

Consequences of early marriage on the girl-child among the Urhobos in the Central Senatorial District of Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: Early marriage is a harmful practice affecting millions of children especially girls across the globe with short- and long-term social and public health consequences. It extensively affects females of poor financial status, no or low-educated families living in rural areas with poor social status, and is associated with frequent childbirth (<24 months apart), unwanted pregnancy, and abortions that predisposes young girls to social stigma, maternal morbidity and mortality.

Objective: The objectives of this study were to determine the prevalence, determinants factors, and consequences of early marriage and factors that could worsen them as well as ways to prevent the practice.

Methods: A mixed method survey questionnaire was adopted for stratified random data sampling among the Urhobo young girls of secondary school and tertiary institutions level age, married women, community leaders, policy makers. Data were analyzed descriptively in percentages as obtained from the questionnaire on prevalence of early marriage as well as the health and psychosocial consequences.

Results: Among the 381/500 respondents, 63.8% have forced marriages and 48.3% were before 18years old. Health and social consequences of early marriage include spousal abuse (19.2%), vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF), and pregnancy-and-birth complications (14.8%), among others were reported. Factors that worsen the consequences such as customs/sociocultural beliefs that prohibit the victims of early marriage from seeking family planning constituted 20.4%.

Conclusion: The study has revealed significant prevalence and determinant factor of early marriage among the Urhobos. Respondents regardless of their instructive foundation concurred that early marriage happens with grave outcomes such as poor education, psychosocial issues, pregnancy/birth confusions, spousal maltreatment, VVF and death.

Key words: Early Marriage, Consequences, Customs, Health-related, Vesico-Vaginal Fistula

BACKGROUND

Child forced marriage (CFM) is a threat to women's health [1]. It causes mental, pathophysiological (pre and post pregnancy); and psycho-social injustices to the victims [2]. It is compelling the young lady or kid into a relationship she knows little or nothing anything about its associated short- and long-term consequences [3]. It is a paradox that the current commonness of the practice globally is on a decline, but when juxtaposed with the growth in population, the total number of married children tends to increase especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia [4].

The United Nations (2022) expressed that youngster constrained marriage undermines the lives and fates of young ladies and occasionally boys all over the planet, denying them of their rights and privileges to settle on conclusions about their lives, making them more powerless against brutality, abuses and forestalling their full participation in education, financial, political and social spheres [5]. It is of extraordinary worry that in spite of worldwide enhancements in orientation fairness, young ladies are even more probable than young men to wed as kids [6]. The UNICEF (2021) report vehemently stated that under-age marriage and kid labor were both an infringement of fundamental human rights and a neediness of health, safety, bodily integrity, and self-determination, as set out in international law [7].

Kizilhan (2017) further opined that forced marriage is a marriage constrained through savagery and stressed that it by and large happens with the assent of the guardians who force their own girl-child to wed [8]. It is pertinent to acknowledge that forced marriage occurs for several reasons, recent report from Syria highlighted family coercion as one of the determinants of early marriage [9]. Abasi (2023) reported that several factors such as age, level of education, marital status, employment and so could affect health and quality of life [10]. The option to agree to a marriage freely and fully is perceived in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and in numerous ensuing common liberties instruments - assent cannot be 'free and full' when one partner is very immature [9]. Early marriage often results in greater risk of sexual exploitation, barbarity, and domestic enslavement and forced labour even at home [11]. Braimah (2014) reported that Nigeria has the third most elevated number of kid ladies in Africa with 3,538,000, and the eleventh most commonness of youngster marriage universally and most common in the North-West and North-East of Nigeria, where 68% and 57% of ladies were hitched before their eighteenth birthday celebration perpetuated among Nigeria's Islamic families and the Hausa ethnic gathering [12].

Schantz-Dunn (2009) reported that there are about 60 million marriages of ladies younger than 18 years: around 31 million in South Asia, 14 million in sub-Saharan Africa, and 6.6 million in Latin America and the Caribbean [13]. More disheartening about under age union is the Plan International (2023) delineation that 12 million youngsters became wives before the age of 18 each year at a rate of almost one every 2 seconds and that except with timely intervention, more than 150 million girls will become child brides by 2030 [14].

