



Should we Keep this Quiet? Print Media and Child Marriage in Nigeria

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Abstract

Child marriage is an issue that has become a scourge to some girl-children in Nigeria. These girls are unaware of the consequences of this act on their health and well-being. The Child Rights Act which was passed in Nigeria in 2003 puts the age of marriage at 18 years old, but sometimes in Nigeria girls are married off before their 18th birthday and most times, they are faced with a lot of health challenges which could be curbed through effective information, education and communication. The study examined the print media report of child marriage in Nigeria and looked at the theme of reportage of child marriage in the print media and how the newspapers presented stories about child marriage. The study employed the agenda setting and media framing theories, and content analysed two Nigerian newspapers from 2013 to 2016. The study explored the prominence given to the coverage of child marriage, the dominant themes covered on child marriage and the framing of child marriage by the newspapers. Findings showed that there has not been enough focus on child marriage in Nigeria and that some of the news stories did not explain in details the implications and consequences of child marriage to the Nigerian girl-child. The study therefore recommended that the print media should put more effort in educating the masses on the issue of child marriage.

Keywords: Agenda setting; Child marriage; Child rights act; Girl-child; Print media

Introduction

Newspapers play the traditional role of educating the masses and setting agenda for public action. News coverage can have a strong influence on how the public will respond to societal issues. Child marriage as a global issue involves the giving out to marriage a child who is not mentally, psychologically, emotionally or physically prepared for a marital life to an older man who most times has children same age as the girl bride. It is a human rights violation that denies girls their rights to health, education, equality, free from

violation and exploitation. Okafor and Oyakhiromen [1] citing United Nations see child marriage as “any marriage carried out below the age of eighteen (18) years before the girl is physically, psychologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and child bearing”. A child who is a minor does not consent to marriage decision about a life partner. Maharjan et al. [2] opine that “Child marriage is a product of cultures that devalue women and girls and discriminate against them”, and it is also a “gross violation of human rights and a barrier to girls health and social well-being” [3]. Poverty, poor educational attainment, and strong social and religious traditions are drivers of child marriage in Nigeria. Child marriage is mostly prevalent in Northern Nigeria. The child when married assumes the role of a wife, daughter-in-law, mother and housekeeper. She is deprived of education, and any chance of her developing her own personality and growing professionally.

UNICEF’s report on child marriage in 2006, rates is that 43% of girls are married off before their 18th birthday, while 17% of the girls are married off before they turn 15. UNICEF [4] reports that, “Worldwide, more than 700 million women alive today were married as children. More than 1 in 3 – or some 250 million – were married before 15”. According to UNICEF [5] rates of child marriage are highest in sub-saharan Africa across the globe, around 4 in 10 girls marry before age 18; about one in eight were married or in union before age 15 also, West and Central Africa have the highest percentage (42%) of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 15 and after age 15 but before age 18. UNICEF [5] report further states that globally about one in seven adolescents and girls (aged 15 to 19) are currently married or in union, while West and Central Africa have the highest proportion of married adolescents (27%).

Girls that are married before they are eighteen years pose the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS because of unprotected sex with their spouse who is older and might have other sexual partners. Child marriage threaten girls’ lives and health, and it limits the girl-childrens’ future prospects. These girls are disempowered and suffer so many illnesses [6]. According to Malhotra [3] “Girls who marry young are at a higher risk of dying during childbirth, having their child die before its first birthday, contracting AIDS and becoming a victim of domestic violence”. The girls could easily fall prey to maternal/infant

mortality, and are susceptible to health condition such as Vesicovaginal Fistula (VVF), and other pregnancy issues.

Since 1959, issues such as human rights, health matters, immorality, ethics, culture, social stigma and others related to children's rights have been in focus with the declaration of the Rights of the Child by the United Nation in 1989. In 2003, Nigeria adopted the Child Rights Act to domesticate the convention on the rights of child; although, the Child's Right Act was adopted in Nigeria, issues related to children's right (child abuse, child labour, child trafficking) still occur in Nigeria. There was heightened discussions on child marriage in 2013 in Nigeria because of the attempt by the Senate to change section 29, sub section 4 of the Nigerian constitution legalising the marriageable age of a Nigerian girl to 18. This study therefore looked at the coverage of this issue by the print media during this heightened period and after it. The study tried to answer these questions: are the media raising awareness among members of the public – parents, teachers, religious leaders, and the government? are they talking about the consequences in the newspapers in order to eradicate child marriage? Should the issue of child marriage be talked about in the media?

