

SOCIO-CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF GIRL CHILD EARLY MARRIAGE AND ITS DISRUPTIVE IMPACT ON CAREER ASPIRATIONS

BY

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17471730>

Abstract

Early marriage remains one of the most pressing socio-cultural challenges confronting the girl child, particularly in developing societies where traditions, poverty, and gender inequalities intersect to undermine the rights and aspirations of young girls. The paper argues that poverty, economic pressures, entrenched gender norms, patriarchal practices, traditional beliefs, and family or community expectations remain powerful forces that legitimize early marriage despite existing legal and policy frameworks. Early marriage is revealed to disrupt girls' access to education, limit career opportunities, and perpetuate cycles of poverty across generations. The discussion also underscores the psychological and emotional toll of early unions, the reproductive health burdens imposed on young girls, and the broader denial of agency and self-development. The paper further interrogates the role of international conventions alongside national legal frameworks in curbing the practice. However, it stresses that laws and policies alone are insufficient without grassroots implementation, community reorientation, and socio-economic empowerment initiatives. In addressing the way forward, the study identifies community-based interventions aimed at changing social norms, educational empowerment initiatives that ensure girls remain in school, strong policy implementation and advocacy, and the active involvement of parents, teachers, civil society, and traditional leaders. The study concludes that tackling early marriage requires a multi-pronged approach that integrates cultural change, educational access, economic empowerment, and effective legal enforcement.

Keywords: Career Aspirations, Early Marriage, Disruptive Impact, Girl child, Socio-Cultural Determinants,

Introduction

Early marriage among girls remains one of the most persistent socio-cultural challenges confronting Nigeria today. According to UNICEF (2024), four in every ten Nigerian girls are married before their eighteenth birthday, making the country one of the highest contributors to the global burden of child marriage. Despite national laws such as the Child Rights Act 2003 and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015, the practice persists, particularly in states where socio-cultural traditions, patriarchal gender norms, and weak policy enforcement override formal protections. Erulkar and Muthengi (2023) further highlights wide

disparities across regions, with the northern and some southern communities recording significantly higher rates, often linked to religion, ethnicity, and household poverty.

The roots of girl child marriage in Nigeria extend beyond poverty and legal loopholes; they are deeply embedded in cultural values and traditions that prize female chastity, uphold patriarchal lineage systems, and emphasize the social prestige attached to early marriage. As Bolarinwa et al. (2022) explain, household poverty and community-level expectations reinforce each other, while low educational attainment leaves young girls particularly vulnerable to early unions. Qualitative studies reveal that many families consider early marriage a form of protection against stigma and harassment, particularly in regions where adolescent female sexuality is tightly controlled (PLOS ONE, 2024). In contexts where religious prescriptions and the tradition of bride price still carry enormous weight, marrying girls “on time” is often seen as both a moral obligation and an economic necessity.

The consequences of such marriages, however, are profound and disruptive. At a time when adolescent girls should be consolidating their education and shaping their aspirations for the future, early marriage forces them into premature adult roles. Erulkar and Muthengi (2023) stressed that child marriage is one of the leading causes of school dropout among girls, with devastating implications for their career aspirations. In Zimbabwe, Pasuwa and Chisango (2021) found that child brides were significantly less likely to complete secondary school, a pattern consistent across many sub-Saharan African countries. Similarly, in Malawi, Ricker-Gilbert et al. (2022) showed that marriage reduced not just school attendance but also women’s ability to translate education into meaningful employment, effectively narrowing their career pathways.

The impact extends beyond education and employment to broader issues of empowerment and self-determination. Evidence from South Asia, as reported by Tauseef and Sufian (2024), indicates that delaying marriage significantly strengthens women’s bargaining power within households and enhances their long-term capacity to pursue professional goals. In Nigeria, the economic losses are staggering. Fang et al. (2024) estimate that the country loses billions of dollars annually due to the combined effects of lost education, high fertility, and poor health outcomes linked to child marriage. These losses are not just financial but generational, perpetuating cycles of poverty while denying girls the opportunity to realize their career dreams.

Taken together, these insights point to a dual reality. On the one hand, girl child early marriage in Nigeria is a product of entrenched socio-cultural determinants, religion, ethnicity, poverty, and deeply held gender ideologies. On the other hand, the practice severely disrupts the aspiration window through which girls imagine their futures, cutting short their education, imposing early motherhood, restricting mobility, and

diminishing their agency. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the socio-cultural factors that sustain early marriage and to analyze how these factors intersect to disrupt the career aspirations of the Nigerian girl child. In doing so, it hopes to shed light on the urgent need for interventions that not only enforce protective legislation but also challenge harmful norms, expand educational opportunities, and create environments where girls can dream and pursue meaningful careers.