In Nigeria, the pervasiveness of early marriage differs from one area then onto another, with figures as high as 88% in the North-West locale and as low as 10% in the South East; making early marriage in Nigeria is higher than worldwide normal of 5% [15].

Statistics showed that 45% ladies in the 20-24 years range were married before 18 years while around 17% were before 15 years old [16]. The general causes of early marriage are guardians feeling of dread for disgrace brought about by the loss of virginity before marriage; as virginity of the girl adds quality to the bargaining power for families because virgin and younger girls are valued and thus more dowries paid [17]. Agege (2018) concluded that some of the young ladies forced into marriage were with spouses without a kind of revenue to sufficiently accommodate their wives particularly during pregnancy [18].

There is a report about kid marriage which expressed that today, there are records of 60 million relationships incorporated of ladies younger than 18 years: around 31 million in South Asia, 14 million in sub-Saharan Africa, and 6.6 million in Latin America and the Caribbean [13]

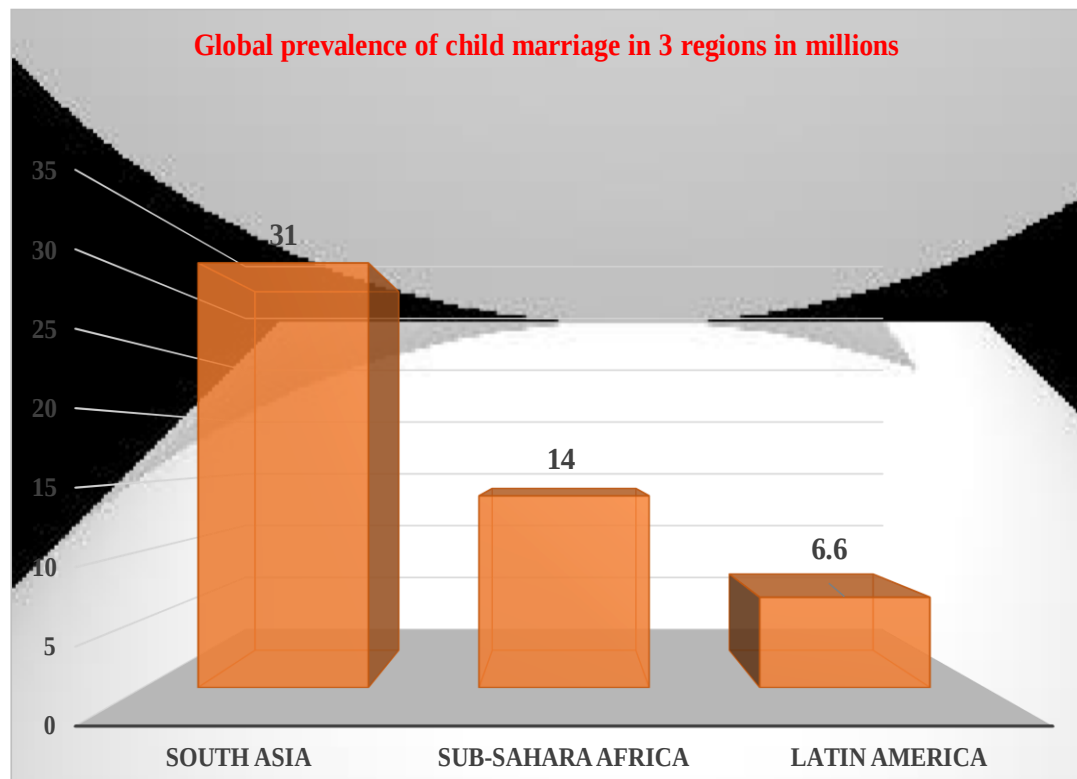


Fig.1. Global prevalence of Child Marriage in 3 Regions [13]

Reports from different countries across the globe highlighted the prevalence of early marriage as shown on the table below.

Table1 top Ten countries' rates of early marriage in 2020 [19].

