Influence of Early Marriage on Girl-Child Education in Nigeria: Implications for Guidance

By

Oguche, T. E., Adamu, E. and Adikwu, V. O.
Department of Guidance and Counselling
Faculty of Education
University of Abuja
Email: thankgod.oguche@uniabuja.edu.ng

Abstracts

This study examined the Influence of Early Marriage on Girl-Child Education in Nigeria: Implications for Guidance and Counselling. The study adopted a descriptive survey design with a sample of 442 respondents drawn from selected schools across urban and rural areas in North-Central Nigeria. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data, while the results were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and t-test statistics. Findings revealed that early marriage significantly hinders girls' educational access, retention, and progression, with a sectional mean of 2.63, indicating that respondents generally agreed that early marriage remains a major barrier to girl-child education. The study further found that guidance and counselling interventions play a crucial role in reducing the negative effects of early marriage through awareness creation, parental counselling, and empowerment programmes (sectional mean = 2.79). The t-test analysis showed a significant influence of early marriage on girl-child education (t = 0.113, p < 0.05), while location-based differences were not significant (p > 0.05), indicating that both urban and rural girls are similarly affected. The study concluded that early marriage continues to limit educational opportunities and socio-economic advancement for girls in Nigeria. It recommended strengthening school counselling services, enforcing laws against child marriage, intensifying public awareness campaigns, and providing educational incentives to enhance girls' retention and achievement.

Keywords: Early marriage, Girl-child education, Guidance and counselling, Gender, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a critical driver of socio-economic and personal development. For the girl-child in particular, education has the potential to break cycles of poverty, improve health outcomes, and empower future generations. However, in Nigeria, the educational opportunities of girls are often curtailed by early marriage, defined as the formal or informal union of a girl before the age of 18. According to the 2021 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), approximately 43% of girls aged 20–24 were married before reaching 18, with northern regions exhibiting prevalence rates as high as 60%.

Early marriage not only interrupts the educational trajectory of girls but also exposes them to a host of challenges including adolescent pregnancy, maternal mortality, limited employment opportunities, and diminished social agency. Empirical studies have consistently shown that girls who marry early are significantly more likely to drop out of school and perform poorly academically compared to their unmarried peers (Eze & Obi, 2020; Oduro & Adekunle, 2018). These trends perpetuate cycles of poverty and gender inequality, undermining national development efforts.

The persistence of early marriage in Nigeria is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural, economic, and social factors. Traditional norms in some communities prioritize marriage over education, especially for girls, while poverty often compels families to marry off daughters to reduce financial burdens. Religious interpretations and societal pressures further reinforce this practice, making prevention challenging.

Statement of the Problem

Despite Nigeria's efforts to promote girl-child education through legal frameworks such as the Child Rights Act (2003) and international commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), early marriage remains a pervasive challenge. The 2021 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) reported that 43% of girls aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18, with northern regions exhibiting even higher prevalence rates. Early marriage disrupts the educational trajectory of girls, leading to high school dropout rates, low academic performance, and limited future socio-economic opportunities. Empirical evidence suggests that girls who marry early are significantly more likely to experience adverse health outcomes, including adolescent pregnancy and maternal complications, which further hinder educational attainment. Cultural norms, poverty, and societal pressures continue to perpetuate early marriage, making prevention and intervention efforts difficult. Although guidance and counselling services have been recognized as crucial tools in promoting educational continuity and empowering at-risk girls, there is limited empirical data in Nigeria quantifying the influence of early marriage on girl-child education and the effectiveness of counselling interventions. This gap poses challenges for policymakers, educators, and counsellors in designing evidence-based strategies to mitigate the impact of early marriage.

Therefore, this study seeks to empirically examine the influence of early marriage on educational outcomes among girls in Nigeria, with a particular focus on how guidance and counselling interventions can address the challenges posed by early marriage and enhance girls' access to, and retention in, education.

Objectives of the Study

The study investigated the influence of early marriage on girl-child education in Nigeria: Implications for Guidance. Specifically, the study investigated the:

Specific Objectives

i. Influence of early marriage on girl-child education in Nigeria.
ii. Role of guidance and counselling interventions in reducing the negative impact of early marriage on girls' education.

Research Questions

1. What is the Influence of early marriage on girl-child education in Nigeria?
2. What are the roles of guidance and counselling interventions in reducing the negative impact of early marriage on girls' education?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

H_{01}: There is no significant influence of early-marriage on girl-child education in Nigeria.

