Child Marriage in Rural Cameroon: The Case of Magba in the West Region

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the long term struggle for the empowerment of women by international bodies, governments and non-governmental organisations, which has greatly improved the situation of women in Cameroon, certain cultural practices still relegate woman to the background. Child marriage is one of these cultural practices that do not only deprive a woman of her legal rights, but also of her social and economic opportunities. Marriage of girls below 15 years of age is still very common in Magba like in other rural communities in Cameroon. The pertinence of this topic is seen where ironically, men are not the only people who promote this practice but mothers of these girls are equally perpetrators of this act. Due to the high illiteracy rates of women in the Magba community, they are ignorant of the consequences of early marriage. In addition, the culture of the people, championed by men who are custodians of the tradition, believe that if at 20 years a girl is not married, there are very few chances of her getting married since men fear that she could be barren, not attractive or has a bad family history. This belief has encouraged most young girls to be interested in early marriage for fear of stigmatization by the community. In order to effectively carry out this study, the qualitative research method was used. The results revealed that cultural norms, poverty, illiteracy, male chauvinism and female subordination are some of the main causes of child marriage. Our findings also show that early marriages cause physical, biological and psychological damages on the girls under the age of 15. This paper calls for government and stakeholders to take measures to reduce the rate of child marriage in Cameroon as well as reinforce the laws and conventions to mitigate its negative effects.

Key words: child marriage, cultural practices, empowerment, subordination, stigmatization

RESUME

Suite à la lutte de longue haleine pour les droits de la femme menée par les organisations internationales, les gouvernements et les organisations non-gouvernementales, la situation des femmes au Cameroun s’est considérablement améliorée ; sauf en ce qui concerne certaines pratiques culturelles qui continuent de reléguer la femme au second plan. De ces pratiques on compte le mariage des mineurs qui non seulement prive la femme de ses droits légaux mais aussi place cette dernière à la marge des opportunités sociales et économiques. A Magba comme dans plusieurs autres localités rurales du Cameroun le mariage des filles de moins de 15 ans est encore un phénomène courant. Curieusement, il n’y a pas que les hommes qui favorisent de telles pratiques, Il y a aussi les mères de ces mêmes filles qui les pérennissent. Du fait du taux élevé d’analphabétisme parmi les femmes de la communauté de Magba, elles sont ignorantes des conséquences du mariage précoce. En outre, d’après
les traditions de ce peuple -traditions défendues par la gente masculine, laquelle est la gardienne de la culture locale- une fille célibataire âgée de plus de 20 ans, a moins de chance de se marier soit parce que les hommes craignent qu’elle ne soit stérile, soit parce qu’elle n’est pas séduisante, ou encore parce qu’elle provienne d’une famille de mauvaise notoriété. Cette croyance a poussé la plupart des jeunes filles à adhérer à l’idée du mariage précoce par crainte d’être stigmatisée par la communauté. Pour mener à bien cette étude nous avons utilisé la méthode qualitative. Les résultats obtenus ont prouvé que les normes culturelles, la pauvreté, l’analphabétisme, le machisme et la subordination de la gente féminine sont entre autres les principales causes du mariage des enfants. Nos conclusions révèlent que les mariages précoces provoquent chez les filles de moins de 15 ans des dégâts physiques, biologiques et psychologiques. Cet article vise à interpeller le gouvernement à renforcer les lois et les conventions concernant le mariage des enfants de manière à atténuer ses effets négatifs.

Mots-clés : mariage d’enfants, pratiques culturelles, responsabilisation, subordination, stigmatisation

INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a worldwide practice but while the practice has decreased globally over the last 30 years, it remains common in rural areas of Cameroon and among the poorest of the poor. In Africa, 42% of girls are married before the age of 18(Sharon La Frantere, 2005). In Cameroon the percentage of girls marrying before the age of 18 stands at 61% (UNFPA, 2004). Article 1 of the Convention on the Right of the Child defines Child marriage as any marriage of a child younger than 18 years old. Girls in Magba are victims of this practice given that most of them are forced into marriage as early as 9 years of age. In this regard, they are often socially neglected with little education, low self-esteem and left with no skills and opportunities for personal development. Consequently these girls are trapped in the vicious cycle of ignorance, poverty and diseases.