The Girl Child in Socio-Cultural Context

The position of the girl child in society is a subject of intense concern because she often finds herself at the intersection of cultural expectations, gender ideologies, and limited opportunities. In many African societies, particularly in Nigeria, the girl child is viewed through the lens of social roles rather than individual potential. She is often socialised from birth into responsibilities of caregiving, household chores, and obedience to authority, while boys are encouraged to display independence, leadership, and assertiveness. This early social conditioning creates unequal opportunities between boys and girls, especially in access to education and participation in community development.

According to UNICEF (2024), the girl child in many Nigerian communities is considered a bearer of family honor, where her chastity and moral conduct are highly guarded. In such settings, decisions about her schooling, movement, and marriage are rarely in her hands but are determined by family and community structures. Once she reaches puberty, her identity is often reduced to her potential as a wife and mother, while her talents and aspirations may be overlooked. Cultural practices such as bride price further reinforce this perception, as girls are sometimes seen as sources of financial or social gain for their families.

Bolarinwa et al. (2022) emphasize that these socio cultural norms do not exist in isolation but interact with household poverty and weak policy enforcement to restrict the growth of the girl child. For instance, in poor households, girls are more likely to be withdrawn from school to assist with domestic chores or to be married off early as a strategy to ease financial burdens. In this way, the socio-cultural context becomes a powerful determinant of the trajectory of the girl child's life, dictating not only when she marries but also whether she can develop the educational foundation and career aspirations that would empower her in adulthood.

Meaning and Perspectives of Early Marriage

Early marriage, also known as child marriage, is defined as a union where one or both partners are below the age of eighteen. It has been widely recognized as a violation of human rights because it denies children the chance to fully enjoy childhood, pursue education, and make informed life choices. UNICEF (2023) describes

early marriage as a harmful practice that interrupts personal development, exposes young girls to health risks, and compromises their ability to participate meaningfully in society. Within Nigeria, however, early marriage is often interpreted differently through cultural and religious lenses. Many families consider it a way of protecting girls from premarital pregnancy, preserving family honor, and building alliances between kinship groups. In some communities, it is perceived as a religious requirement, while in others it is defended as a tradition that has been passed down across generations. These cultural justifications often overshadow the legal frameworks that exist to protect children. Even where child rights laws are in place, their effectiveness may be undermined by community-level acceptance of early marriage as a normal practice.

The perceived benefits of early marriage are, however, contradicted by overwhelming evidence of its negative consequences. Studies across Africa and beyond show that early marriage drastically reduces the chances of girls completing their education. For example, Pasuwa and Chisango (2021) found in Zimbabwe that girls who were married before the age of eighteen were far less likely to finish secondary school, leaving them with diminished career prospects. Moreover, early marriage is linked with early childbearing, increased health risks, and reduced autonomy in personal and household decisions. What some communities view as protection is in reality a practice that locks young girls into cycles of poverty, dependence, and unrealized potential. Thus, while early marriage is defended in some socio-cultural contexts as a social safeguard, it is ultimately a practice that undermines the development of the girl child. It robs her of agency, interrupts her education, and imposes adult responsibilities long before she is ready, thereby setting in motion lifelong disadvantages.

Career Aspirations of the Girl Child

Career aspirations are the visions and ambitions individuals hold about the professions they hope to pursue in the future. For the girl child, these aspirations are often shaped by her family environment, access to education, exposure to role models, and the encouragement she receives from society. When girls are supported to remain in school and allowed to explore their talents, their aspirations can extend to professions in medicine, law, engineering, politics, entrepreneurship, and the arts. Such aspirations not only benefit the individual girl but also contribute significantly to the social and economic development of the nation.

Unfortunately, early marriage disrupts this process of aspiration building. When a girl is married before completing her education, her focus shifts abruptly from academic and career pursuits to the immediate demands of domestic life, childbearing, and caregiving. Ricker-Gilbert et al. (2022) observed in Malawi that young women who were married early found it difficult to convert their education into gainful employment, as domestic expectations consumed their time and energy. This reflects a broader reality across sub-Saharan

Africa where early marriage narrows the career options available to girls and restricts their economic independence.