Countries	Girls married ≤ 15	Girls married ≤ 18	Boys married ≤ 18
Chad	30%	67%	8%
Central African Republic	29%	68%	28%
Niger	28%	76%	6%
Bangladesh	22%	59%	4%
Mauritania	18%	37%	2%

Guinea	17%	47%	2%
Mozambique	17%	53%	10%
Mali	16%	54%	2%
Nigeria	16%	43%	3%
Ethiopia	14%	40%	5%

In Nigeria, the pervasiveness of kid marriage differs broadly starting with one area then onto the other, with figures as high as 88% in the Northwest locale and as low as 10% in the South East. Considering this peculiarity for example, early marriage in Southern Nigeria is higher than worldwide normal of 5% [15]. Hence the vital reason for this study since the Urhobos belongs here.

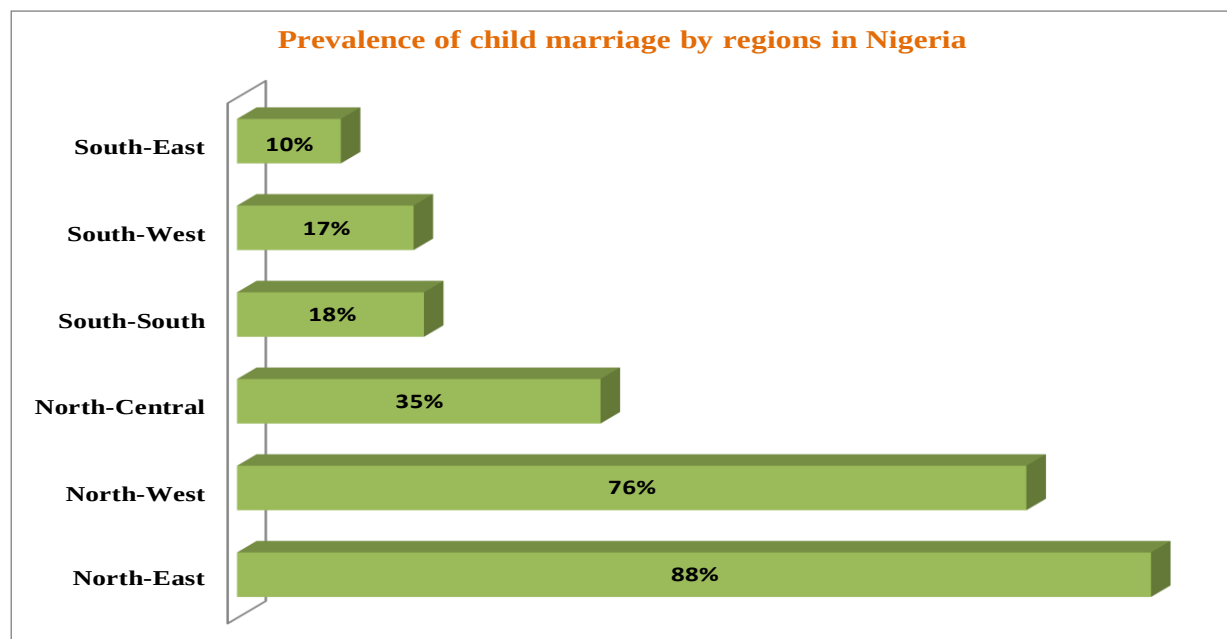


Fig.2. The Prevalence of child marriage by regions in Nigeria [2].

Methods and material

This was a descriptive cross-sectional narrative/systematic study where a mixed survey questionnaire was adopted for stratified random data collection. A structured questionnaire titled „**Consequences of early marriage on the girl child among the Urhobos women in Central Senatorial District of Delta State**’ comprising three parts (A) demographic variables, (B) questions on prevalence/determinant and consequence, and (C) questions on influential factors and preventive measures was used.

Data collection

The researcher with the help of a local interpreter administered the questionnaire within one month randomly among young girls of secondary school and tertiary institutions, married women, community women leaders and women policy-makers where all respondents had 100% equal chances of being selected excluding the non-Urhobo women/girls within the catchment area.

Data collected was analyzed using Scientific Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0. Socio-demographic data, prevalence and consequences of early marriage were presented in frequency tables. Chi-Square statistics were used to evaluate the determinants factors associated with and preventive strategies to early marriage practice. The significant level was 95% ($P < 0.05$) and two tails.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Department of Public and Community Health of Novena University.

