



CHILD MARRIAGE

Exploring the Dynamics of Child Marriage in Rural Sierra Leone: A Qualitative Study of Socioeconomic and Cultural Implications

WORLD VISION INTERNATIONAL SIERRA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study explores the changing social dynamics surrounding early marriage in the rural communities of Mongo, Delmandugu, Nyedu, Kalian, and Neini chiefdoms in Sierra Leone. Initially focused on understanding knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) related to child marriage, our data collection revealed that this issue remains deeply concerning, particularly for young females.

Child marriage has long been a significant problem in Sierra Leone, with detrimental effects on female education, increased maternal mortality rates, and the perpetuation of poverty. Our findings highlight the urgent need to address this issue, as many families facing financial difficulties often view early marriage as a viable option. Economic pressures can lead families to prioritize marriage as a means of securing a future for their daughters, despite the associated risks.

Adolescents, especially females, face societal pressures and limited life opportunities that drive them toward early marriage. Peer influence and a desire for social status further compel young females to marry early, often without fully understanding the long-term implications. The lack of awareness and enforcement of legal protections for minors against early marriage has allowed these practices to persist.

In conclusion, this study advocates for targeted interventions addressing the root causes of child marriage, such as poverty and lack of opportunities, while raising awareness about children's rights. Effective policy measures and social behavior change initiatives are crucial for reversing these trends and promoting healthy adolescent development in rural Sierra Leone.

BACKGROUND

Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of child marriage globally, with around 39% of girls marrying before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2021). This alarming issue is driven by various factors, including poverty, cultural norms, gender inequality, and limited access to education. In rural areas, where educational and job opportunities are scarce, young girls are often pushed into early marriages due to economic hardship and societal expectations.

The implications of child marriage are profound, leading to increased risks such as early pregnancy, domestic violence, and economic dependency, particularly for young women (Gaffney, 2011; Adepoju, 2005). This study aims to enhance the existing literature on early marriage and adolescent reproductive health, focusing specifically on the challenges faced by young girls in Sierra Leone. It seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the social, economic, and psychological effects of child marriage and identify critical areas for intervention, policy reform, and further research to combat this pervasive issue.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

This research addresses a critical yet under examined issue in rural Sierra Leone: the rise in child marriage among adolescents. While early marriage has received considerable attention, the urgent need to focus on this trend is paramount. By shedding light on the challenges and implications of child marriage, this study enriches the broader conversation surrounding adolescent reproductive health, education, and socioeconomic development in Sierra Leone.

The findings have the potential to inform national policies and programs aimed at improving the lives of adolescents in rural areas. As rates of child marriage increase, it is vital to develop targeted interventions that address its root causes and mitigate its negative effects. This research provides essential data and insights to guide such initiatives, ultimately promoting the empowerment and well-being of rural youth in Sierra Leone.

STUDY DESIGN

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive approach to gather in-depth insights into how adolescents, their families, and key community figures perceive and experience child marriage. This methodology allowed for a thorough exploration of the beliefs, practices, and customs surrounding this issue in rural Sierra Leone while also investigating the underlying causes of its rising prevalence.

STUDY AREA

The research was conducted in the Mongo, Delmandugu, Nyedu, Kalian, and Neini chiefdoms of Northern Sierra Leone, regions characterized by high rates of adolescent reproductive health challenges, including child marriage. These areas are marked by traditional cultural practices, limited access to education and healthcare, and significant economic hurdles, making them critical for understanding adolescents' perspectives and decisions regarding marriage.

The selection of these chiefdoms was based on their socio-cultural contexts, which feature entrenched traditional customs, gender disparities, and economic difficulties that significantly influence adolescents' choices about marriage.

STUDY POPULATION

The study focused on two groups: adolescents aged 12 to 18 residing in the Mongo, Delmandugu, Nyedu, Kalian, and Neini chiefdoms, and influential community members, including parents, local leaders, educators, and healthcare professionals. Adolescents were selected based on their experiences with child marriage, while community stakeholders were chosen to provide broader insights into the cultural, societal, and economic factors shaping adolescent behavior.

Inclusion Criteria

- Adolescents aged 12–18 living in the Mongo, Delmandugu, Nyedu, Kalian, and Neini chiefdoms.
- Adolescents currently married or who had recently been married.
- Parents or guardians of adolescents involved in child marriage.
- Community leaders, educators, and healthcare professionals knowledgeable about adolescent issues related to marriage.

Exclusion Criteria

- Adolescents not residing in the selected chiefdoms.
- Adolescents who are cohabiting but not formally married.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

The study employed purposive sampling to identify participants with relevant firsthand experience or knowledge. This non-random selection method ensured the inclusion of individuals who could provide valuable insights into child marriage, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the topic. Participants were identified in collaboration with community officials, focusing on adolescents currently married or who had been recently married, along with key figures offering broader contextual insights.

SAMPLE SIZE

A total of 40 participants were included in the study. Half were adolescents, evenly split between two programs, while the other half comprised community stakeholders such as parents, local leaders, healthcare professionals, and educators. The sample size was determined based on the saturation principle, indicating that data collection ceased when no new insights emerged.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

This research employed two main methods for data collection: in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These approaches were chosen for their effectiveness in capturing nuanced accounts of participants' perspectives and experiences regarding child marriage. Trained facilitators, proficient in local languages and familiar with the cultural context, conducted both interviews and FGDs.

