



## UNVEILING THE SILENT SUFFERING: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF GIRL CHILD MARRIAGE VICTIMS AND ITS IMPACT ON THEIR EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT:** *This qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experiences of victims of girl child marriage, an issue that persistently affects countless girls worldwide, and its impact on the victim's education. Using a phenomenological approach, the study delves into the narratives of girls who have been married off at an early age, examining their perspectives on the impact of marriage on their education, personal development, and overall well-being emotions. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study reveals the multifaceted nature of girl-child marriage and its profound impact on the lives of its victims. Girl child marriage victims experienced emotional and psychological distress, socio-economic and health-related challenges, as well as a disruption in their education. By giving voice to the experiences of these girls, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricacies surrounding girl-child marriage and underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy changes.*

**KEYWORDS:** Girl Child Marriage, Impact, Lived Experiences, Victims, Education



## INTRODUCTION

Girl child marriage, defined as the union of a girl under the age of 18, remains a critical, pervasive, and concerning global issue with far-reaching consequences for the physical, emotional, and social well-being of young girls. Several research reports indicated that girl-child marriage or early marriage is prevalent in almost all countries in the world and that this practice is a violation of human rights and has negative implications on the girl child (ICRW, 2006; UNICEF, 2012; World Bank, 2014; Mehari et al., 2023). Again, UNICEF's (2019) report highlights the prevalence of child marriage globally. It indicates that while progress has been made in reducing child marriage rates, millions of girls are still married before the age of 18. Yigzaw et al. (2018) examine the prevalence of intimate partner violence among married girls in Ethiopia and highlight the increased vulnerability of child brides to violence within marriage. Also, a study by Erulkar et al. (2018), which focused on the relationship between child marriage and education in Sub-Saharan Africa and the factors contributing to early marriage as well as its impact on girls' educational attainment, found that child marriage negatively affects girls' educational opportunities and perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

These studies, among others, provide robust evidence of the existence and consequences of girl-child marriage across different regions and contexts. Despite legal measures and international efforts to eradicate this practice, millions of girls are married off before reaching adulthood, perpetuating cycles of poverty, disempowerment, and vulnerability. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that includes policy changes, community engagement, and empowerment of girls to ensure their rights and well-being.

Also, while quantitative studies have provided insights into girl child marriage prevalence rates and its broad impacts, there is a lack of qualitative research that captures the lived experiences of those directly affected as well as the impact of girl child marriage on the education of the girl child. This study, therefore, sought to address this gap by offering an in-depth exploration of victim's experiences and their impacts on girl child education, thereby enriching our understanding of the physical, emotional, psychological, educational, and socio-economic challenges faced by victims of girl child marriage.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Causes of Girl Child Marriage

Multiple factors contribute to the practice of girl-child marriage, often varying across regions and cultures. The causes of early child marriage can be classified into social, economic, cultural, and legal dimensions.

Poverty is a major driver of early child marriage, particularly in low-income and developing countries. Families living in poverty may view marriage as a way to reduce their financial burden by transferring the responsibility of caring for their daughters to their husbands. In many cultures, dowry payments or bride price may be involved, providing economic incentives for families to marry off their daughters at a young age (Raj et al., 2017).

Also, Societies with entrenched gender inequalities and discriminatory norms often view girls' education and aspirations as secondary to their role as wives and mothers. In such contexts,



girls' value is often associated with their ability to fulfil traditional gender roles, leading to their early marriage (Santhya, 2011).

Moreover, Cultural norms and traditions can play a significant role in perpetuating early child marriage. Some communities uphold the belief that early marriage safeguards girls' honours and protects their families' reputations. Marriage is also seen as a way to preserve cultural identity and maintain social harmony (Nour, 2009).

Moreover, lack of access to quality education is another driving factor in early child marriage. When educational opportunities are limited, families may prioritise early marriage for their daughters over-investing in their education. Early marriage then becomes a perceived alternative to a lack of future prospects (Malhotra et al., 2011).

Furthermore, weak legal frameworks and poor enforcement mechanisms contribute to the persistence of early child marriage. In some countries, laws may exist to prevent child marriage, but they are not effectively enforced due to a lack of resources, societal resistance, or ignorance of the laws (Chae & Ngo, 2016).

In addition, conflict and humanitarian crises can exacerbate the prevalence of early child marriage. Families facing displacement, economic hardship, and insecurity may marry off their daughters as a coping mechanism or to ensure their safety in challenging environments (Save the Children, 2016).

