of the assertion of various researchers and findings, the following recommendation are made.

1. **Strengthen Legal Frameworks and Enforcement:** government should enforce existing laws that prohibit child marriage and ensure compliance through stronger monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Also collaborate with local authorities, traditional leaders and law enforcement to ensure child protection laws are respected at the community level.

2. Promote access to Quality Education: government at all levels should provide free or subsidized education for girls, especially in rural and underserved areas, to reduce financial barriers to schooling.
3. Community Sensitization and Advocacy: counsellors in collaboration with schools should conduct awareness campaigns to educate parents, religious leaders and communities about the harmful effects of early marriage on girls' education and well-being. Counsellors should also engage community leaders as advocates for girls' education and role models for changing harmful cultural norms.
4. Reintegration Programmes for Married girls: the government should establish alternative education programmes, as such evening classes or vocational training to accommodate girls who dropped out due to early marriage. With the help of trained counsellors, provide psychosocial support and counselling services to help married girls return to school and rebuild their confidence.
5. Introduce Economic Support for Families: offer financial incentives, such as conditional cash transfers or scholarships to families that keep their daughters in school. Also develop livelihood programmes to reduce the economic pressures that often lead to early marriage.

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