Results

Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 500 exploration surveys questionnaire were given out to respondents from 8 networks inside the nearby legislatures in the Central Senatorial District of Delta State. They were dispersed in accordance with the expressed exploration technique within the area of review, out of which 381 polls were gotten back with responses representing 76.2%. 184 (48.3%) of respondents were below 18 years, 76 (19.9%) of the respondents were 18 - 30 years and 121 (31.8%) were above 31 years. 259 (68.0%) were cohabiting 109 (28.6%) were legally married while 13 (3.4%) were divorced/separated. 217 (57.0%) had tertiary education, 114 (29.9%) had secondary education, 34 (8.9%) had primary education, and 16 (4.2%) had no formal education. 169 (44.4%) respondents were unemployed and 212 (55.6%) were employed. 159 (41.7%) had no monthly income, 44 (11.5%) were earning less than ₦30,000; 102 (26.8%) were earning ₦30,000 to ₦50,000 while only 76 (19.9%) were earning above ₦50,000.

Prevalence and determinants of early marriage practice among the Urhobos in the Central Senatorial District of Delta State

184 (48.3%) of the respondents got married below 18 years. Data showed that 76 (19.9%) of the respondents were given out for marriage at age 18 - 30 years while 121 (31.8%) got married at 31 years and above. 251 (65.9%) married without their consent, 130 (34.1%) admitted that their consent was sought before marriage. A breakdown revealed that among the married respondent 243 (63.8%) were forced into marriage, 48 (12.6%) were influenced while 90 (23.6%) were voluntary.

On determinant of early marriage, a total of 140 (36.7%) respondents agreed ignorance is a factor influencing early marriage, 115 (30.2%) claimed poverty as a factor for under age marriage (below 18 years). 102 (29.4%) respondents attributed social and environmental influence as causes, while 11 (2.9%) and 3 (0.8%) agreed that other causes are parents' marriage history and family background respectively.

Table2: Prevalence and determinant of early marriage practice among the respondents

Variables	Options	Frequency (n=381)	Percent (%=100)	P-value
Age at which respondents was given	Below 18 years	184	48.3	*5.866
	18-30 years	76	19.9	
	Above 30 years	121	31.8	

Consent by respondents before being given	Consent not sought	130	34.1	0.475
	Consent sought	251	65.9	
Knowledge about marriage before getting married	No pre-marriage knowledge about marriage	90	23.6	0.497
	Received pre-marriage knowledge about marriage	48	12.6	
Determinants of early marriage among the Urhobos	Ignorance	140	36.7	*0.0001
	Poverty	115	30.2	
	Family background	3	0.8	
	Parents' marriage history	11	2.9	
	Social/environmental influence	102	29.4	

*Mean age 23 years

Consequences of early marriage on the girl child among the Urhobos

170 (19.2%) respondents reported episodes of spousal abuse as one of the consequences of early marriage, followed by 156 (17.6%) on Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF) as a consequence. Other consequences were 155 (17.5%) on psychological trauma, 153 (17.3%) on pregnancy and birth complications, 131 (14.8%) agreed on interruption of the educational pursuit of the girl-child and 120 (13.6%) reported that death due prolonged birth labor as another consequence.