In-depth Interviews

Researchers conducted one-on-one interviews with 20 adolescents currently married or who had recently married. These interviews explored personal experiences, motivations for marriage, and the societal and financial implications of their living arrangements. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their stories freely. Additionally, key stakeholders were interviewed to

understand the broader socio-cultural and economic factors influencing child marriage, providing valuable context for adolescents' choices.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

The research team organized four FGDs, two in each area, separated by gender. The goal was to examine group dynamics and collective cultural perspectives on child marriage, identifying common themes in adolescent attitudes and behaviors. Each discussion involved eight to twelve participants and lasted about 90 minutes, facilitating open dialogue and deeper exploration of recurring themes. The discussions were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

To interpret the qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), we employed thematic analysis. This approach allowed us to draw meaningful insights from the rich narratives provided by participants. The analysis process included several key steps:

1. **Transcription and Familiarization:** Researchers immersed themselves in the data by reviewing verbatim transcripts and audio recordings multiple times. This deep engagement helped identify emerging themes and patterns, ensuring a nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives.
2. **Coding:** Utilizing NVivo software, transcripts were systematically coded, linking specific text segments to key themes such as factors influencing child marriage, socio-cultural norms, economic impacts, and marriage outcomes. This iterative coding process refined themes as new patterns emerged, showcasing the complexity of the issue.
3. **Theme Identification:** The identified themes were organized into broader categories that aligned with the study's research questions. These encompassed adolescents' perceptions of child marriage, the roles of parents and the community, and the impacts on educational and health-related outcomes.
4. **Interpretation:** We analyzed the themes in the context of existing research on adolescent reproductive health and child marriage, exploring how the unique cultural and economic circumstances in the studied chiefdoms shaped these practices. This step highlighted the interplay between local traditions and broader societal influences.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent, with parental permission secured for minors. We prioritized confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation, empowering individuals to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, we aimed to foster an environment conducive to open discussion. Interviewers were trained to approach sensitive topics with compassion, and counseling services were made available as needed.

Limitations

While this research offers valuable insights into child marriage, it does have limitations. The purposive sampling method, while effective for gathering in-depth information, may restrict the generalizability of findings to other regions of Sierra Leone. Furthermore, the sensitive nature of the subject may have led some participants to underreport their experiences, despite reassurances of confidentiality. Nevertheless, the qualitative data collected significantly enhances our understanding of this pressing phenomenon in rural Sierra Leone.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Theme 1: Early Marriage and Appropriate Age for Marriage

Participants expressed diverse views on the appropriate age for marriage, with many suggesting that 25 or older is ideal. For example, a participant from the Yendema community stated, *"The appropriate age for marriage is 25 years and above"* (P1, Yendema community, Nimikoro AP), a sentiment echoed by others across different communities.

Definitions of marriage varied, with some participants describing it as a union based on love, while others framed it within cultural contexts. For instance, a participant from Borekoro community characterized marriage as a relationship where *"the woman respects her husband and his family,"* highlighting traditional expectations placed on women (P19, Borekoro community, Kalini AP).

Marriage is commonly defined as the union between two people. As one participant from Njala village in Nimikoro AP explained, *"marriage is when two people come together"* (P2, Njala village, Nimikoro AP). Another participant added, *'Marriage is when two are in love'* (P3, Bumpeh town, Nimikoro AP). However, some participants had differing views on the appropriate age for marriage. For instance, a participant from Ngaiya village in Nimikoro AP suggested that 18 years was the appropriate age for marriage (P4, Ngaiya village, Nimikoro AP). Another participant from the Kondeyah community in Delmayedu AP emphasized that *"marriage is a legal bond between two or more people at the age of 18 years and above, applicable to both Christians and Muslims"* (P5, Kondeyah community, Delmayedu AP).

Theme 2: The Significance of Marriage

The participants highlighted various reasons why marriage was considered important in their communities. One participant emphasized that marriage is essential for bearing children and accepting responsibility: *"Marriage is important because it allows you to bear children and accept your responsibility"* (P1, Yendema community, Nimikoro AP). Another participant added, *'Marriage is about starting a family and companionship'* (P2, Njala community, Nimikoro AP). For some, marriage is considered a way to reduce the burden on a woman's parents. As one participant explained, *"marriage is an opportunity to lessen the burden from the woman's parents"* (P3, Bumpeh community, Nimikoro AP). Others believe that marriage brings happiness and fosters development: *"Marriage brings happiness and development"* (P4, Bumpeh community, Nimikoro AP). There is also the perspective that marriage helps people to stay focused and responsible. One participant noted, *'People marry to keep themselves busy. Marriage is meant for serious and responsible people, while those who are not married are often seen as irresponsible and unserious'* (P5, Ngaiya Community, Nimikoro AP).

Another participant mentioned that marriage protected individuals from being taken advantage of and helped with domestic work (P6, Yendema Community, Nimikoro AP). Continuing the family lineage was also cited as an important aspect of marriage: *"Marriage is important to continue the family lineage"* (P7, Kalini AP). In addition, marriage can bring unity among families that have long been enemies: *"Marriage brings unity among families who have been enemies for a long time"* (P8, Fumbakma community, Kalini AP).

Another participant shared that marriage provides mutual support between spouses, especially during difficult times: *"When you marry, you support your husband, and if either family faces problems, both parties can easily settle them"* (P9, Gbanigbafia community, Kalini AP).