Despite article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which states that “all human beings are born free with equal dignity and rights”; the culture and the religion of the Magba people continue to encourage child marriage which is now widely recognised as a violation of children's rights and a direct form of discrimination against the girl child. Early marriage is punishable under article 356 of Cameroon’s Penal Code. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is still very common in many rural areas of Cameroon. Child marriage in Magba has become a cultural norm acceptable to most men and women. This is reinforced through the various rites, values and practices which are detrimental to the wellbeing of women and girls. One of such rite is that of passage from childhood to maturity and which is not determined by the age of the girl but by the fact that she starts to menstruate, develop breasts and the physical appearance. Another practice is that of “fattening” where girls considered to be of marriage age and who are physically not matured are secluded in a room and feed with nutritious food for about two weeks or more so that they can grow fat. The practice of child marriage in Magba is therefore considered normal and is continuously carried out due to the ignorance of the consequences.

Marriage is one of those institutions that is highly respected in our society. Marriage celebrations in Magba are contracted among all classes of people in the community be it rich or poor. Child betrothal is a very common form of marriage in the Magba community. This is a practice where a child is given out for marriage at birth through an indication of interest by a male adult. According to the African charter on the Right and welfare of the child, 1990 article 21; child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective action including legislation shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be 18 years. The magnitude of the ceremony of most marriages in this community depends on the amount of wealth of the family but the marriage rituals remain the same. Items demanded from the groom’s family reflect the culture of the people. For example hoe is always demanded from the groom’s family which is an indication of the fact that farming is one of their main activities in this community. However, marriage is one of those ceremonies that is supposed to call for
happiness but when one of the parties is not of marriage age it brings a lot of frustration and unhappiness.

Early marriage implies that a girl’s childhood is cut short and her fundamental rights are compromised. Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, 1964 Article 1, makes clear that no marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties, such consent to be expressed by them in person … as prescribed by law. Article 2, States Parties to the present Convention shall … specify a minimum age for marriage ("not less than 15 years" according to the nonbinding recommendation accompanying this Convention). No marriage shall be legally entered into by any person under this age, except where a competent authority has granted a dispensation as to age, for serious reasons, in the interests of the intending spouses … Article 3, All marriages shall be registered … by the competent authority. These conventions are often not respected by the people of Magba. Besides, law No 794 of 29th June 1979 on the organization of Customary and Akali courts in Anglophone Cameroon and as well as decree No 69/DF/544 of 19th December 1969, does not stipulate a minimum age for marriage. It is determined by the physical maturity of the individual and most often puberty, showed by the enlargement of the breast, menstruation and ability to procreate.

Based on the study carried out in Magba, in March 2006 by GTZ (German Technical Cooperation) on teenage mothers, out of the 65 girls interviewed, 40 had a child before the age of 15. This is contrary to article 16 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which states that: Men and women of full age have the right to marry and form a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during and at its dissolution. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending parties. From the interviews carried out in the field, it was glaring that most of the girls were forced into marriage or the got themselves involved without actually knowing what they were doing.

According to statistics on child marriage in the rural communities of Cameroon carried out by UNICEF (1987 -2006), 57% of girls are married under the age of 18. Whereas in 1994, the international conference on population and development stated that the minimum age of marriage which is 18 should be raised and enforced, while all forms of coercion and discrimination should be eliminated and marriage should be entered into with free consent and as equal partners United Nations Fund for Population (UNFPA, 2004). Though Magba is a melting pot of different parts of Cameroonian cultures, the Bamoun (mostly Muslims) are the indigenous and predominant group of people in the entire division. The phenomenon of early marriage and early school dropout is very evident in Magba. Article 10 of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discriminations against women states that; states shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education and in particular to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women. It further states in Article 10(f) that, various states shall ensure the reduction of female student dropout rates and the organisation of programmes for girls and women who have left school. Magba community rather has a high illiteracy rate with majority of school dropouts being girls. Besides, the education of girls is always being looked upon as a waste of resources. This is because she will soon be married off to stay with the husband’s family who will take full charge of her. A married girl is looked upon as a source of pride for her family. This explains why in Magba most girls do not go to school.