Efforts to address early child marriage should consider these multifaceted causes within their specific cultural and regional contexts. Comprehensive strategies that combine legal reforms, education, awareness campaigns, economic empowerment, and community engagement are essential for effectively combating this harmful practice.

### **Effects of Girl Child Marriage**

Child marriage exposes girls to various health risks, including early and unplanned pregnancies. The bodies of young girls are often not fully developed to bear the physical stress of childbirth, which can lead to complications such as obstetric fistulas, premature births, and maternal mortality. Studies have shown that girls married before age 18 are more likely to experience pregnancy-related complications and have a higher risk of maternal mortality compared to women who marry later (Raj et al., 2015).

Also, girls who are forced into child marriages may experience psychological distress due to the abrupt transition into adulthood and the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood. Early marriages often limit girls' freedom, decision-making abilities, and autonomy, leading to feelings of disempowerment and reduced self-esteem (Raj et al., 2017). Young girls forced into marriage are often not emotionally prepared for the responsibilities and challenges that come with married life. They may experience feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety due to their limited agency and lack of autonomy in decision-making (WHO, 2013). Again, child marriage can lead to the isolation of young girls from their families, friends, and communities. Once married, they are often removed from their support networks and are compelled to prioritise their roles as wives and mothers over their own personal growth (ICRW, 2011).

Furthermore, child marriage often results in the discontinuation of girls' education. Early marriage restricts their access to formal schooling and limits personal and intellectual



development opportunities. Lack of education perpetuates the cycle of poverty and reinforces gender inequality (UNICEF, 2014). Moreover, early marriage hinders girls' economic opportunities and financial independence. It hampers girls' economic prospects by limiting their ability to engage in higher education and gainful employment. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty for both individuals and their families (Camacho et al., 2017; Santhya et al., 2011).

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative phenomenological design was chosen in this study to help apprehend the lived experiences of girl child marriage victims. The study involved 11 female participants aged 16 to 29 who had experienced girl child marriage, selected from diverse geographical locations and backgrounds to ensure a wide range of perspectives. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the study's participants to ensure that only information-rich participants were engaged in the study.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture the participants' experiences. The interview focused on girl child marriage victims' experiences before, during, and after the marriage and their perceptions of the impact on their lives. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, ensuring the preservation of participants' original language and expressions.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights within the data. An iterative coding and theme development process was undertaken to ensure the accuracy and depth of the findings. Also, Guba and Lincoln's (1985) strict criteria of transferability, confirmability, credibility, and dependability, as cited in Kombat et al. (2023), were followed to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical guidelines were followed to protect their confidentiality and well-being.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis revealed several prominent themes that characterise the experiences of girl child marriage victims and its impact on their education;

Among these themes is loss of childhood and education: Participants consistently expressed the abrupt end to their childhood and dreams of education. They reported that child marriage led to the abrupt termination of their education, preventing them from achieving their academic aspirations and limiting their future opportunities. Early marriage forced them into adult roles, leading to a lack of agency over their lives. Many participants expressed regret over the termination of their education and the loss of opportunities for personal and professional growth. Many shared experiences of being treated as possessions rather than individuals. This finding supports the (UNICEF 2014) report, which revealed that child marriage often results in the discontinuation of girls' education and restricts their access to formal schooling



opportunities for personal and intellectual development. Some interview excerpts are provided below;

*P1: “Hmmm, because of early marriage, I dropped out of school in order to assume the role of an adult. My friend, whom I was brighter than in class, just completed nursing training college this year and will be getting employment, which will enable her to take good care of herself and her children in the future whilst I am left to rot in this so-called marriage with my children”.*

*P7: “I stopped school because I was forced to marry as a teenager. I was also deceived that when I got married, my husband would take care of me in school, but after the marriage, my husband said I was supposed to be in the house, doing house chores and taking care of the house and children whilst he was away. My dreams and aspirations have been shattered as a result of this marriage”.*

Also, the lack of autonomy and agency in decision-making processes, both within the marriage and in their broader lives, was a recurring challenge. Participants shared their struggles with being denied the right to make choices about their own lives, both prior to and after marriage. They discussed feelings of powerlessness and lack of control over their own destinies. Many participants spoke about feeling trapped in situations they did not choose. This finding corroborates with Raj et al. (2017), whose study found that early marriages often limit girls' freedom, decision-making abilities, and autonomy, leading to feelings of disempowerment and reduced self-esteem. Below are interview excerpts:

*P3: “I have never been involved in taking any decision in this marriage. He takes his decision and then tells me what he wants me to do, and I must do it even if the decision does not favour me. I am being treated as if I have no right to make my own decisions, and the reason why I cry every day is that it was not my intention to marry him or even marry at that tender age”.*

*P11: “I do as he says whether I like it or not. He does not involve me in decision-making, and the family, too, is even worse. They do not recognise me as being part of the family”.*

Furthermore, the emotional toll of child marriage was evident as participants discussed feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression resulting from the sudden transition to married life at a young age. This was exacerbated by their limited support networks. The lack of support networks compounded the challenges faced by victims. Participants recounted strained relationships with their families of origin and difficulties in forming supportive relationships within their marital households. Survivors described their isolation and alienation due to their marital status, often being excluded from social circles and enduring stigmatisation from their communities. They discussed the profound impact on their self-esteem, mental health, and overall well-being. This finding is in line with the (WHO, 2013) where it was reported that victims of girl-child marriage may experience feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety due to their limited agency and lack of autonomy in decision-making. Below are interview excerpts:

*P9: “I sometimes feel like God is not alive or has neglected me. Sometimes I feel like also chatting with others, but there is usually no one to talk to, even my colleagues and friends whom we used to play together when I was in school now don't want to talk to me just because I am pregnant and looking dirty always. This has always kept me thinking all night, and sometimes I cry in my room”.*



*P6: “I sometimes feel like I am living in a different world from the rest of the people. I feel rejected by the people around me, even my own family members. No one wants to be close to me again as before. I am always worried, but what can I do? I am already in it”.*

Last but not least, the economic and Health challenges stemming from girl-child marriage were a recurring theme, with participants discussing difficulties in securing employment, financial independence, and providing for their children. They revealed that they remained financially dependent on their husbands as a result of them not being able to secure well-paid jobs or engage in any meaningful economic activity that could have fetched them some money. They also made it known that they are not engaged in any economic activity because they are forced to understand that their place is in the kitchen and for carrying out other household chores. Participants also highlighted the physical toll of early marriage, including premature pregnancies and associated health risks. They shared experiences of inadequate healthcare during and after pregnancy, leading to complications and potential maternal mortality. This finding agrees with Camacho et al. (2017) and Santhya et al. (2011), who revealed that girl child marriage or early marriage hinders girls' economic opportunities and financial independence, which can perpetuate the cycle of poverty for both individuals and their families. It again supports Raj et al. (2015), who found that girls married before the age of 18 are more likely to experience pregnancy-related complications and have a higher risk of maternal mortality compared to women who marry later. Some excerpts from the interview are shown below:

*P5: “I depend on my husband for everything because I am not allowed to undertake any economic activity, and that gives him the chance to maltreat me. It is always difficult for me to even get money for antenatal and postnatal”.*

*P8: “To be frank with you, there is too much suffering in early marriage. Sometimes to even get money to buy paracetamol for oneself or a child when sick is a problem. I would not advice any young girl out there to enter into marriage too early or enter into marriage without having a job. All these are happening to me because I do not have any work doing that can fetch me money, so life is unbearable for me right now”.*

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted and deeply negative impact of girl-child marriage on victims' lives. The loss of educational opportunities, agency, and social support further perpetuates cycles of gender inequality and vulnerability. The findings further underscore the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that address not only the legal and policy dimensions of girl-child marriage but also the multifaceted impacts on survivors. The emotional, psychological, educational, health-related, and socio-economic challenges described by participants reflect the complexity of this issue. Tailored support systems, educational opportunities, and accessible mental health services are essential components in mitigating the long-term repercussions of girl-child marriage.



## CONCLUSION

The experiences of victims of girl-child marriage are complex and require a nuanced understanding to develop effective interventions. The girl child experiences disruptions in their education, emotional and psychological trauma, loss of agency and decision-making, and socio-economic and health-related challenges in their marriage. This qualitative study offers insights into the challenges faced by these young girls, highlighting the urgent need for policy measures and community-based initiatives to end this harmful practice. By amplifying the voices of these victims, this research contributes to a collective effort to create a safer and more empowering environment for girls around the world.

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