H_{02}: There is no significant difference in the mean rating of students from rural and urban areas on the influence of early-marriage on girl-child education in Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study illustrates the relationship between early marriage and girl-child education in Nigeria, highlighting the role of guidance and counselling as an intervening variable. It provides a visual and theoretical representation of how early marriage affects educational outcomes and how interventions can mitigate its negative effects.

Girl-Child Education

Girl-child Education refers to the formal and informal instruction, training, and learning opportunities provided to female children, typically from early childhood through secondary and tertiary levels. It encompasses access to schooling, retention, academic achievement, and progression through the educational system. Girl-child education is not only a fundamental human right but also a strategic investment in national development, as it contributes significantly to reducing poverty, improving health outcomes, promoting gender equality, and fostering economic growth (UNESCO, 2015). The girl-child has become a victim of female trafficking across international borders, being denied education, and consigned to early marriage. They can be seen but not to be heard in both private and the public spaces of decision making. The girl-child by the natural status ascribed to her by male defined norms societal conduct and behaviour remains a property to be owned and commoditized (Ben-Kalio, Oguche, & Usman, 2024).

Girl-child education refers to the formal or informal learning experiences of girls that contribute to their cognitive, social, emotional, and economic development. It encompasses enrollment, attendance, retention, academic performance, and completion of primary, secondary, and higher education. Education for girls is not only a fundamental human right but also a critical tool for achieving gender equality, social empowerment, and national development (UNESCO, 2021).

Importance of Girl-Child Education

Education equips girls with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for personal and societal advancement. Research has shown that educated girls:

1. Are more likely to delay marriage and childbirth, thereby improving maternal and child health outcomes.
2. Contribute significantly to household income and national development.
3. Possess higher levels of agency, decision-making capacity, and self-esteem.
4. Act as change agents in their communities, promoting literacy, health awareness, and social justice.

In Nigeria, educating the girl-child is particularly important because it addresses the persistent gender gap in literacy and economic participation. According to the 2021 NDHS, literacy among women aged 15–24 is 68% in urban areas but only 42% in rural areas, highlighting disparities in educational access.

Challenges Affecting Girl-Child Education in Nigeria

Despite its importance, girl-child education in Nigeria faces numerous obstacles, many of which are exacerbated by early marriage:

1. **Early Marriage and Dropout Rates:** Marriage before the age of 18 disrupts schooling. Studies indicate that **nearly** 70% of early-married girls in Northern Nigeria drop out of school permanently (Eze & Obi, 2020).
2. **Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes:** In certain communities, educating girls is seen as less valuable than preparing them for domestic roles, which perpetuates early withdrawal from school.
3. **Economic Constraints:** Poverty forces families to prioritize boys' education, pay bride prices, or marry off daughters to reduce household expenses.
4. **Access and Infrastructure Issues:** Limited schools, long travel distances, inadequate sanitation, and lack of female teachers disproportionately affect girls, particularly in rural areas.
5. **Health and Reproductive Challenges:** Early pregnancies and maternal complications often result in prolonged absence or permanent school dropout.

Link Between Early Marriage and Girl-Child Education

Empirical studies underscore the strong negative correlation between early marriage and educational outcomes. Early-married girls are less likely to enroll in school, have lower academic performance, and are less likely to complete secondary education. For example, Eze and Obi (2020) reported that married girls

scored an average of 48.6% in examinations, compared to 72.3% for their unmarried peers. This educational disruption perpetuates cycles of poverty, gender inequality, and limited socio-economic mobility.

Role of Guidance and Counselling in Enhancing Girl-Child Education

Guidance and counselling serve as critical interventions in promoting educational continuity among at-risk girls:

1. **Awareness and Advocacy:** Counsellors educate girls, parents, and communities about the long-term consequences of early marriage on education, health, and socio-economic development.
2. **Psychosocial Support:** Counselling provides emotional and cognitive support to at-risk girls, fostering resilience, goal-setting, and self-efficacy.
3. **Mentorship and Reintegration Programs:** Counsellors coordinate programs that help girls who have dropped out return to school, bridging gaps caused by early marriage.
4. **Community Collaboration:** By working with local leaders, religious groups, and NGOs, counsellors can influence cultural attitudes, reduce societal pressure for early marriage, and promote the value of education for girls.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is anchored on Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) to explain the relationship between early marriage and girl-child education, and to justify the role of guidance and counselling interventions.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory posits that education represents an investment in an individual's knowledge, skills, and competencies, which enhances productivity, earning potential, and socio-economic development. From this perspective, every year a girl spends in school increases her capacity to contribute meaningfully to society and the economy. Early marriage, however, truncates this investment by forcing girls to leave school prematurely, thereby limiting skill acquisition, career opportunities, and long-term economic independence. Empirical evidence suggests that girls who marry early are more likely to experience low literacy, unemployment, and poverty (Eze & Obi, 2020). In the context of Nigeria, where socio-economic development is closely tied to human capital development, early marriage represents not just a personal loss for the girl but also a broader societal cost.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory emphasizes that behaviour is acquired through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social contexts (Bandura, 1977). In many Nigerian communities, early marriage is normalized: girls observe older peers and family members marrying young, internalize the practice as socially acceptable, and anticipate limited educational opportunities. Similarly, societal reinforcement through cultural expectations, peer pressure, and parental approval perpetuates these behaviours. This theory explains why educational discontinuation and early marriage are intergenerational and culturally entrenched.

Guidance and counselling serve as critical interventions by reshaping behaviours and social norms. By providing information, mentorship, emotional support, and advocacy, counsellors can challenge the cultural and social reinforcements that encourage early marriage and school dropout. Counselling promotes resilience, goal-setting, and self-efficacy among at-risk girls, helping them to resist societal pressures and continue their education. In essence, guidance and counselling operationalize both the Human Capital and Social Learning Theories: they preserve the investment in education (human capital) while modifying learned behaviours and normative social patterns (social learning).

By combining Human Capital and Social Learning perspectives, this study conceptualizes early marriage as both an economic and socio-cultural barrier to girl-child education. Human Capital Theory highlights the developmental and economic losses of truncated education, while Social Learning Theory explains the behavioural and normative mechanisms through which early marriage is perpetuated. Together, these theories

justify the role of structured guidance and counselling programs as interventions to empower girls, reshape social norms, and enhance educational continuity.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted **a** descriptive survey design, this is a research method that describes a given state of affairs at a particular time (Afu, Oguche, Usman and Gimba, 2023). This design is appropriate for investigating the influence of early marriage on girl-child education and for examining the role of guidance and counselling. The survey design allows for the collection of data from a large sample to analyze patterns, correlations, and effects using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprised girls aged 10–18 years in selected communities across Northern Nigeria, where early marriage is most prevalent. The population also included school authorities and guidance counsellors to provide additional perspectives on educational continuity and counselling interventions.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of 442 respondents were selected for the study using stratified random sampling. Stratification was based on:

1. Age groups (10–12, 13–15, 16–18 years)
2. Marital status (married vs. unmarried)
3. Location (rural vs. urban)

This sampling approach ensures representative data that captures variations in educational experiences, socio-cultural contexts, and exposure to guidance and counselling.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of two sections. The first section comprised the demographic information of the students while the second questions comprised items that covered the research questions. The questionnaire employed Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended items to capture both quantitative and qualitative data.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Content Validity: The instrument was reviewed by five experts in Guidance and Counselling and Educational Research to ensure relevance and clarity.

Reliability: A pilot study involving 40 respondents (10% of the sample size) was conducted. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for internal consistency was 0.84, indicating that the instrument is reliable for data collection.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out in collaboration with school authorities and guidance counsellors. Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained from parents, guardians, and participants prior to the administration of questionnaires. Care was taken to maintain confidentiality, ensure voluntary participation, and clarify any items that respondents found difficult to understand.

Method of Data Analysis

The researcher used both descriptive and inferential statistics to analyse the data to collected. Descriptively, the data that collected from the respondents were analysed using simple percentage; frequency counts and mean scores for the demographic data and research questions. The decision rule was any value from 2.50 and above were agreed and any value below 2.50 were considered as disagreed. Inferentially, the hypotheses of the study were tested at 0.05 level of significance using t-test statistical analysis.

Data Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 442 respondents participated in the study. The age distribution showed that 15% of respondents were between 10–12 years, 35% were between 13–15 years, and 50% were between 16–18 years. Regarding residence, 60% of the respondents lived in rural areas, while 40% were from urban locations. In terms of marital status, 21% of respondents were married, whereas 79% were unmarried. These demographic patterns indicate that a significant proportion of respondents were at risk of early marriage, particularly those in rural areas and older age groups.

Data Analysis and Results

This section contains data on the research questions answered and the results of the hypotheses testing in this study.

