



CHILD MARRIAGE POLICIES IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE HEALTH POLICY TRIANGLE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Ending child marriage, a global health issue, by 2030 is one of the sustainable development goals. With seven years to this deadline, the world has made a positive movement towards reducing the prevalence of child marriage. Despite progress being made in many countries, a number of lower and middle-income nations, such as Nigeria, still face challenges in effectively combating this particular issue. The progress of Nigeria in the fight against child marriage has been slow, with prevalence rates showing only a slight decline. Although these rates are concerning, the predicted future rates for child brides are even more alarming. This created the need to understand the factors influencing this slow progress. This analysis aimed to explore the environmental influence on existing strategies to tackle child marriage in this culturally diverse nation from a health policy triangle perspective using thematic content analysis. Findings showed that although there have been successes in reforming the legal structures, more needs to be done in implementation activities and effective monitoring of strategies. These strategies should be ethnic-specific rather than focused on geographical locations. The neglect of the educational sector and existing poverty are concerns that need to be targeted with utmost commitment to give hope for the future of the girl child in Nigeria.

Keywords: Child marriage, Nigeria, girl child, strategies, health policy triangle (HPT), child bride.



1. Introduction

Enriched with cultural diversity, Nigeria has proven challenging for researchers to provide a comprehensive review of the total number of existing ethnic groups, and this has led to debates in academic fields, with some estimating 250 ethnic groups and another 350 (Okehie-Offoha and Sadiku, 1996). Situated on the western coast of Africa, it is home to over 140 million people as per the 2006 census, with an anticipated growth rate of 3.2% per year (National Population Commission, ICF International, 2013). This number has nearly doubled since then, with the United Nations Population Fund estimating a total population of 223,800,000 in 2023. They also reported that people between ages 0-14 years form nearly half (43%) of this population (*World Population Dashboard -Nigeria | United Nations Population Fund, 2022*), which is relatively identical to 41.83% in 2006 (National Bureau of Statistics, Nigeria, 2015).

Child marriage is a pressing issue facing Nigerian children (UNFPA and Unicef, 2018). It involves the joining of a child under the age of 18 with an adult or another child, officially or unofficially. (*Child marriage, 2023*). Approximately 650 million girls and women globally have experienced this harmful practice (Arora, 2021). Child marriage disproportionately affects girls and highlights gender inequality in society, with a prevalence ratio 1:6 between boys and girls (*Child marriage, 2023*). The health impacts of child marriage on child brides are several and include reduced accessibility to sexual and reproductive health services, an increase in unsafe cultural norms such as female genital mutilation, and negative fertility and maternal health outcomes (Elnakib *et al.*, 2022; Santhya, 2011). The risk of mental health issues, such as depressive symptoms, is also a genuine concern for child mothers (Burgess *et al.*, 2022). It also affects the infant and not only the mother. Children born to underage brides face a higher risk of neonatal mortality and low birth weight, among other problems (Irani and Roudsari, 2019).

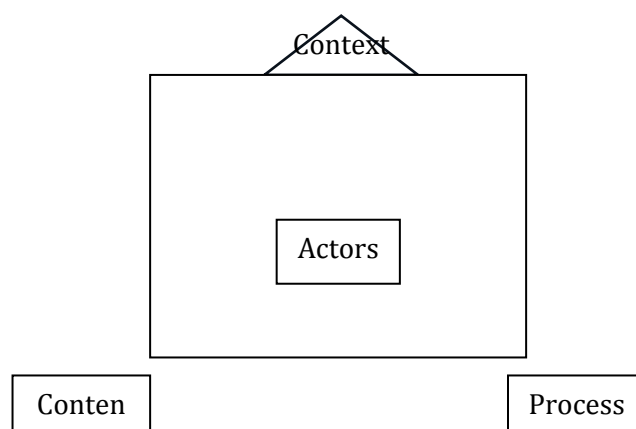


Global efforts have reduced girls-child marriage rates from 25% to 21% in 10 years (Unicef, 2018). Nigeria has a prevalence rate of 41.5% (Bolarinwa *et al.*, 2022), one of Africa's highest today (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Although the country is not among the top 10 countries presently significantly impacted by child marriage, future predictions are alarming, and indications show it is likely to have the highest number of absolute child brides by 2050 globally despite current efforts (Unicef, 2014). Failure to address this issue will impede the achievement of one of the Sustainable Development Goals - eradicating child marriage by 2030. (Unicef, 2018).

Child marriage can only be addressed through multi-stakeholder approaches due to the wide range of enabling factors, from legal issues to conflict, humanitarian crises, and family and religious values (Kohnno *et al.*, 2020). This study aims to explore the child marriage policies in Nigeria and the environmental influence on their strategies, identify gaps and provide recommendations for future agenda-setting using the health policy triangle.