Statement of the Problem

Child marriage is a life-threatening and life-changing reality that has affected and is still affecting girls globally. It spans the globe, and is a practice that is more religious and traditional. Girls are forced to trade their childhood for adulthood, they trade their youth for a life of diseases (VVF, HIV/AIDS, RVF etc.) and loneliness and their voices are unheard. In 2007 UNICEF reported that more than 60 million girls aged 20-24 globally had married before their 18th birthday [7]. Child marriage is one of the problems faced by the girl child in Nigeria. Girls are given to marriage without their consent before their 18th birthday. They made to face the devastating effect of child marriage. According to Malhotra [3] "girls who marry young are at a higher risk of dying during childbirth, having their child die before its first birthday, contracting AIDS and becoming a victim of domestic violence". The mass media according to Raufu [8] "...should aim at creating a climate for change by inducing new values, attitudes and modes of behaviour which favour and are capable of aiding modernization". Communication through broadcast, print media and other forms of media educate, and shape opinions of the public. Communication as a process of disseminating and exchanging information to others can be used to deliver information to the public through the mass media. It is in view of this, that the study sought to investigate the coverage of child marriage in the Nigerian newspapers, how the newspapers reported the issues and what should be done on this issue that is more traditional and religious.

Research Questions

- What is the prominence given to the coverage of child marriage issues in the newspapers?
- How did the newspapers frame child marriage stories?

- What are the dominant themes covered on child marriage in the newspapers?

Literature Review

The media inform the public, matters relating to their health and warn them against any danger. Dominick [9] notes that, "newspapers perform the watchdog role in our society... They alert the public to possible threats and new trends". Readers use the newspaper to get information about and interpretation of public affairs, it serves as tools for daily living and for social contact (from human interest stories and advice columns). Newspapers help shape readers understanding of themselves and their world. Newspapers tell readers what is significant and meaningful through their placement of stories in and on their pages [10].

Macnamara [11] is of the opinion that the roles of the media vary widely around the world, in a number of developing countries such as in South East Asia, the media perform a role described as 'agent of development'. He goes on to say that the role the media perform relates to the political system and state of development of the country. The media therefore help in the development of a country - socially, economically and politically. "The media play a crucial role in most countries in spreading information" [12]. The media are channels by which social changes are given direction and impetus. "They have become a dominant source of definitions and images of social reality for individuals, but also collectively for groups and societies; they express values and normative judgments inextricably mixed with news and entertainment" [13].

Child Marriage in Nigeria

Marriage before the age of 18 is a fundamental violation of human rights. There are many factors that interact to place a girl at risk of marriage, these includes; poverty, the perception that marriage will provide 'protection', family honour, social norms, customary or religious laws that condone the practice, an inadequate legislative framework and the state of a country's civil registration system. Child marriage often compromises a girl's development by resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, interrupting a girl-child's schooling, limiting her opportunities for career and vocational advancement and placing her at increased risk of domestic violence. Child marriage in Nigeria is centered on religious and cultural norms. There is a cultural and religious belief that when a girl-child commenced menstrual period, she is fully matured for marriage and should be married off to preserve her virginity. According to Fayokun [14], "it is believed that early marriage for a girl child maximizes her childbearing potential". Erulkar and Bello [15] were of the opinion that the basis for acceptance of early marriages in the northern parts of Nigeria in particular is to preserve the value of virginity, fears about pre-marital sexual activity, reduction of promiscuity of the girl-child and other socio-cultural and religious norms. Erulkar and Bello [15] in their study found out that most of the girl-child fathers or parents are instrumental in making

arrangements for their marriage and that their grandmothers and the prospective husbands also get involved. Some of these girls readily accept the marriage arrangements while others do not.

In 2003, Nigeria adopted the Child Rights Act to domesticate the convention on the rights of child. The Child Rights Act defines a child as a person who has not attained the age of eighteen (18) years. According to Akinlami [16], the 2003 Child's Rights Act main objective is to provide and protect the rights of the Nigerian children; and other related issues. Section 21 of the Child Rights Act states that, "No person under the age of 18 years is capable of contracting a valid marriage, and accordingly, a marriage so contracted is null and void of no effect whatsoever" (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2003, Part III). Section 22 also states that,

- No parent, guardian or any other person shall betroth a child to any person; and
- A betrothal in contravention of subsection (I) of this section is null and void (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2003, Part III).