4.3.1 Answers to Research Questions

Research Question One: What is the influence of early marriage on girl-child education in Nigeria?

Table 1: The Influence of Early Marriage on Girl-Child Education in Nigeria are:

N=442

S/N	Statement	Mean	Std Dev	Decision
1.	Early marriage prevents girls from completing school	2.65	0.93	Agreed
2.	Early marriage negatively affects academic performance.	2.56	1.03	Agreed
3.	Girls who marry early have fewer opportunities for higher education.	2.76	0.97	Agreed
4.	Marriage before 18 increases the likelihood of school dropout.	2.52	0.52	Agreed
5.	Families in my community prioritize marriage over girls' education.	2.75	0.66	Agreed
6.	Early marriage negatively affects girls' personal and social development.	2.80	0.99	Agreed
7.	Girls who marry early have limited career prospects in the future.	2.60	0.98	Agreed
8.	Early marriage increases the risk of adolescent pregnancy, which disrupts schooling.	2.61	0.88	Agreed
9.	Societal and cultural expectations often pressure girls into early marriage at the expense of education.	2.53	0.92	Agreed
10.	Awareness and counselling about the consequences of early marriage could improve educational outcomes for girls.	2.50	0.90	Agreed
	Sectional Mean Score	**2.63**	**0.88**	**Agreed**

The results in Table 1 reveal that respondents generally agreed that early marriage significantly hinders girl-child education in Nigeria, with an overall mean score of 2.63 and a standard deviation of 0.88. The highest mean score (2.80) indicates that respondents strongly believe early marriage negatively affects girls' personal and social development, while the lowest mean score (2.50) still reflects agreement that awareness and counselling can help mitigate the problem. Overall, these findings suggest that early marriage remains a critical barrier to educational access, retention, and progression for girls. It limits their opportunities for higher education and career development, while also exposing them to challenges such as adolescent pregnancy and emotional instability. The results emphasize the importance of parental enlightenment, community sensitization, and comprehensive counselling interventions to promote girl-child education and discourage early marriage practices.

Research Question Two: What are the roles of guidance and counselling interventions in reducing the negative impact of early marriage on girls' education?

Table 2: The Roles of Guidance and Counselling Interventions in Reducing the Negative Impact of Early Marriage on Girls' Education:

N=442

S/N	Statement	Mean	Std Dev	Decision
11.	Guidance and counselling help create awareness about the negative effects of early marriage.	3.21	0.41	Agreed
12.	Counselling services encourage girls to remain in school despite societal pressure to marry early	2.64	0.72	Agreed
13.	School counsellors play an important role in supporting married or at-risk girls to continue their education.	2.92	0.93	Agreed
14.	Guidance programmes empower girls with decision-making and self-advocacy skills.	2.67	0.88	Agreed
15.	Counselling interventions help parents understand the importance of educating their daughters.	2.68	0.93	Agreed
16.	Career guidance motivates girls to pursue long-term educational and professional goals.	2.99	0.87	Agreed
17.	Peer counselling programmes can help reduce the incidence of early marriage among students.	2.56	0.94	Agreed
18.	Counselling services provide emotional and psychological support for girls affected by early marriage.	2.89	1.03	Agreed
19.	Community-based counselling and awareness programmes help change cultural attitudes towards early marriage.	2.80	0.87	Agreed
20.	Effective guidance and counselling policies can significantly improve the retention and academic success of girls vulnerable to early marriage.	2.51	0.99	Agreed
	Sectional Mean Score	**2.79**	**0.86**	Agreed

The data in Table 2 indicate that respondents agreed that guidance and counselling interventions play a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of early marriage on girls' education, with an overall mean score of 2.79 and a standard deviation of 0.86. The highest-rated item (Mean = 3.21) shows strong agreement that guidance and counselling help create awareness about the adverse consequences of early marriage, while the lowest-rated item (Mean = 2.51) still reflects agreement that effective guidance policies enhance school retention and academic success among vulnerable girls

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Overall, the findings suggest that counselling services are vital in promoting educational continuity, self-confidence, and goal setting among girls at risk of early marriage. They also highlight the importance of career guidance, parental counselling, and community-based sensitization in addressing cultural and social pressures that perpetuate early marriage. Thus, integrating comprehensive guidance and counselling services within schools and communities can significantly enhance girls' educational outcomes and empowerment.

Test of Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance

Ho_1: There is no significant influence of early marriage on girl-child education in Nigeria.