2. Framework

The health policy triangle (HPT) was chosen as the desired framework for this analysis. It is divided into four sections: content, actors, process, and context (Walt and Gilson, 1994).



Source: (Walt and Gilson, 1994)



Content refers to the substance of the policy, which includes goals, procedures, rules, principles, and others (O'Brien, 2020). Actors are individuals or groups that influence the policy process. Process considers the stages of policymaking, from initiation to evaluation (Buse, Mays and Walt, 2005). Context refers to the factors influencing the policy and is divided into four: situational factors, such as earthquakes; structural factors, such as the government; and cultural and international factors (Leichter, 1979).

This framework was chosen because it not only examines the content but also evaluates the policy process, which is crucial in shaping policy outcomes (Walt and Gilson, 1994). It is widely used in various policy areas (O'Brien et al., 2020), such as medical tourism (Hafizan et al., 2018), out-of-pocket payments for General Practitioners (Hansen and Andrioti, 2017), pharmaceutical care in a healthcare system (Zupanets, Dobrova and Shilkina, 2018) and drug policies (Akgul and Köprülü, 2017) among others. This tool facilitates an in-depth political analysis and enables comprehension of the interplay among policies, stakeholders, and the environment. (Walt *et al.*, 2008), which is necessary due to the cultural complexity of Nigeria.

3. Search strategy and document finding

Pub Med, CINAHL, and the University of Wolverhampton online library databases were searched. Keywords used included end, child, marriage, implementation, intervention, strategies, and Nigeria. Also, hand-searching of reference lists of identified articles was done. Inclusion criteria were documents on child marriage in Nigeria. To identify the latest national policy on ending child marriage, the Federal Ministry of Health and the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs' national websites were also searched, which gave no search hits. Databases of international agencies involved in ending child marriage identified from the literature review were searched independently and showed the latest strategy document- National Strategy to End Child Marriage in Nigeria (2016-2021).



List of analysed documents

Original document	National strategy to end child marriage in Nigeria (2016-2021). The Child Rights Act (2003).
Research articles	Ethnicity, religious affiliation, and girl-child marriage: a cross-sectional study of nationally representative sample of female adolescents in Nigeria (Mobolaji, Fatusi and Adedini, 2020). Legality of child marriage in Nigeria and inhibitions against realisation of education rights (Fayokun, 2015). A protocol for a controlled, pre-post intervention study to change attitudes toward child marriage in Southwestern Nigeria using targeted radio programming (Omobowale <i>et al.</i> , 2023). Spatial distribution and multilevel analysis of factors associated with child marriage in Nigeria (Bolarinwa, Seidu, <i>et al.</i> , 2022). A multilevel analysis of prevalence and factors associated with female child marriage in Nigeria using the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey data (Bolarinwa, Ahinkorah, <i>et al.</i> , 2022). Early marriage and teenage pregnancy: The unspoken consequences of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria (Musa <i>et al.</i> , 2021). Child marriage in Northern Nigeria: Section 61 of Part I of the 1999 Constitution and the protection of children against child marriage (Brammah, 2014). Why Do Policies Fail in Nigeria (Bolaji, Gray and Campbell-Evans, 2015). Health Implication of Child Marriage in North-East Nigeria (Allen and Adekola, 2017)



Reports	<p>Gender-transformative collective action to address child marriage and advance girls’ rights: The experience of the coalition of civil society to end child marriage in Nigeria(Girls Not Brides, 2023).</p> <p>Review of Adolescent and Youth Policies, Strategies and Laws in Selected Countries in West Africa (Papworth and Nelson, 2017).</p> <p>Thecostofnoteducatinggirls: missedopportunities: The highestcostofnoteducatinggirls (Wodonet <i>al.</i>, 2018).</p> <p>Child marriage in humanitarian contexts, Girls Not Brides (Girls Not Brides, 2020).</p>
Media	<p>FG: 34 States Have Domesticated Child’s Rights Act(Aya, 2022).</p> <p>Covid child brides: ‘My family told me to marry at 14(Ontiveros, 2021).</p> <p>Child Marriage in COVID-19 contexts: Disruptions, Alternative Approaches and Building Programme Resilience(UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020).</p>

4. Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was used. The analysis methodology has been recognised in different areas of social policy(Strivastava and Thomson, 2009) and health policy research (Kante and Ndayizigamiye, 2021; Faraji *et al.*, 2015). A thematic content analysis was conducted. Codes were assigned to the data, then put into categories, and the categories were grouped into the following themes: content, process, actors, and context based on the health policy triangle.The data was organised and analysed using NVIVO 14 software as used by Kante and Ndayizigamiye (2021).

5. Results and discussion

Coding and categorisation are shown below in the appendix.