In Nigeria, the consequences of lost career aspirations are felt not only at the personal level but also at the national level. Fang et al. (2024) estimate that the economic burden of child marriage in Nigeria, which includes lost education and career opportunities, amounts to billions of dollars each year. Beyond financial loss, the psychological damage is immense, as girls are stripped of the chance to dream, plan, and work toward meaningful futures. The denial of career aspirations is therefore both an individual tragedy and a societal setback.

Career aspirations are shaped in the critical years of adolescence, when young people are most impressionable and ambitious. For the girl child, this period should be one of expanding horizons and nurturing ambitions. Instead, in many communities, it becomes the point at which dreams are silenced by early marriage. Empowering girls to pursue their aspirations requires not only educational access but also the dismantling of harmful socio-cultural practices that diminish their potential. When girls are allowed to envision and achieve careers of their choice, they become active contributors to national growth and powerful symbols of social transformation.

Socio-Cultural Determinants of Early Marriage

Early marriage, often defined as a formal or informal union involving a child below the age of eighteen, remains a pressing socio cultural and developmental challenge across many societies. It is particularly prevalent in sub Saharan Africa and South Asia, where cultural traditions, poverty, gender inequality, and weak enforcement of child rights converge to perpetuate the practice. Early marriage does not occur in isolation; it is shaped by socio cultural determinants that normalize the practice and sustain its persistence despite legislative prohibitions. These determinants include poverty, gender and patriarchal norms, religious and traditional beliefs, family and community pressures, and limited access to education. Each of these factors interacts to produce an environment where early marriage is seen as socially acceptable, economically necessary, or even morally required.

Poverty and Economic Pressures

Poverty is perhaps the most cited driver of early marriage. Families struggling to meet basic needs may view marrying off daughters as a coping mechanism to reduce household expenses or to secure financial gain through bride price. Bolarinwa et al. (2022), in their study of Nigerian households, note that families in poor communities often marry off girls early to ease economic hardship. This strategy is also prevalent in other

developing countries, where early marriage is used to secure the economic survival of the household. In fragile economies, crises such as conflict and climate shocks further intensify reliance on child marriage as an economic safety net. By prioritizing short term financial relief, families inadvertently sacrifice the long term wellbeing and aspirations of the girl child, reinforcing cycles of poverty and dependence.

Gender Norms and Patriarchal Practices

Gender norms and patriarchy play a fundamental role in legitimizing early marriage. In many societies, including Nigeria, patriarchy positions the girl child as subordinate, with her worth tied to reproductive and domestic roles. UNICEF (2024) observed that in such cultural contexts, girls are socialized to believe that their primary function is marriage and childbearing, rather than education and career development. Patriarchal structures also privilege the authority of fathers and male relatives in making marital decisions for girls, often without their consent. Such gendered expectations contribute to the truncation of girls' educational and career opportunities by embedding social beliefs that a girl's future lies in her husband's household. This patriarchal framework, sustained by cultural norms, entrenches the perception that early marriage is a natural transition into womanhood.

Religious and Traditional Beliefs

Religious and traditional beliefs often reinforce the practice of early marriage, especially where sacred texts or customs are interpreted to endorse it. In Northern Nigeria, for instance, some Islamic communities justify early marriage on the basis of cultural interpretations of religious teachings. Erulkar and Muthengi (2023) stresses that the influence of religious and traditional beliefs in perpetuating early marriage is profound, particularly in rural areas where customary law is stronger than statutory law. Similarly, in South Asia, traditional practices such as dowry and caste obligations perpetuate early marriages under the guise of cultural continuity. These belief systems, whether religious or cultural, serve as powerful tools of social conformity, often silencing dissent and overriding the legal protections designed to safeguard children.

Influence of Family and Community Expectations

Family and community expectations are central to the perpetuation of early marriage. In many societies, marriage is not seen as an individual decision but as a collective family and community responsibility. Parents may marry off daughters early to protect family honor, secure alliances, or prevent premarital pregnancies. Pasuwa and Chisango (2021) note that in Zimbabwe, families often perceive early marriage as a safeguard against social stigma. In Nigeria, similar expectations persist, with families valuing early marriage as a way of maintaining respectability and avoiding perceived shame associated with delayed unions. Communities that

regard early marriage as a cultural norm also create an environment where parents who resist the practice are seen as deviating from tradition. Thus, social pressure becomes a strong determinant, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of the practice.