The Child Right Act further states in section 23 criminalizing child marriage that, "A person –

- who married a child;
- to whom a child is betrothed;
- who promotes the marriage of a child; or
- who betroths a child,

commits an offence and is liable on conviction of a fine of 500,000 naira or imprisonment for a term of five years or both such fine and imprisonment". (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2003, Part III). In 2013, Nigerian senators attempted to change section 29, sub section 4 of the Nigerian constitution to legalize the marriageable age of a Nigerian girl to 18, but it was opposed by some segments in Nigeria. The amendment was stepped down but these generated discussions in the media – both the social media and the traditional media. The issue of child marriage which is seen as a fundamental violation of human rights was considered a national issue by the Federal Government of Nigeria who set up a Technical Working Group on Ending Child Marriage which was formed at the end of 2015 and spearheaded by the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development. Also in May 2015, the Violence against Persons Prohibition Act was adopted to address the issue of female genital mutilation and other harmful traditional practices such as child marriage.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study lies in the gate keeping theory and media framing theory. This is based on the fact that the media determines the information to transmit; screening, shaping, modifying and editing news in order to come out with good news. The information they disseminate shapes the public, influences the society and therefore play major role in changing the risky behavior and attitudes of readers. The gate-keeping theory was propounded by Kurt Lewin in 1947. The theory has been widely used as a metaphor

to describe the process by which selections are made in media works, especially decisions regarding, whether or not, to allow a particular news report to pass through the gates of a news medium into the news channels [13]. Gate-keeping is not only accepting and rejecting information but involves other things – modifying, editing, and shaping news stories. A gatekeeper is any person (or group) who has control over what material eventually reaches the public. Each day, editors and news directors – the gatekeepers in news media systems decide which items to pass and which to reject. McCombs and Shaw in the 1970's looked at the effect of gatekeepers' decisions and found out that the audience learns how much importance to attach to a news item from the emphasis the media place on it. Gatekeepers in the newspapers decide on information to pass across to the public, thereby educating the public on certain issues deem important and relevant.

Media framing theory by Goffman Erving 1974 is closely related to agenda setting theory, both focuses on how the media draw the public's eye to specific topics by setting agenda for such issues. Framing shows the ways in which the news presented creates a frame for those specific topics. Arthur [17] citing Nisbet 2007, p. 12 opine that frames are, "Schemata of interpretation that allow individuals to 'locate, perceive, identify, and label' issues, events, and topics". Arthur [17] further states that "Framing helps the audience understands a topic in the short term, and also gives them a way to think about the topic that they can draw on later when thinking about the topic in the future". The media in framing stories, focuses attention on certain events and places them in order for the public to derive meaning and knowledge of those issues, they identify information, classify them and disseminate them to the public.

Research Methodology

The study spans through a period of three years from 2013-2016, a period of heightened discussion of child marriage in Nigeria caused by the aborted amendment of the Nigerian constitution on the right age for marriage. Stratified sampling technique was used to stratify each of the sample years into quarters, while four months were picked from each quarter in the year under study using the simple random technique (ballot method). In 2013, the months of March, June, and November were picked making a total of 91 copies of newspaper editions including weekend copies, in 2014, February, May and December were picked and the number of copies considered were 90 while in 2015, January, June and November were picked, making a total of 91 editions of the newspaper. On the whole, the total in number of newspaper editions considered in the two newspapers was 544 editions – a total of five hundred and forty four newspaper editions constituted the sample size for this study. Coding guide and coding sheet were used to obtain data. The units of analysis which are the contents to be examined in the newspapers selected were categorized indicating, the prominence of coverage which covered frequency of coverage and the story placement of child marriage issues. This involved the number of times the issue was mentioned in a particular copy of the

newspaper studied; story placement was further categorized as front page, centered page and back page. Framing of the news stories was categorized as episodic framing (an individual's experience) and thematic framing (within a large societal context). Dominant issues covered were categorized as consequences, traditional/cultural and child/human rights issues.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Research question one: What is the prominence given to the coverage of child marriage issues in the newspapers?

Table 1 shows a breakdown of frequency distribution of the selected Newspapers coverage of child marriage issues in Nigeria from 2013 to 2015. The Guardian Newspaper has a total no of 36 (48%) news studies during the period under study while Punch Newspaper has 39 (52%) news stories. Total number of reports in the two newspapers under study during the period under investigation is 75 (100%). It is evident from the findings that Punch newspaper devoted more space in the coverage of child marriage issues in Nigeria between 2013 and 2015, and that news stories on child marriage were not adequately covered.