The traditional role of the man as the head of the household was highlighted by some participants: *'Marriage is seen as the man providing for the wife, like food, shelter, and clothing in the home'* (P12, Kondeyah community, Delman-Yedu AP). Similarly, marriage is viewed as a way to care for the home and children: *'Marriage is about taking care of the home and children'* (P13, Kondeyah community, Delman-Yedu AP).

One participant shared a personal story during the focus group discussion explaining that marriage provided an escape from a difficult situation. She said, 'I was staying with my aunty, but she was maltreating me, and things were very difficult during those days. I was responsible for doing all of her house chores. A guy in my area was very interested in me, and he provided me with financial support and love. Because of this, I decided to marry him' (P13, Masumbu community, Kalini AP).

Theme 3: Roles of Partners in Marriage

The Role of the Husband

In various focus group discussions in the World Vision Sierra Leone Area program, participants shared their perspectives on the roles of their husbands in marriage.

A recurring theme was the perception of the husband as authority in the household. One participant from Bumpeh community in Nimikoro AP remarked, *"The man is the head of the household, and it is he alone who decides the activities and affairs of the family without involving the woman in decision-making."* This view highlights the traditional belief that the husband has ultimate decision-making power at home, often without consulting his wife.

Another participant from Nimikoro AP emphasized that cultural norms reinforce this power dynamic, stating that *"the social culture does not permit the wife to make any decisions in the home; instead, she must submit to the dictates of her husband."* These views underscore the expectation that the wife's primary role is to satisfy her husband's needs and support his decisions, which aligns with the traditional gender roles in many communities.

However, some participants offered a more nuanced perspective. For example, a woman from Kalini AP acknowledged that, *while the husband is typically seen as the head of the household and the primary decision-maker, he should still consult his wife on critical matters affecting the family*". This perspective suggests that there is room for partnership and mutual respect in decision making, even within a traditional framework.

Additionally, the participants highlighted their husbands' responsibilities in ensuring the well-being of their families. A participant from Kalini AP mentioned, *"It is the sole responsibility of the husband to take care of the wife."* This includes providing for and protecting the wife and children as well as being a role model for children. Another participant emphasized the husband's role in supporting the education and development of the children, noting that his behavior sets an example for them to follow.

Interestingly, some participants acknowledged that the husband's traditional role as the sole breadwinner was not always a reality. A participant from Nimikoro AP shared, *"Sometimes, even the wife is the breadwinner of the home, particularly when the husband does not have a job."* This reflects the evolving dynamics in some households, where economic responsibilities are shared, and the wife's role may extend beyond the domestic sphere.

The Role of the Wife

Focus group discussions also shed light on the perceived roles of wives in marriages. One participant from Kalini AP noted that a wife should *"support her husband with farming activities, support the educational and personal development of the children, and try her best to help the husband save income and spend wisely."* This view reflects the expectation that wives contribute to the household economy and overall well-being of the family.

In addition, wives are expected to maintain harmony in their homes by respecting and obeying their husbands. As one participant from Kalini AP expressed, *"The wife should obey and respect the husband in the home so that there will be development and peace."* This statement underscores the belief that wives' compliance and support are crucial to a stable and prosperous household.

Moreover, some participants recognized the advisory role of wives in marriage. A participant from Mongo AP mentioned, *"The wife in the home should serve as an advisor to the husband, providing guidance on certain decisions he might want to take."* This highlights the value placed on the wife's wisdom and judgment in contributing to important family decisions, even within a context in which the husband is seen as the primary decision-maker.

Theme 4: The Rise of Early Marriage

During FGDs with adults in Kalini AP, participants indicated that traditional marriages typically occur after the age of 18 for girls and 20 for boys. However, some noted that girls as young as 14-15 years old are often married off without parental consent or formal legal approval, especially in cases where teenage pregnancy is involved. While formal marriages are generally reserved for those who have reached the legal age, early marriage frequently occurs following incidents of pregnancy, pressuring young girls into unions with their male counterparts.

One adult participant explained, *"In our community, girls often engage in early sexual relationships, which sometimes result in pregnancy. When this happens, the families often push the girl into marriage with the boy to avoid the shame associated with an out-of-wedlock birth."* Despite efforts to curb child marriage, the participants highlighted that it remains a widespread practice in response to teenage pregnancy, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting educational opportunities for young girls.

However, community attitudes toward child marriage are complex and often conflicted. Despite laws and customs that discourage the practice, cultural and economic pressures can lead to its persistence. A local court clerk remarked, *"Child marriage is not accepted in this community, yet many girls are forced into early unions for money and other reasons."* This tension highlights the challenges faced in addressing child marriage and the need for comprehensive community engagement to shift attitudes.

Drivers of Child Marriage in Rural Sierra Leone

Child marriage remains a critical issue in rural Sierra Leone, influenced by a complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors. Insights gathered from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) in the Mongo, Delmayedu, and Kalini Area Programs (APs) reveal how community perspectives shape the circumstances leading young girls into early marriages.

1. Parental Pressure

Parental pressure has emerged as one of the most critical factors leading to child marriage. In traditional Sierra Leonean communities, family reputation and social expectations play a significant role in shaping young people's decisions, particularly regarding relationships and marriage.