5.1 Actors

Stakeholders included in the National Strategy to End Child Marriage (2016-2021) were the Presidency, federal ministries of women and social affairs, health, justice, finance, agriculture, state ministry of local government and chieftaincy affairs, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as USAID, UNFPA, Save the Children and EU, civil society organisations, girls and boys and other members of the community. Other actors included were families, the police, health care workers, teachers, community leaders, and boys and girls.

Although the roles of the federal ministries were clearly defined in the National Strategy, others were not, such as the health care workers were not.

5.2 Content

The national strategy plan, built on the ecological model as its framework, had the vision to eradicate child marriage in Nigeria by 2030 and create a safer environment where children's fundamental human rights are not restricted. There was a worrying level of ambiguity and generalisation in the definition of the goal, "to reduce the percentage of girls who are married before attaining full maturity (usually 18) in Nigeria by 2021" (National Strategy to End Child Marriage in Nigeria 2016-2021, 2016). This does not reflect the Child Rights Act (2003), which criminalises the marriage or betrothal of minors under 18 and punishes violators with penalties such as fines and imprisonment. The lack of clarity on the age limit could create room for misinterpretation, limiting the success of interventions.

The strategy plan identified vital approaches that are supported by research- reviewing existing laws and policies (Fayokun, 2015), addressing harmful cultural practices promoting child marriage (Mobolaji, Fatusi and Adedini, 2020), multi-sectoral and interagency collaboration (Musa *et al.*, 2021), addressing poverty and unemployment and providing free



education for all girl-children (Bolarinwa, Ahinkorah, *et al.*, 2022). Other strategies included encouraging research to provide evidence-based approaches for the future and establishing a functioning system to monitor data on child marriage and accompanying interventions.

Although child marriage is a national issue, research shows it is highly concentrated in some regions. Bolarinwa et al. (2022) found higher rates of child marriage in Bauchi, Kebbi, Gombe, Katsina, Jigawa, Sokoto, Yobe, Niger, Borno, Kano, and Adamawa states. The strategy plan did not account for this difference in child marriage prevalence.

5.3 Context

5.3.1 Structural

Nigeria practises three legal systems: Islamic, civic, and customary laws (Fayokun 2015). Child marriage is most prevalent in regions that follow Sharia law (Braumah, 2014) and have low acceptance of the Child Right Acts of 2003 (Braumah, 2014; Bolaji, Gray and Campbell-Evans, 2015). Although child marriage may be permitted under Islamic law, it is crucial to acknowledge that the child's well-being takes precedence over this allowance, and other laws within the system can override it (Fayokun, 2015) but the Federal Government rarely interferes in such constitutional disputes (Papworth and Nelson, 2017). In 2017, only 23 states out of 36 had domesticated the Child Rights Act of 2003 (Papworth and Nelson, 2017). This increased to 34 in 2022 (Aya, 2022), and in 2023, Kano State joined the list (*UNICEF applauds Kano State for enacting child protection law, calls for effective implementation*, 2023).



5.3.2 Situational

Despite the positive impact of education on child marriage, the budget for education has significantly dropped over the years, and in 2020, a state of national educational emergency was declared (Girls Not Brides, 2023). During humanitarian crises, child marriage practice experiences a significant increase (Girls Not Brides, 2020). The Northeastern region of Nigeria continues to face a humanitarian crisis that has persisted over time. (OCHA, 2023), which includes states affected mainly by child marriage (Mobolaji, Fatusi and Adedini, 2020).

Reports indicate that the pandemic has contributed to a rise in child marriages (Ontiveros, 2021). One possible reason is the loss of income (Musa *et al.*, 2021). The pandemic threatens global efforts to reduce child marriage (UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020).

In the southeast of Nigeria, child marriage has fallen. However, there appears to be a rise in the prevalence of adolescent pregnancy and cohabitation (National Strategy to End Child Marriage in Nigeria 2016-2021, 2016), which could threaten efforts to tackle child marriage as one of the enabling conditions is the need to prevent teenage pregnancy (Brammah, 2014).

5.3.3. International

National and state policies to end child marriage draw support and guidance from the African Charter of Human and People's Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Fayokun, 2015). Ending child marriage is incorporated into the Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, which aims to end this public health issue by 2030 (Bolarinwa, Ahinkorah, *et al.*, 2022). The National Strategy to End Child Marriage acknowledged the crucial role of international agencies in achieving its goals and sought to actively involve them as key stakeholders.



5.3.4. Cultural

Child marriage is mainly dominant in the northern part of Nigeria, about 15-18 times higher than in the southern part (Mobolaji, Fatusi and Adedini, 2020), affecting more rural communities than urban ones (Bolarinwa, Ahinkorah, *et al.*, 2022). This is mainly because of the prevalence of the cultural practice of child betrothal (Allen and Adekola, 2017). The prevalence of child marriage is highest among two ethnic minorities tribes in this region- Kambari and Fulfude- even higher than the Hausa/Fulani tribe, which shows this practice is not geographically location-specific but rather ethnic-specific (Mobolaji, Fatusi and Adedini, 2020).