Educational Attainment and Access Barriers

Education plays a dual role as both a protective factor against early marriage and a barrier when access is denied. Girls who remain in school are significantly less likely to marry early because education broadens their horizons, enhances their self confidence, and increases their value beyond domestic roles. Pasuwa and Chisango (2021) found that child marriage in Zimbabwe sharply reduced the likelihood of completing secondary school, a pattern echoed in Nigeria. Fang et al. (2024) argue that the loss of education due to early marriage not only diminishes individual career opportunities but also imposes heavy economic burdens on society, with Nigeria losing billions annually. Conversely, lack of access to schools, poor infrastructure, gender based discrimination in classrooms, and high dropout rates create fertile ground for early marriage. When education is inaccessible or undervalued, marriage becomes the default option, especially in rural and disadvantaged communities.

Disruptive Impact of Early Marriage on Career Aspirations

Early marriage among girls remains a deeply rooted practice that extends beyond personal choice to broader socio-cultural, economic, and structural determinants. Its implications are far-reaching, not only for the education and empowerment of the girl child but also for her long-term career aspirations and overall development. While early marriage is often justified on cultural or religious grounds, its consequences disproportionately disadvantage girls by truncating their education, restricting personal growth, and confining them to premature adult responsibilities. Early child marriage has several negative implications on the career aspirations of the girl child. They include the intersections between education, psychological well-being, health, personal agency, and intergenerational poverty.

Educational Disruption and Limited Opportunities

Education is widely recognized as the foundation for career development, yet early marriage remains a leading cause of school dropout among girls. According to Ogunniyi (2023), child marriage is strongly correlated with decreased school enrollment and completion rates, particularly at the secondary level, which is critical for shaping career aspirations. When girls are married off early, their schooling is often interrupted due to household duties, marital obligations, and pressures to bear children. Pasuwa and Chisango (2021) found in Zimbabwe that married girls were significantly less likely to progress academically compared to their

unmarried peers, a situation mirrored in Nigeria where marriage is often perceived as a substitute for education. Without education, girls face limited career opportunities and are unable to compete in an increasingly knowledge-driven labor market, thereby narrowing their life prospects.

Psychological and Emotional Consequences

The psychological impact of early marriage also plays a significant role in constraining career aspirations. Tauseef and Sufian (2024). observed that married adolescents often experience anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness due to the abrupt transition from childhood to adulthood. The loss of peer networks and the denial of personal autonomy further diminish self-esteem and motivation to pursue ambitions. In Bangladesh, Tauseef and Sufian (2024) reported that girls in early unions displayed reduced self-confidence, which negatively affected their ability to envision or plan for professional careers. These psychological burdens create invisible barriers that prevent girls from aspiring to higher educational and career goals, even when opportunities exist.

Reproductive Health Burdens and Maternal Roles

Marriage at a young age is closely linked to early childbearing, with severe consequences for the health and professional development of the girl child. Fang et al. (2024) explained that adolescent mothers face higher risks of maternal mortality and complications, which often result in lifelong health challenges. The dual responsibility of managing childbearing and household care restricts time and energy for education or vocational training. Studies in sub-Saharan Africa show that young mothers are less likely to return to school after childbirth, making re-entry into educational or professional tracks difficult (World Bank, 2023). In Nigeria, cultural expectations around motherhood further entrench these limitations, with societal approval of a woman often tied to her role as a wife and mother rather than her individual career achievements.

Loss of Agency and Personal Development

Early marriage often deprives girls of their agency, curtailing their freedom to make decisions about their own lives. Bolarinwa et al. (2022) emphasized that child brides frequently have little control over their educational and professional choices, as decisions are made by husbands, in-laws, or community elders. This loss of agency denies girls the chance to develop personal goals, explore talents, or invest in skill-building activities that could enhance career development. UNICEF (2024) also noted that empowerment opportunities diminish significantly when girls marry early, as their identities become subsumed under family roles and obligations. The absence of autonomy limits their ability to aspire or prepare for meaningful careers in adulthood.

Intergenerational Cycle of Poverty and Limited Careers

The economic consequences of early marriage extend beyond the immediate generation. Fang et al. (2024) estimated that child marriage costs countries like Nigeria billions annually in lost productivity and human capital. Girls who marry early are less likely to enter the workforce or attain high-paying jobs, resulting in financial dependency on their spouses. This lack of income-generating opportunities perpetuates poverty, which in turn increases the likelihood of their daughters also experiencing early marriage. Ricker-Gilbert et al. (2022) highlighted how these intergenerational effects entrench gender inequality and reduce women's participation in professional and leadership roles. As a result, the cycle of poverty continues, limiting not only the aspirations of today's girl child but also those of future generations.