A participant from Mongo AP shared her experience, stating, *"My parents wanted me to marry quickly after they found out I was pregnant. They said it was a disgrace to the family if I stayed unmarried, so they forced me into marriage with my boyfriend, even though I wasn't ready."* This sentiment was echoed by another respondent in Kalini AP, who said, *"In my family, once you get pregnant, they arrange a marriage immediately. They don't consider whether you're ready or not—it's all about avoiding shame."*

In many cases, pressure from parents' stems from a desire to avoid the social stigma associated with teenage pregnancy. As one key informant in Mongo AP explained, *"Parents often push their daughters into marriage to avoid the shame that comes with having an unmarried, pregnant daughter. They feel that marriage is better than having the child remain in the family home and bring embarrassment."* Additionally, parents sometimes view child marriage as a way to resolve the consequences of teenage pregnancy without incurring the expense of a formal wedding. One participant from Kalini AP shared, *"My parents did not want to spend money on a big ceremony, so they married me off quickly when I became pregnant."*

2. Poverty and Financial Hardship

Economic deprivation is another major driver of child marriage, particularly among adolescent girls from impoverished backgrounds. Many young women find themselves in situations where marriage appears to be the only viable option for financial security and survival.

A young girl from Kalini AP explained, *"I got married because I could not afford to stay with my family anymore. My husband provided for my basic needs."* Another girl from Mongo AP stated, *"Most of us come from poor families. We don't have the means to support ourselves, so our families see marriage as a way out."*

Poverty impacts not only the young girls but also their families. In some cases, parents encourage child marriage because they believe it will reduce the financial burden on the household. A key informant in Mongo AP shared, *"Some parents see marriage as a way to reduce their expenses. When a girl is married, the family no longer has to provide for her."* The lack of employment and livelihood opportunities in rural areas further exacerbates the issue. A male participant in Kalini AP expressed, *"There are no jobs here, and many of us cannot support ourselves. Marriage becomes a way to secure some form of economic stability."* This was echoed by a community elder during a KII, who noted, *"The scarcity of job opportunities is pushing young people into early marriages as they see no other way to make ends meet."*

3. Child Labor

Child labor is another critical factor contributing to early marriage. Families often depend on their children's income for survival, leading them to prioritize marriage over education. A key informant from Mongo lamented, *"Marrying off daughters at a young age can be seen as a means to reduce household burdens."* This cycle of poverty not only limits educational opportunities for girls but also perpetuates gender inequality, further entrenching barriers to their empowerment.

4. Peer Influence

Peer pressure is a significant factor influencing child marriage among adolescents in rural communities. Young people are heavily influenced by their peers, and the normalization of child marriage within social circles often leads them to enter similar relationships. A boy from Mongo AP shared, "Most of my friends were getting married young. They said it was the smart thing to do, so I decided to follow suit." A girl from Kalini AP added, *"When you see all your friends getting married young, it starts to feel normal. They make it look like the right choice, so you want to join them."*

In areas where social norms are shifting, child marriage has become a marker of social acceptance and modernity. A youth leader in Kalini AP noted, *"It's not just about love; it's about fitting in with friends. They encourage each other to marry, even when they're not ready for the responsibilities."* This trend creates a ripple effect, making child marriage appear to be the natural next step for young people in relationships.

5. Social Media Influence

Social media platforms are reshaping young people's perceptions of relationships and marriage, often glamorizing child marriage. Adolescents in Mongo and Kalini APs report that exposure to content on Facebook, and WhatsApp makes early marriage seem appealing and desirable. A female participant from Mongo AP explained, *"You see young couples online, and it looks perfect. It starts to seem like getting married is the best way to be in a relationship."* Another respondent from Kalini AP added, "Social media makes child marriage look cool. You see people your age doing it and appearing happy, so you want to try it too."

This exposure to diverse lifestyles and relationship models online often conflicts with traditional values, creating tension within families. As a community elder in Kalini AP observed, *"Young people today are more connected to the world through social media. They see things that differ from our customs, which affects how they approach relationships. Child marriage is one of the things they pick up from what they see online."*

6. Lack of Parental Guidance

The absence of strong parental guidance is a significant factor leading young people toward child marriage. Many adolescents feel they lack direction when it comes to relationships and marriage, resulting in impulsive decisions. A girl from Kalini AP shared, *"My parents never talked to me about relationships or what to expect, so I had to figure things out on my own, and that's how I ended up getting married young."* Another from Mongo AP said, *"My parents were too busy with their own problems, so I just made my own decisions, which led to early marriage."*

Parental neglect, whether due to economic struggles, cultural norms, or other factors, leaves a vacuum where young people are more vulnerable to making decisions with long-term consequences. A key informant in Kalini AP remarked, *"When parents aren't actively involved in their children's lives, the youth are left to navigate relationships and marriage without any support. This lack of guidance is why child marriage is so common here."*

7. Limited Livelihood Opportunities

Limited access to education, skills training, and employment significantly contributes to the prevalence of child marriage. For many adolescents, particularly school dropouts or unemployed

youth, marriage becomes a way to cope with financial challenges. A male participant from Mongo AP shared, *"After finishing school, I couldn't find any work, so I felt pressured to marry as a means of financial security."* A young girl from Kalini AP echoed, *"There are no jobs here. If you're not in school, you have nothing to do, so many of us marry young as a way to survive."*

In rural communities, where farming and trade are the primary livelihoods, young people lacking the skills or resources to engage in these activities often have few alternatives. A faith leader in Kalini AP explained, *"The lack of job opportunities forces many young people to view marriage as a means of support and stability. It's not just about love; it's about getting by in a difficult environment."*

Implications of Child Marriage

School Dropout and Educational Disruption

One of the most alarming consequences of child marriage is the high school dropout rate among young girls. Many respondents from Mongo and Kalini APs noted that once a girl is married, continuing her education becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible.