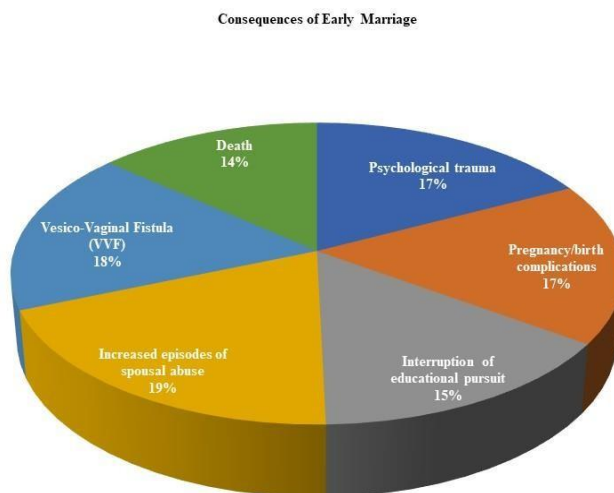


Fig.3. Consequences of early marriage on the girl child among the Urhobos

Factors that worsens the consequences on the girl-child

The data stated on table2 as attached revealed that 160 (20.4%) of respondents agreed that tradition that prohibits the victims of early married girls from seeking family planning, 170 (20.9%) on violence, rape and abandonment before, during and after delivery, 162 (19.9%) that extending a woman's potential child bearing capacity portend risk to mothers. Others were 171 (20.0%) absence of healthcare facilities or program for the pregnant victims and 144 (17.8%) proposed that lack of punitive measures to those who decided to marry their daughter before 18 are capable of worsening the consequences of early marriage.

Table3. Factors that worsen the consequences

Variables	Frequency (n=381)	Percent (%=100)	*P-VALUE
The tradition that prohibits the victims of early married girls to seek for family planning	160	20.4	*0.0001
Violence, rape and abandonment before, during and after delivery	170	20.9	
Extending a woman's potential child bearing capacity which represents a risk to mothers	162	19.9	
Absence of health care facilities or program for the pregnant victims of early marriage	171	20.0	
Lack of punitive measures to those who decided to marry their daughter before 18	144	17.8	

Preventive strategies to early marriage and its consequences

On reporting the strategies for preventing early marriage and its consequences, more than half of the respondents 234 (28.7%) suggested health education and health promotion on the risks associated with early marriage and its consequences, 151 (18.5%) of the respondents recommended that government should enact and implement anti-early marriage laws, and 111 (13.6%) of the respondents recommended that violators should always be prosecuted. A good proportion of the respondents 194 (23.8%) recommended that there is need for government and Non-governmental Organizations to establish social machineries to assist victims of early marriage while 126 (15.4%) of the respondents suggested that there is need for the establishment of focal centers where victims can report cases and as well be rehabilitated as displayed on the table below.

Table4. Preventive strategies to early marriage and its consequences

Variables	Frequency (n=381)	Percent (%=100)	*P-value
Health education/promotion	234	28.7	0.0001
Enacting/implementing anti-early marriage laws	151	18.5	
Prosecuting violators	111	13.6	
Building social machineries to assist victims	194	23.8	
Establishing focal centres where victims can report cases	126	15.4	

There should be room to make choices grounded on maturity	228	27.8	
Parents should meet the needs of their children physically and materially through empowerment programs	196	23.9	
Programs that keep girls in school should be promoted at all levels	156	19.0	
Customs, traditions and practices which negate the welfare of the girl child should be abolished at all levels	106	12.9	
The girl child should be valued equally as the boy child. No room for sex discrimination	134	16.4	

***Multiple responses**

DISCUSSION

Prevalence of early marriage among the Urhobos in the Central Senatorial District of Delta State

The aim of this objective was to enunciate on the prevalence of the practice of early marriage among the Urhobos because it will be futile tackling the practice without knowing the prevalent rate.

From the result, 48.3 (184) of respondents agreed that early marriage is prevalent and high among the Urhobos in the Central Senatorial District of Delta State. This is a confirmation of the estimated percentage of child marriage prevalence in Nigeria with 43% (22 million) affecting the girls before their 18th birthday and another 16% before they turned 15 years old [20]. Child marriage is an issue in Nigeria, especially in the northern parts of Nigeria where poverty; gender inequity; traditions, customs; weak legislation and structures; conflict and political instability were responsible [21]. It is both a traditional and cultural practice which is heavily influenced by Islamic pressure on girls to marry young in Northern Nigeria, 48 per cent of Hausa-Fulani girls are married by age 15, and 78 per cent are married by age 18 [12]. Niger has the highest child marriage rate in the world where recent data revealed that 75 per cent of the girls who were below age 18 were married, with 36 per cent of them being younger than 15 years old. Bangladesh, Chad and Bangladesh had rates ranging from 59 per cent to 68 per cent [22].