Policy and Legal Frameworks on Early Marriage

The persistence of early marriage remains a pressing global challenge despite widespread recognition of its detrimental consequences on the girl child's education, health, and career aspirations. Over the past two decades, governments, international organizations, and advocacy groups have introduced a variety of policies and legal frameworks to curb the practice and protect children's rights. National laws are expected to align with international conventions to provide enforceable mechanisms that safeguard the girl child from harmful socio-cultural practices. However, weak enforcement, cultural resistance, and policy gaps continue to hinder progress in many societies (UNICEF, 2024). Understanding the role of both national and international frameworks is critical in assessing how legal instruments can be strengthened to address early marriage.

National Policies and Laws

At the national level, many countries, including Nigeria, have enacted laws to prohibit child marriage. The Nigerian Child Rights Act of 2003 stipulates 18 years as the legal minimum age for marriage, aligning with global standards for protecting children. However, implementation has been inconsistent, as some states, particularly in Northern Nigeria, have yet to domesticate or fully enforce the Act due to strong cultural and religious influences (Akinola & Yusuf, 2022). This lack of uniformity has contributed to the persistence of early marriage, particularly in rural and marginalized communities.

Similarly, other African nations have adopted specific statutes aimed at preventing child marriage. For instance, Ethiopia's Family Code of 2000 explicitly sets the marriage age at 18 years, and Kenya's Marriage Act of 2014 criminalizes unions below this age. While these laws exist, enforcement challenges remain widespread, and customary practices often override statutory provisions (World Bank, 2023). In many

contexts, legal reforms are undermined by weak institutional capacity, limited awareness, and a lack of political will, which diminish the impact of such protective measures.

International Conventions and Commitments

Globally, various conventions and commitments form the backbone of legal frameworks designed to eliminate early marriage. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989, ratified by nearly all countries, emphasizes the right of every child to protection from harmful practices. Complementary to this is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) of 1979, which obligates signatories to abolish child marriage by addressing cultural and gender-based inequalities (United Nations, 2023).

Regionally, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) also stipulates 18 years as the minimum marriage age and calls for strict measures to protect children from harmful traditional practices (African Union, 2022). Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5.3, commit nations to eliminate child marriage by 2030, highlighting the global consensus on addressing the issue.

While these international instruments set strong normative frameworks, their translation into national contexts often encounters socio-cultural resistance. Nwosu and Adepoju (2024) argued that without deliberate efforts to bridge global commitments with local realities, policies may remain symbolic rather than transformative. This highlights the necessity of integrating awareness campaigns, community dialogue, and enforcement mechanisms alongside ratification of treaties. National policies and international conventions together provide a robust framework for combating early marriage. However, their effectiveness depends on the synergy between legal provisions, political commitment, and socio-cultural acceptance. Laws alone cannot dismantle entrenched norms; therefore, governments must invest in enforcement, awareness, and social change initiatives to ensure that the rights of the girl child are not only legally recognized but also practically upheld.

Strategies for Mitigating Early Marriage and Promoting Girl Child Career Aspirations

Early marriage continues to undermine the potential of millions of girls worldwide by limiting their access to education, career opportunities, and personal development. The practice is deeply entrenched in socio-cultural traditions, poverty, and gender-based norms, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where prevalence remains highest (UNICEF, 2024). Effective strategies for mitigating early marriage must therefore be multi-pronged, combining community engagement, educational empowerment, policy enforcement, and strong support from parents, teachers, and civil society actors. These approaches are not only critical in curbing early marriage but also essential in ensuring that the girl child's career aspirations are nurtured and realized.

Community-Based Interventions

Community-driven initiatives are among the most effective strategies for combating early marriage, as they address the socio-cultural drivers of the practice at the grassroots level. According to Nwosu and Adepoju (2024), community dialogue programs that involve religious leaders, traditional rulers, and youth advocates have shown significant success in changing perceptions about child marriage. For instance, in Northern Nigeria, NGOs like the Girls Not Brides Network have implemented participatory community education sessions that challenge harmful norms and promote the value of girls' education. Case studies from Ethiopia demonstrate that community-based "Berhane Hewan" programs, which integrate peer mentorship and economic incentives for parents, have contributed to reducing child marriage rates and increasing school retention among adolescent girls (Erulkar & Muthengi, 2023). Such initiatives work best when communities feel ownership of interventions, thus ensuring sustainability and long-term impact.