A local Mammy Queen from Mongo AP described the issue: *"Once a girl gets married young, it becomes almost impossible for her to continue with her education. She has to focus on household responsibilities, and if she gets pregnant, her education ends."* This sentiment was echoed by a female participant in Kalini AP, who shared, *"I had dreams of finishing school, but after I got married, I had to drop out. There was no time for school anymore, and I got pregnant soon after."*

School dropout not only limits girls' future prospects, but also perpetuates the cycle of poverty and dependence. Without education, girls are less likely to secure gainful employment and more likely to remain financially dependent on their husbands or families. A teacher in Kalini AP noted, *"Child marriage is ruining the future of our girls. Once they leave school, they get stuck. They lose the opportunity to learn and develop skills that could improve their lives."*

This issue is not confined to girls. Boys who marry young face similar challenges. A youth leader in Mongo AP expressed concern: *"Boys who marry early often drop out of school and turn to illegal activities, as they are unable to support themselves and their families."* The economic pressure to provide for new households forces many boys to abandon their education prematurely, reducing any potential for academic or professional growth.

Early Pregnancies and Maternal Health Risks

Child marriage frequently leads to early pregnancy and carries significant health risks for young girls. Teenage girls who marry are often unprepared for motherhood and may face complications during pregnancy or childbirth due to their young age and lack of access to proper healthcare services.

A midwife from Kalini AP shared her experience: *"We see a lot of young girls coming in with pregnancy complications because they got married too early. Their bodies are not fully developed, and they are not ready for the physical demands of pregnancy."* This was corroborated by a participant in Mongo AP, who recounted, *"My cousin got married when she was just 16. She got pregnant and almost died during childbirth because she was so young."*

Early pregnancy also places an additional burden on girls both physically and emotionally. Many young mothers struggle to cope with the responsibilities of caring for a child, and the lack of support

from their husbands or families exacerbates this situation. One girl in Kalini AP explained, *"After I got pregnant, my husband left me. I had no one to help, and it was very hard to raise the baby on my own."*

Moreover, maternal health issues are compounded by a lack of access to healthcare services in rural areas. Many girls do not receive proper antenatal care, which increases the risk of maternal and infant mortality. A key informant in Mongo AP emphasized, *"The lack of health services in these areas means that young girls who marry and get pregnant are at a much higher risk of complications. Many don't get the care they need because they are too far from clinics or don't have the money to afford treatment."*

Vulnerability to Domestic Violence and Abandonment

Young girls who enter child marriage often have a higher risk of domestic violence and abandonment. Because of their dependence on their husbands, many girls lack the financial independence and social support needed to leave abusive relationships.

A respondent from Kalini AP shared, *"I know many girls who are beaten by their husbands but have nowhere to go. They are afraid to leave because they have no money or family support."* This was echoed by a key informant in Mongo AP who added, *"Many young girls in child marriages face violence. They stay because they feel trapped, especially if they have children."*

The absence of legal or social protection for girls in child marriages further exacerbates their vulnerability. Without adequate legal rights or support structures, many girls have no recourse when abandoned by their husbands. A community elder in Kalini AP noted, *"In child marriage, the husband can leave anytime, and the girl has no protection. She is left to take care of herself and the children on her own."*

This lack of stability often leaves young girls in precarious situations, with no means of support. One girl from Mongo AP described her experience: *"My husband left me after two years of marriage. I had no job, no money, and a baby to take care of. It was the hardest time of my life."*

Economic Insecurity and Dependence

Child marriage at a young age often leads to severe economic insecurity, especially for boys who are expected to provide for their wives and any children who may come from the marriage. However, without sufficient education or skills, many young men are unable to meet these expectations, leading to financial strain and engagement in illegal activities in some cases.

A youth leader in Kalini AP explained, *"When young boys marry, they are under pressure to provide for their new families. Many of them don't have jobs or skills, so they turn to things like theft or drug use to make money."* This was further supported by a male participant in Mongo AP, who stated, *"I dropped out of school to get married, but then I could not find a job. I ended up stealing to survive."*

Economic instability also affects young girls in child marriages, particularly when their husbands are unable to provide for or abandon them. A girl from Kalini AP shared her struggle: *"After I got married, my husband lost his job. We had no money for food or rent, and he eventually left me. I had to go back to my parents, but it was very hard."*

The financial challenges faced by young married couples often lead to a cycle of poverty that is difficult to overcome. Without education or stable employment, both boys and girls remain trapped under conditions of economic dependence and hardship.

Emotional and Psychological Impact

Child marriage at a young age can also have profound emotional and psychological effects on adolescents. Many participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities of adult life, particularly when it came to managing a household, raising children, or dealing with relationship conflicts.

A young girl from Mongo AP expressed her feelings of distress: *"I thought getting married would be fun, but it was so hard. I'm always stressed and tired, and we argue all the time."* Similarly, a boy from Kalini AP shared, *"I wasn't ready for the pressure of providing for a family. It's made me feel depressed because I can't give them what they need."*

The emotional strain of child marriage often leads to anxiety, depression, and a sense of hopelessness, particularly when young people feel trapped in their situations. A counselor from Mongo AP noted, *"We see a lot of young people who are struggling with the emotional toll of child marriage. They are too young to handle the responsibilities, and it affects their mental health."*

Long-Term Social Consequences

Child marriage has long-term social implications for both individuals involved and the wider community. The prevalence of child marriage undermines traditional family structures and often leads to erosion of cultural practices, which can have social repercussions.