Islam is the main religion practised in states where the prevalent rates of child marriage are notably high (Brammah, 2014). The influence of religion in child marriage can be seen in a case of a Nigerian political leader who married a 13-year-old girl (Brammah, 2014).

5.4. Process

The national strategy was developed due to the lack of adequate structures in the country to aid the implementation of existing policies and the absence of evidence to show the inclusion of the different government sectors in the various interventions. There is a lack of resources available to support understanding the implementation process of the national strategy. The evaluation was split into progress evaluation, focusing on key activities and impact evaluation, focusing on assessing the plan's final effects. The review was to be conducted externally, with 2017 as the pre-intervention, 2019 mid-term evaluation and 2021 final evaluation, through regular reports (*National Strategy to End Child Marriage in Nigeria 2016-2021*, 2016).

No national report was available on the public database on the different stages of the evaluation. However, data from external agencies show the strategy was also inadequately implemented with a lack of focus (Girls Not Brides, 2023). Funds for national educational



interventions for children were redirected for other purposes without any appropriate structure to replace the diverted funds (Girls Not Brides, 2023). Although Nigeria has the Universal Basic Act (2004), it still has the world's highest number of children not in school, with over 10 million, and 60% of them are girls. (Girls Not Brides, 2023).

The strategy aimed to prioritise research into ending child marriage, but little work has been available since then. Omobowale et al. (2023) study on assessing the effectiveness of using radio programmes to change social norms is one of the few interventions available in public databases. One of the plans was to develop a website for the dissemination of information to a broader audience, and since today, there has yet to be a website design. No recent review of the National Policy on the Health and Development of Adolescents and Young People in Nigeria has been found, even though it was planned for review in the national strategy to end child marriage. Reports indicate limited collaboration between governmental sectors in tackling child marriage. (Girls Not Brides, 2023).

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper analyses the policies to combat child marriage. The findings show that Nigeria has made significant progress in building adequate legal structures despite its complex judiciary and cultural system; however, more focus must be put into its implementation and monitoring strategies. Government agendas must focus on providing primary education and poverty alleviation schemes to people, especially those of lower socioeconomic status, with ethnic-specific interventions. Policymakers must also demand transparency and accountability from the different federal ministries and committees involved if there is any hope of addressing child marriage.

This study provides insight into the present state of the nation through the compilation of articles and reports published between 2021 and 2023, following the completion of the national strategy framework timeline. The document aims to deliver a comprehensive



understanding of the country's current prevailing conditions and developments, ensuring a robust framework for the next phase of global efforts to be built on. One limitation is that the policy is evaluated using reports from external NGO agencies, with no inclusion of national evaluation reports due to the challenge of obtaining information from public databases.

The absence of reports detailing the implementation process of the national strategy between 2016 and 2021 hinders the ability to accurately identify barriers to effective implementation strategies. This could be a gap for future research.



Appendix

Coding and categorisation were developed, and data was organised and analysed using the NVIVO 14 software as shown below:

Child marriage policy analysis

Codes\\Child marriage\\Actors

Individuals or groups that influence the policy.

Name	Description	Files	References
Actors	Individuals or organisations involved in child marriage activities.	2	10

Codes\\Child marriage\\Content

The substance of the policy

Name	Description	Files	References
Conceptual approach	Frameworks on which interventions were based	1	6
Informing questions	Gaps identified that needed to be resolved through outlined actions	1	1
Law	Legal structures for eradicating child marriage	1	2
Objectives	The specific targets to meet the goals and achieve the vision	1	2
Principles	Ideals to guide approaches	1	1
Scope	Details and contents of documents.	1	1
Strategies	Methods and approaches to use in tackling child marriage	3	10
Targets group	The group of people to reach using proposed interventions	2	2



Name	Description	Files	References
Vision	The description of the desired future outcomes	1	4
Goal	The desired aims to achieve the vision	1	2

Codes\\Child marriage\\Context

Factors influencing the policy.

Name	Description	Files	References
Cultural factors	Factors relating to the social and living conditions of the people, their way of life and interaction with people and the environment	2	25
Exogenous or international	International cooperation and activities on child marriage	3	6
Situational	Transient or one-off events impacting child marriage	5	18
Structural factors	The unchanging elements and structures of the country	7	29

Codes\\Child marriage\\Process

Stages involved policymaking.

Name	Description	Files	References
Monitoring and evaluation	The process involved monitoring activities and assessing their effectiveness.	1	12
Policy formulation	Process of developing the policies	1	2
Policy implementation	Methods of putting plans and strategies into actions	4	8
Problem identification	Activities leading to the development of policies	1	8



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