Educational Empowerment Initiatives

Education remains a powerful deterrent against early marriage and a pathway to career fulfillment. As UNICEF (2024) observes, girls who complete secondary education are less likely to marry before the age of 18 and more likely to pursue careers that enhance their socioeconomic status. In Nigeria, scholarship schemes and safe school initiatives targeting rural girls have been introduced to reduce dropout rates and delay marriage (Ogunniyi, 2023). Programs such as "Keeping Girls in School" in Malawi and "Educate A Child" in Ghana have also demonstrated how financial support, mentorship, and school safety policies can empower girls to pursue long-term educational and career aspirations (World Bank, 2023). Furthermore, digital learning opportunities have emerged as innovative platforms for enhancing access to education, especially in marginalized regions. Nwosu and Adepoju (2024) revealed that online and mobile-based learning programs are helping Nigerian girls in conflict-affected areas sustain their education, thus creating opportunities for career advancement despite systemic challenges.

Policy Implementation and Advocacy

The presence of strong legal and policy frameworks is crucial but insufficient without consistent enforcement. According to Akinola and Yusuf (2022), gaps in the domestication of the Child Rights Act of 2003 across Nigerian states weaken the national response to early marriage. Advocacy groups such as the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) and UN Women have been instrumental in pushing for accountability, stronger enforcement of marriage laws, and policies that protect girls' educational rights (United Nations, 2023). At the global level, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5.3, call for the elimination of

child marriage by 2030, making advocacy not only a local necessity but also a global priority. International commitments like CEDAW and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provide strong advocacy platforms for holding governments accountable. Advocacy also extends to resource mobilization, ensuring adequate funding for girl-child education, community awareness programs, and protection services (World Bank, 2023).

Role of Parents, Teachers, and Civil Society

Parents, teachers, and civil society organizations form the frontline defense in protecting girls from early marriage and fostering career aspirations. Ogunniyi (2023) notes that parental attitudes toward education are often decisive in determining whether a girl continues her studies or is forced into marriage. Empowering parents through awareness campaigns, conditional cash transfers, and livelihood support programs can reduce the economic incentives behind child marriage. Teachers also play a crucial role in mentoring, counseling, and providing career guidance. Nwosu and Adepoju (2024) noted that schools that integrate life skills education and vocational training help girls envision career paths beyond traditional domestic roles. Civil society organizations, on the other hand, bridge the gap between communities and government policies. Local NGOs in Nigeria, such as ActionAid Nigeria and Save the Children, have championed campaigns to protect girls at risk of early marriage and promote educational opportunities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The problem of early marriage among the girl child is deeply rooted in socio-cultural, economic, religious, and patriarchal traditions that continue to perpetuate gender inequality and limit the realization of girls' full potential. Socio-cultural determinants such as poverty, gender norms, traditional beliefs, and family expectations significantly influence the persistence of this practice, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Early marriage has been revealed to disrupt girls' educational pursuits, truncate their career aspirations, and trap them in cycles of poverty and disempowerment. Its impact extends beyond the individual girl child to entire communities and nations, as it undermines social development and economic growth. Furthermore, the psychological, emotional, and reproductive health burdens associated with early marriage often deprive girls of agency and personal development, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of marginalization. Despite the existence of international conventions and national policies in Nigeria and other countries, enforcement remains weak and inadequate. This calls for a holistic approach that integrates socio-cultural change, education, policy implementation, and community participation. This makes it evident that addressing early marriage requires more than legislative provisions; it requires a shift in attitudes, values, and

societal practices that deny girls their rights. Most importantly, strategies must not only prevent early marriage but also promote career aspirations and empowerment for the girl child, enabling her to become an agent of transformation within her family and community. Based on this, the following recommendations are offered

1. Governments should ensure strict enforcement of laws prohibiting early marriage, such as Nigeria's Child Rights Act, and harmonize conflicting customary and religious practices with human rights principles.
2. Governments should also ensure continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in order to assess the impact of interventions, identify gaps, and replicate successful models across different communities.
3. Governments, NGOs, and donor agencies should provide scholarships, mentorship programs, and safe learning environments to keep girls in school. Curricula should be enriched with life skills, career guidance, and reproductive health education to prepare girls for future opportunities.
4. Traditional leaders, religious authorities, and community elders should be engaged in sensitization programs that challenge harmful practices and promote positive norms.
5. Parents should be sensitized to the long-term benefits of delaying marriage for their daughters, not only for the girls themselves but also for family and societal prosperity.
6. Civil society organizations should collaborate with local NGOs and international organizations in advocacy, monitoring, and supporting victims of early marriage.

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