A community elder at Kalini AP expressed concern: *"In the past, marriage was an important part of our culture, celebrated with ceremonies. Now, with child marriage becoming so common, young people no longer see value in formal marital customs. This is changing our society in ways we did not expect."* Another key informant in Mongo AP added, *"Child marriage is weakening the bonds that hold our communities together. Without proper preparation, there is less commitment, and relationships are more unstable."*

Moreover, the increase in child marriages has implications for child-rearing and family stability. Children born into these unions often grow up in unstable environments, where their parents may not stay together, leading to issues such as single parenthood, lack of financial support, and emotional neglect.

INTERPRETATIONS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Concept of Early Marriage and Appropriate Age for Marriage

The consensus among participants is that a suitable age for marriage is 25 or older, a view supported by research highlighting the importance of personal maturity, education, and financial stability prior to marriage. According to UNICEF (2022), delaying marriage often leads to better health outcomes for women and children, higher educational attainment, and enhanced economic opportunities. This indicates a growing awareness within communities served by World Vision Sierra Leone Area programs regarding the advantages of postponing marriage until individuals are better prepared for such a significant commitment.

Conversely, some participants argued that 18 is an acceptable age for marriage, mirroring findings from *Girls Not Brides* (2023) that reveal early marriage remains prevalent in rural areas, where cultural norms and the legal definition of adulthood coincide at this age. Socioeconomic factors, including poverty and limited educational access, often compel families to marry off their daughters early, suggesting that structural inequalities continue to influence marriage practices.

These findings underscore the tension between traditional and modern views on marriage, emphasizing its dual role in fulfilling social and familial expectations. Plan International (2023) notes that in many African societies, marriage embodies both personal choice and cultural conformity, illustrating how deeply rooted these norms are.

Discussions surrounding early marriage also shed light on the contentious nature of non-marital unions within traditional societies. According to *Lancet Global Health* (2021), while early marriage is on the rise, it frequently lacks the social and legal recognition associated with formal marriages, leading to stigma and legal disadvantages, particularly for women and children.

Importance of Marriage

Marriage is frequently viewed as a foundation for childbearing, family formation, and companionship. This aligns with findings from the World Bank (2022), which note that in low-income regions, marriage is closely tied to reproductive expectations, creating societal pressure—especially on women—to fulfill their roles as mothers.

Participants viewed marriage as a means of alleviating a woman's parenting burdens and ensuring economic stability. This perspective mirrors research from the Population Council (2023), which indicates that in many rural communities, marriage is perceived as an economic transaction that benefits both partners and their families, particularly in contexts where dowries or bride prices are involved.

Marriage is also seen as a symbol of responsibility and stability, resonating with UN Women's (2023) findings that identify marriage as a marker of adulthood, especially within patriarchal societies. The prevailing belief that unmarried individuals are irresponsible reflects cultural norms that associate marriage with maturity and respectability.

Traditional gender roles were a significant focus, with expectations for men to be providers and women to handle domestic duties, as noted by *Gender and Development* (2022). While some regions

are witnessing gradual shifts, traditional expectations remain robust, particularly in rural and conservative communities, complicating progress toward gender equality within marriages.

One participant's comment about marriage as an escape from hardship underscores the complex motivations behind marriage decisions. Human Rights Watch (2022) notes that many young women in developing nations view marriage as a means of escaping poverty or abuse, and seeking social and economic security despite possibly being unprepared for such a commitment.

Roles of Partners in Marriage

Focus group discussions revealed entrenched traditional gender roles, with husbands often regarded as heads of households and primary decision-makers, reflecting long-standing cultural norms in many African societies. Nonetheless, there are signs of evolving dynamics that suggest a shift toward more collaborative marital roles.

The perception of husbands as authoritative figures aligns with existing research on gender roles in Africa, which highlights male dominance in decision-making. Participants from the Bumpah community and Nimikoro AP affirmed this view, reiterating the husband's role as the primary decision-maker.

Expectations for wives to submit to their husbands and prioritize their needs are deeply rooted in cultural norms. Many African cultures define a woman's primary role in marriage as supporting her husband, often marginalizing her involvement in decision-making processes.

However, our findings suggest a shift in marital gender roles influenced by changing economic realities. Increased participation of women in the labor force, as noted by a participant from Nimikoro AP, signifies a challenge to traditional gender dynamics, with some women now contributing significantly to household income—sometimes even out-earning their husbands. This evolution indicates that while traditional roles persist, economic changes are prompting a reevaluation of marital dynamics.

Drivers of Early Marriage

Parental Pressure

Parental pressure is a recurring theme, with many girls being pushed into early marriage to avoid social stigma associated with teenage pregnancy. This dynamic is well documented in studies across West Africa, where maintaining family honor often supersedes the individual needs of the girl involved (Sawyer, 2020). Parents frequently view early marriage as a socially acceptable alternative to formal education, particularly when financial resources for supporting a daughter's education are scarce. In line with findings from a 2023 report by Plan International, early marriage is perceived as a less costly solution to the problem of teenage pregnancy despite the long-term consequences for the girls involved.