However, according to Save the Children (2022), the number of Nigerian girls that are married before their 18th birthday is as high as 58.2% [23]. It has been noted that prevalence of child marriage varies widely across the country, but figures are as high as 76% in the North-West region, compared with 10% in the South-East [24]. The report during 2022 International Women's Day by UNICEF disclosed that around 650 million girls and women alive today were married in childhood and that many child brides are not in a formal marriage; in some countries, up to 90% of child marriages take the form of an informal union in which the couple lives together as if married [25].

Determinants of early marriage among the Urhobos

It has been established that the practice of early marriage are human rights violation affecting girls more than boys with severe consequences. It is therefore imperative to see how the respondents in this research viewed the causes of this age-long obsolete practice. The respondents agreed that early marriage was due largely to

the following factors: ignorance from both the parents and victims 36.7% (140), poverty 30.2% (115), family background/parents' marriage history 3.7% (14) and social/environmental influence (29%) 102. According to Modak (2019), poverty is one of the main determinants of early marriage because poor parents think of girls as an economic burden for families, so they try to marry their daughters off at an early age to reduce family expenditures [26]. United Nations Development Program UNDP Nigeria Annual Report 2016 estimated that more than half of Nigerians (54.4% or 76 million) live in poverty with 70.8% of this living below the poverty line of less than \$1 per day, predominantly in the rural areas and deepens from the southern to the northern part of the country [27].

Also, Ruhul (2019) posited that due to social stigma and loss of reputation on both the parents and the girl if people will think she is having affairs when she looks mature and has not been married [28]. A study has revealed that a girl is more likely to drop out of school during the preparatory period before her marriage or shortly after, being a wife or mother, places more responsibility on her to take care of the home, children and extended family; this makes returning to school almost difficult or impossible for a married girl [29].

Consequences of early marriage among the Urhobos in the Central Senatorial District of Delta State

On this objective, respondents data 170 (19.2%) indicated that increased episodes of spousal abuse, 156 (17.6%) Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF), 155 (17.5%) psychological trauma as an aftermath of early marriage, followed by 153 (17.3%) on pregnancy and birth complications. Others were 131 (14.8%) on interruption of the educational pursuit of the girl child, 120 (13.6%) reported death due to prolonged episodes of pregnancy and labor were consequences of early marriage. The above responses on consequences and health burdens of early marriage are obvious indications that there was great depth of understanding amongst the respondents about the abysmal practice.

To buttress the above collated data, Agege (2020) posited that child marriage constitutes a gross violation of human rights, leaving physical, psychological and emotional scars for life, with sexual activities which starts soon after marriage, and pregnancy and childbirth at an early age, maternal as well as infant mortality is usually an issue [2]. Kids marriage has devastating consequences for the victim's health, there are links between child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, gender-based violence, female genital mutilation/severing, HIV and the Sustainable Development Goal [29]. It is important to note that girl child marriage is increasingly recognized as a critical barrier to global public health and gender discrimination, the data gathered from the respondent where issues of VVF, spousal abuses, and psychological trauma and pregnancy complications are of great concern as they affect the quality of life of its victims point to the above.

No wonder, Dangal (2013), opined that obstetric fistula remains a major public health problem in developing world where unattended obstructed labour is common and maternal mortality is unacceptably high, and added that it is a tragedy in developing world because of illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, lack of knowledge and lack of health facilities [30]. Chandrakar (2020) submitted that the early marriage consequences include domestic violence, sexual abuse and social isolation, deprivation from quality education low economic status which contributes to persistent poverty, child marriage perpetuates an unrelenting cycle of gender inequality, sickness physical immaturity leading to high rates of maternal and child mortality [31]. According to WHO (2016), the health of the child is extremely affected including their physical health, psychological, emotional, sexual and reproductive health. They are expected to become pregnant as soon as possible after marriage; this means they have to give birth at a very young age where they are not physically mature enough. This is a major problem, because young women who give birth are at a higher risk [32].