Table 1: Distribution of news stories according to newspapers.

Newspapers	No	%
The Guardian	36	48
Punch	39	52
Total	75	100

Distribution showing prominence of coverage in the two newspapers

The placement of news stories by the newspapers on child marriage issues between 2013 and 2015 shows that 57 (76%) of the stories were reported as news stories placed in back page. Eleven news stories representing 14.6% of the news stories were placed in center spread page while 7 (9.3%) news stories were placed on the front page. This shows that stories on child marriage were reported more on the back pages of the newspapers (**Table 2**).

Table 2: Story placement.

	The Guardian		Punch		Total	
	NO	%	NO	%	NO	%
Front Page	4	11.1	3	7.7	7	9.3
Back page	27	75	30	76.9	57	76
Centre Spread Page	5	13.8	6	15.4	11	14.6
Total	36	100	39	100	75	100

Research question two: What How did the newspapers frame child marriage stories?

Table 3 shows the way child marriage news stories are framed in the newspapers. Episodic framing explains the framing of child marriage issues from an individual's experience and thematic framing explains the framing of child marriage issues within a large societal context. The total number of news stories framed as episodic in the two newspapers was 44 (58.6%) while as thematic was 31 (41.3%). This implies that stories framed as individual's experience was higher than stories framed within the societal context.

Table 3: Story Framing.

	The Guardian		Punch		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Episodic	21	58.3	23	58.9	44	58.6
Thematic	15	41.6	16	41	31	41.3
Total	36	100	39	100	75	100

Research question three: What are the dominant themes covered on child marriage in the newspapers?

Table 4 shows that the dominant theme on child marriage in the newspapers was centered on the traditional/cultural issues surrounding child marriage in the Guardian and Punch newspapers, which were 39 (52%) news stories. Stories on consequences of child marriage, which centered on different consequences ranging from health, psychological, social and mental consequences was 29 (36.8%) news stories while stories about child marriage on it being a child/human rights issue was 7 (9.3%) news stories. This implies that traditional/cultural issues about child marriage were more prominent in the newspapers.

Table 4: Dominant themes covered on child marriage by the two newspapers.

	The Guardian		Punch		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Consequences	16	44.4	13	33.3	29	38.6
Traditional/cultural	18	50	21	53.8	39	52
Child/Human Rights	2	5.5	5	12.8	7	9.3
Total	36	100	39	100	75	100

Discussion and Results

Findings from the study showed that the mass media have not really covered the issue of child marriage adequately; the study found out that the mass media are somehow keeping quiet to the issue of child marriage since the coverage is sparse. The total number of the news stories covered on child marriage in the Nigeria two newspapers in three years reflected the low priority accorded the issue. This indicates that the issue is not yet considered an issue for sustainable development by the Nigeria press. It should have more coverage in the dailies than what the newspapers covered in the period of study. Significant proposition of the stories were on individual experiences and not on the view of the government for societal consumption. Front page and the center page were the least covered in the two newspapers. There is a gap in the coverage of child marriage issue in the pages that draw attention from the readers. News in back pages are normally consumed in a hurry and may have less impact in the readers. Readers may tend to read only the lead paragraphs in the front pages and centered pages. The child marriage issues were presented more in less conspicuous positions which might be overlooked by the readers. The stories were not covered more on the editorials and opinion pages. It shows the lack of interests of the newspapers on this issue, since editorial are the opinions of the newspapers. It would be helpful if newspapers once in a while, write editorials on some aspects of the campaign. Focus should be given to issues on how to prevent and control child marriage and also on the modes and causes of transmission of child marriage. The dominant theme on child marriage in the newspapers studied centered more on the traditional/cultural issues surrounding child marriage rather than on the consequences of child marriage and it being a human rights issue. Generally, the print media have not fully done well in the coverage of child marriage issues in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Child marriage is a human rights violation that denies girls their rights to health, education, equality, free from violation and exploitation. It involves both the girl child and boys but more prevalent with the girl-child. The study has shown that the mass media have not done enough in disseminating information about child marriage which would have helped to sensitize the public on the consequences of this issue and help to end it which will be key to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of poverty, gender equality, health, education, nutrition and economic growth.

Recommendations

- The following are the recommendations based on the findings of this study:

- The mass media should support awareness-raising of child marriage by constantly reporting the issue
- There should be public education programmes about the negative effects of child marriage to help change attitudes and strengthen duties of parents, guardians, and the community to protect these girls.
- State governments should endeavor to empower the girl-child by giving her adequate education

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