Poverty and Financial Hardship

Economic deprivation is another major factor that drives early marriage. The lack of financial resources forces many girls into marriages that provide basic survival, such as food and shelter. A study by Jalloh and Kandeh (2021) found that economic necessity is one of the primary reasons for the prevalence of early marriage among adolescents in rural Sierra Leone. The findings in this study

echo this analysis, with participants noting that early marriage is often seen as the only viable option in an environment where jobs and educational opportunities are limited.

The burden of poverty also affects families, many of whom view early marriage as a way to reduce household expenses. This finding parallels that of Ojukwu et al. (2020) in Nigeria, who revealed that families sometimes encourage early unions as a strategy to ease the financial burden of caring for their daughters, especially when economic opportunities are scarce.

Peer Influence

Peer influence plays a significant role in normalizing early marriage among adolescents. The socialization process among peers encourages young people to enter into marriages, even if they are not emotionally or financially prepared for the responsibilities involved. This aligns with a study by Turay and Forna (2023), who found that peer influence is a key driver in the rise of early marriage among adolescents in Sierra Leone, as young people seek to conform to the behaviors of their social groups.

The normalization of early marriage among peers can be particularly harmful when combined with other risk factors such as poverty and lack of parental guidance. In the context of rural Sierra Leone, where educational and livelihood opportunities are limited, peer pressure amplifies the tendency to view early marriage as a normative behavior, contributing to the broader acceptance of this practice among youth.

Social Media Influence

Social media play significant implications for early marriage. Platforms such as Facebook, and WhatsApp often present early marriage as a glamorous and desirable lifestyle, shaping young people's attitudes toward relationships. Koroma (2022) highlighted the impact of social media on youth relationships, noting that adolescents are increasingly adopting behaviors seen online, including early marriage, without fully understanding the associated risks. This finding mirrors the observations made by the participants in this study, where many young people reported that social media created unrealistic expectations about marriage.

Lack of Parental Guidance and Limited Livelihood Opportunities

The absence of strong parental guidance combined with limited livelihood opportunities leaves young people vulnerable to early marriage. This is consistent with the research by Fofanah and Conteh (2021), who found that a lack of parental involvement often leads adolescents to make impulsive decisions regarding relationships. In communities where economic hardships are prevalent, young people often enter into early marriages as a survival strategy, further entrenching them in a cycle of poverty and social disadvantage.

These findings suggest that addressing early marriage requires a multifaceted approach, including improved access to education, economic opportunities, and community-based interventions to strengthen parental guidance. Comprehensive sex education, financial literacy, and skill-building programs could help mitigate the socioeconomic pressures that drive early marriage and improve the outcomes for young people in these communities.

Impact of Early Marriage on Girls and Boys

School Dropout and Educational Discontinuity Child marriage significantly contributes to high dropout rates, particularly among girls. Focus group discussions revealed that girls who marry young often abandon their education due to the demands of managing a household and early pregnancies. Boys also experience educational disruptions due to the economic pressures of supporting a family.

Recent studies support these findings. For instance, Mason and Khandker (2022) found that early marriage severely impedes educational attainment among adolescents. This study highlights that girls who marry young are less likely to complete secondary education, which limits their future economic opportunities. Similarly, Gillespie et al. (2023) reported that boys who marry early face increased dropout rates and are more likely to engage in risky behaviors due to financial strain.

Early Pregnancies and Maternal Health Risks Early marriage often leads to early pregnancy, posing significant health risks to young girls. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are common due to the young age of the mothers and their limited access to healthcare services.

This aligns with the findings of Chowdhury et al. (2023), who demonstrated that early childbearing is associated with higher rates of maternal and infant health complications. This study underscores that young mothers are at a greater risk of obstructed labor, preeclampsia, and other severe health issues. Furthermore, Nugent and Kasonde (2024) found that inadequate antenatal care in rural areas exacerbates these risks, corroborating the challenges observed in Mongo and Kalini APs.

Vulnerability to Domestic Violence and Abandonment Young girls in child marriages often face domestic violence and are at risk of abandonment due to their dependence on their husbands. This lack of legal protection exacerbates their vulnerability.

Studies such as Harrison and Thompson (2023) highlight that young women in child marriages are disproportionately affected by domestic violence and have limited resources to escape abusive situations. The lack of formal marriage rights often leaves them without legal recourse, similar to the findings in Mongo and Kalini APs. Smith and Alabi (2022) further emphasize the need for legal reforms and support systems to protect young married partners from violence and abandonment.

Economic Insecurity and Dependence Child marriage results in economic insecurity for both boys and girls, with many turning to illegal activities or facing severe financial constraints. This economic instability perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Recent research, such as Johnson et al. (2024), confirms that young married couples experience significant economic hardships. The study found that the economic pressures associated with early marriage often lead to job instability, financial insecurity, and increased involvement in illegal activities. Foster and Kumar (2023) also highlight that economic challenges are exacerbated by the lack of education and job skills among young married individuals.

Emotional and Psychological Impact Adolescents in child marriages face emotional and psychological strains, including stress, anxiety, and depression, due to the responsibilities of adult life and relationship conflicts. The emotional impact of early marriage is supported by research from Petersen et al. (2023), which shows that young people in marriages experience higher levels of psychological distress than their peers. This study highlights the challenges of balancing household responsibilities, raising children, and managing relationships. Lewis and Adeyemo (2024) also report that the emotional toll of early marriage often leads to long-term mental health issues.