Table 3: t-test results on the Influence of Early Marriage on Girl-Child Education in Nigeria:

Variables	N	X	Std. Dev.	Df	t-value	Sig.(P)	Decision
Early Marriage		2.65	85				
	442			440	0.113	<0.040	Significant
Girl-child Education		2.61	91				

*=significant at 0.05 level (p<0.05)

Table 3 presents the *t-test* result on the influence of early marriage on girl-child education in Nigeria. The computed t-value of 0.113 at 440 degrees of freedom with a p-value less than 0.05 (p < 0.040) indicates a statistically significant relationship between early marriage and girl-child education. This finding implies that early marriage has a measurable and negative influence on the educational attainment of the girl-child in Nigeria. The close mean scores of 2.65 for early marriage and 2.61 for girl-child education suggest that as the prevalence of early marriage increases, the likelihood of sustained educational participation among girls decreases. The significance of the result underscores the educational vulnerability of girls who marry early, as early marriage often leads to school dropout, limited academic progress, and restricted access to future economic and social opportunities. This outcome corroborates earlier studies that identified early marriage as a critical barrier to female education, perpetuating cycles of poverty and gender inequality. The implication is that strategic guidance and counselling interventions, community sensitization, and policy enforcement are essential to mitigating the adverse effects of early marriage on educational outcomes.

Ho_2: There is no significant difference the mean scores of urban and rural students on the influence of early marriage on girl-child education in Nigeria based on Location.

Table 4: t-test results on the Influence of Early Marriage on Girl-Child Education in Nigeria Based on Location.

Variables	N	X	Std. Dev.	df	t-value	Sig.(P)	Decision
Urban	221	2.59	0.89				
				440	0.835	>0.08	Not Significant
Rural	221	2.67	0.87				

*=significant at 0.05 level (p>0.05)

Table 4 presents the *t-test* analysis of the influence of early marriage on girl-child education in Nigeria based on location (urban and rural settings). The computed t-value of 0.835 at 440 degrees of freedom with a p-value greater than 0.05 (p > 0.08) indicates that the difference between urban and rural respondents is not statistically significant. This result suggests that the influence of early marriage on girl-child education is comparable across both urban and rural areas. Although the rural respondents recorded a slightly higher mean score (2.67) than their urban counterparts (2.59), the difference is not large enough to be considered statistically meaningful. The implication is that early marriage continues to negatively affect girl-child education across all locations, though its impact may be more visible in rural communities due to factors such

as poverty, traditional beliefs, and limited access to education. However, the similarity in the results highlights that the problem of early marriage and its educational consequences is a nationwide issue, not confined to rural regions alone. This finding underscores the need for integrated interventions that target both rural and urban populations. Such measures should include community-based counselling, policy enforcement against child marriage, and educational empowerment programmes that promote the retention and academic progression of the girl-child across Nigeria.

Findings

1. The findings revealed that early marriage significantly hinders girls' education in Nigeria, with a mean score of 2.63 and a standard deviation of 0.88. It prevents school completion, lowers academic performance, limits higher education and career opportunities, and negatively affects personal and social development.
2. Guidance and counselling interventions were found to effectively reduce the negative effects of early marriage, with a mean score of 2.79 and a standard deviation of 0.86. They help create awareness, provide emotional support, empower girls with decision-making skills, enlighten parents, and promote educational and career goals.
3. The t-test result ($t = 0.113$, $df = 440$, $p < 0.05$) indicated a significant influence of early marriage on girl-child education, showing that early marriage negatively affects girls' educational attainment.
4. However, the t-test result based on location ($t = 0.835$, $df = 440$, $p > 0.05$) showed no significant difference between urban and rural respondents, implying that early marriage affects girl-child education equally across both settings.

Recommendations

1. Since early marriage significantly hinders girl-child education, government and stakeholders should intensify awareness campaigns emphasizing the long-term disadvantages of early marriage and the benefits of continued education for girls.
2. Given that guidance and counselling interventions play a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of early marriage, schools should strengthen and adequately fund counselling units to provide continuous guidance, mentorship, and psychosocial support to girls at risk.
3. As the influence of early marriage on girl-child education does not differ significantly between urban and rural areas, interventions should target both locations equally, ensuring that educational and counselling programmes reach all communities.
4. Since the statistical results confirmed a strong link between early marriage and reduced educational attainment, policy enforcement and community sensitization should be prioritized, including stricter implementation of laws against child marriage and educational incentives to encourage girls' school retention and progression.

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