Factors that worsen the Consequences of Early Marriage

The respondents strongly agreed that sexually transmitted diseases/HIV, unexpected pregnancy, anemia during pregnancy, abandonment during and after delivery, suicides, exaggerated post-traumatic stress disorder and drug abuse are some of the major factors that further worsen the consequences that are inherent in forced/early marriage. One of the reasons for the above is because the victims are too young to negotiate for sex and time to be pregnant. Agege (2020) posited that child marriage in Nigeria has resulted in several issues with unexpected pregnancy at 23%, maternal mortality at 90%, VVF over 500,000–1,000,000 reported annually in developing countries such as Nigeria as the major health consequences and that the causes, consequences and prevalence of early marriage constituted should be public health concerns [2]. Another factor that could worsen the consequences of early marriage as pointed by respondent 160 (20.4%) was the tradition that prohibits the victims of early married girls to seek for family planning. This is also linked to the age of marriage, financial power of the person involved in the marriage and the expectation from the husband of the young girl to prove that she is fertile and capable of bearing children. Afolabi (2014) and Nmadu (2018) quipped that early marriage on the girl-child negatively impacts on her well-being and that of the society in education, lack of economic empowerment, and lack of knowledge on reproductive health services which will enable them take informed decisions [33] & [21].

The study also revealed factors such as violence, rape and abandonment before, during and after delivery could worsen the effects. According to Plan Canada, girls who marry before the age of 15 are almost 50% more likely to have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner than girls who married after 18. In addition, child brides are more likely to describe their first sexual experience as forced [34]

The outcome of the responses from respondents also highlighted that absence of health care facilities or program for the pregnant victims of early marriage, is a major concern when considering the worsening influence on early marriage. It is important to state that this factor would affect the under-age marriage victims more because of the lack of experience, knowledge and education. According to Pradhan (2015), adolescent pregnancy is a significant public health problem as (95%) pregnancy and births to adolescents occur in low-income and poor countries in terms of resources [35]. Agege (2020) posited that those marrying early may be more susceptible to diseases like malaria and HIV, increased vulnerability to other sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, sexual and reproductive health morbidities and mortality [2]

234 (28.7%) of respondents proposed schooling and wellbeing advancement on the dangers related with early marriage and its ramifications will be the most ideal way to forestall early marriage and its consequences for the young lady, 151 (18.5%) suggested that administration ought to authorize and carry out enemy of early marriage regulations, and 111 (13.6%) suggested that violators ought to continuously be indicted and rebuffed suitably. It was intriguing that 194 (23.8%) suggested that there is need for government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) to lay out friendly programs to help survivors of early marriage while 126 (15.4%) of the respondents recommended that there is need for the foundation of central focuses where casualties can report cases to and be restored.

Agege (2020) detailed that ladies were being deserted alongside their youngsters without emergency clinic charge paid and that this is a run of the mill illustration of socio-social foul play and misuse which should be eagerly dismissed and abhorred [36]. As per the Council on Foreign Relations, it is expressed that there is no remarkable recipe for progress, as the act of youngster marriage and the absence of admittance to family arranging are many times established in accepted practices and examples of orientation inequality [37]. The Human Rights Council, noted with worry that the rate and hazard of constrained marriage is profoundly exacerbated in helpful settings [38]. Self-awareness and social orientation on the part of guardians prior to thinking about the kids/wards for marriage before full eligible years would be necessary. Also recommended are that social wellbeing, quality education and social apparatuses to help casualties of early marriage will be

extremely useful in the quest for the functional measures to wipe out or decrease the issues of early marriage among Urhobo ladies.

Conclusion:

This study has revealed that there is a significant prevalence of early marriage among the Urhobos; this implies that all the factors studied can influence the forced early marriage among the girl-child in Urhobo. It was discovered that the respondents irrespective of their educational background agreed that early marriage was a situation with grave consequences. According to the respondents, parents force the girl-child when they become pregnant into early marriage just to protect the family's image and name, non-enforcement of the law prohibiting early marriage, ignorance, poverty, social/environmental, religion, customs and tradition were the factors perpetuating the practices of early marriage amongst the Urhobos in Nigeria. Notably, psychological trauma, pregnancy/birth complications, spousal abuse, Vesico-Vaginal Fistula, abandonment of both mother and child and death were conspicuous consequences associated with early marriage. It is recommended that mitigating measures need to be put in place and be enforced by both the government and other related authorities to eradicate to the nearest minimum, the issues of girl-child early marriage.

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