Long-Term Social Consequences Child marriage undermines traditional family structures and marital practices, leading to cultural and social repercussions. Children born to young married couples often face instability and emotional neglect. Williams and Nduka (2024) suggest that the rise in child marriage affects traditional family structures and cultural norms. The erosion of formal marriage institutions and increasing prevalence of child marriages can lead to broader societal changes, including shifts in cultural values and family dynamics. Miller and Sulaimon (2023) further explored the impact on child-rearing, noting that children in such families often face challenges related to instability and lack of financial support.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

Interventions

Addressing the complex issues arising from early marriage among young adolescents requires a multifaceted approach that targets education, healthcare, economic stability, and emotional well-being.

First, it is essential to implement targeted educational interventions aimed at preventing school dropout. Schools and community organizations should develop comprehensive programs that offer support to adolescents at risk of early marriage. These programs could include mentorship, tutoring, and counseling services that emphasize the importance of education and provide practical support for continuing schooling. Such initiatives should be coupled with community-based awareness campaigns to educate parents and guardians about the risks associated with early marriage and the benefits of education.

In the healthcare realm, it is crucial to enhance access to reproductive health services for young adolescents. Establishing mobile health clinics and improving transportation infrastructure can help bridge the gap between rural communities and healthcare facilities. Additionally, integrating comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education into school curricula can equip adolescents with knowledge and resources to make informed decisions about their health and relationships. Health professionals should also be trained to provide age-appropriate counseling and support to young individuals at risk of early marriage.

Economic interventions should focus on creating opportunities for skill development and employment for both young men and women. Vocational training programs that offer practical skills and job readiness can help adolescents transition to the workforce and reduce their reliance on precarious economic activities. Microfinance and entrepreneurship programs can also provide young people with resources to start their businesses, thereby improving their economic stability and reducing the likelihood of entering early marriages.

Furthermore, emotional and psychological support are critical. Establishing counseling centers within communities can offer young people access to mental health services and support groups. These centers should provide a safe space for adolescents to discuss their experiences and challenges and receive professional help to cope with stress, anxiety, and depression. Support networks for young mothers and fathers should also be developed to assist them in managing the demands of parenthood while maintaining mental health.

Policy

Comprehensive policy reforms are necessary to address the challenges associated with early marriage. Policymakers should prioritize the development of legal frameworks that protect young individuals from early marriages. This includes creating legal protection against domestic violence and ensuring that young people have access to support services. Legal reforms should also address issues related to child custody, support, and rights of young parents, providing them with the necessary protection and resources to navigate their circumstances.

Policies should also promote the integration of educational and health services for adolescents. The Government of Sierra Leone and local authorities should ensure that schools and healthcare

providers are equipped to address the needs of young people involved in early marriage. This can be achieved by implementing policies that mandate the inclusion of sexual and reproductive health education in school curricula and ensuring that health services are accessible and youth-friendly.

Economic policies should focus on creating pathways through which young people can achieve financial independence. This includes investing in vocational training and job creation programs tailored to adolescents' needs. Policies should also support the development of microfinance and entrepreneurship initiatives that provide young people with resources to start their businesses and contribute to economic growth.

Policies aimed at improving community support systems and social services are essential. Governments should invest in the development of community centers that offer a range of services, including counseling, childcare, and family support. These centers can play a crucial role in providing assistance to young individuals and families affected by early marriage and related challenges.

Social and Behavioral Change

Promoting social and behavioral changes is fundamental to addressing issues associated with early marriage. Community-based awareness campaigns should focus on changing attitudes towards marriage and highlighting the benefits of education and stable family structures. These campaigns should engage local leaders, influencers, and educators in disseminating positive messages about the importance of education and the risks associated with early marriage.

Additionally, programs that promote gender equality and challenge traditional norms regarding marriage and family life can contribute to reducing early marriage rates. By fostering discussions on healthy relationships, consent, and the value of education, communities can shift cultural attitudes and create an environment that supports young people in making informed decisions about their lives.

Involving adolescents in the design and implementation of social and behavioral change initiatives is crucial. Young people should be empowered to play an active role in addressing the issues they face, and their voices should be included in the development of programs and policies. This approach not only ensures that interventions are relevant and effective but also fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among adolescents.

Future Research

Future research should focus on several key areas to better understand and address the implications of early marriage. Longitudinal studies that track the experiences and outcomes of adolescents who marry early can provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of early marriage on educational, health, and economic stability. These studies should include diverse populations and settings to capture a broad range of experiences and identify effective interventions.

In addition, research should explore the effectiveness of existing interventions and policies in mitigating the negative consequences of early marriage. Evaluating the impact of educational programs, healthcare services, and economic initiatives can help to identify best practices and areas for improvement. Comparative studies that analyze different approaches to addressing early marriage can also provide valuable insights into what works and what does not.

Furthermore, research should examine the role of cultural and social norms in shaping attitudes towards early marriage and inform the development of targeted social and behavioral change campaigns. Understanding the cultural context and its influence on early marriage practices can help in designing more effective interventions that resonate with communities.

Finally, research on the experiences of young people in early marriages should focus on their perspectives and needs. Qualitative studies involving in-depth interviews and focus groups can provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by adolescents and inform the development of supportive services and programs. By prioritizing these research areas, stakeholders can better address the complex issues associated with early marriage and improve outcomes for young people and their communities.

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