According to the United National Fund for Population (UNFPA) child marriage advocacy program (2005), child marriage exposes girls to diseases like HIV/AIDS, cervical cancers and fistula. Pregnancies pose many challenges for young girls because it suppresses the immune system therefore exposing them to malaria. Adolescent mothers have a 35%-55% higher birth risk than older women. The study is therefore designed to show that early marriage has biological, physical and psychological effects on the health of girls in Magba through;
• Examining the causes of child marriage in Magba.
• Demonstrating the effects of child marriage in Magba.
• Propose strategies to combat this practice in Magba.

METHODOLOGY

Magba is in Noun Division, West Region of Cameroon, 85km away from Foumban and the administrative headquarters of the division. Magba is a transit zone that links up three regions of Cameroon which are, north west (Nwa and Ndu sub division), Adamoua (Bankim) and Center (Ngambe –Tikar) (Mboumbou, 2010). According to 2002 national statistics, Magba community comprises of six localities with a population of about 40,000 inhabitants. The youth population comprises 60% of age 0-25 years, with 50.3% women and 49.7% men. The principal activities of the people are subsistence food cropping, cattle rearing and artisan fishing from a local lake Magpi. Fishing has attracted many people from different parts of Cameroon and beyond.

The research methods that guided the collection and analysis of data were qualitative. Techniques used included direct observation, semi structured interview, individual in-depth interview and focus group discussions.

Direct Observation enabled the researcher to get involved in the daily activities of Magba people. The researcher lived in Magba, observed and participated in their activities like the traditional ceremonies of womanhood. This was enough to confirm prior information and correct data. Semi-structured interview was used because it gives room for open ended questions which helped in the collection of in-depth answers and spontaneous comments by the respondents. The relevance of this method is that the researcher does not monopolize the interview by excessive control of the respondent. It consequently produced satisfactory responses from interviewees. Also, the use of an interview guide helped the researcher to stay on tract. Individual In-depth interview was instrumental in this study because it enabled some issues to be discussed in privacy, one-on-one with individual men, women and married girls. The advantage is that the interview was conversational between the interviewer and the respondent. Focus Group Discussion was carried out in three phases. This was to compliment data that could not be acquired through interviews and observations. This was organized with the mothers, the married girls and the men separately to get their opinion in respect to this problem.

CAUSES OF CHILD MARRIAGES IN MAGBA

The practice of child marriage in Magba is an old phenomenon that is rampant in this community as their culture promotes polygamous, levirate and sororates marriages. Girls therefore are forced into early marriages for the above reasons. These marriages encourage the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the area as many get involved without the knowledge of the health status of their partners. Besides, their consent is often not sort before given then cut for marriage (Mboumbou, 2002). The causes of child marriage in Magba include poverty, high illiteracy levels, cultural norms and beliefs. Poverty is also a serious factor influencing child marriage and one of the major reasons why parents encourage their female children to marry. A young girl in Magba is regarded as an economic liability and forced to marry an elderly man to enable her family and the child to benefit from the man financially. In Magba just like other communities where child marriage is practiced, marriage is viewed as a deal often representing a significant economic and social activity for a family. Girls in Magba are often given out for marriage as a means to settle debts, for exchange or to cement a good relationship. In this community, marriage is an institution that is respected and gives the girls financial stability especially in times of uncertainty.
In Magba, the practice of paying bride price encourages child marriage. Young girls are seen as a resource with which their parents can become richer and are often married off at a young age, for the bride price and also as a way for parents to lessen their economic burdens. Bride wealth is higher for girls between 9-16 years of age because men in the area believe that young girl’s virginity has been preserved and fertility is guaranteed. Families often receive gifts such as cattle, fish and high quality cloth from the grooms, or grooms family, as part of their daughter’s bride price. It is also a customary right for the groom to assist the bride’s family in times of misfortune and acute difficulties. For example, the groom is expected to assist the parents of the bride at the beginning of the farming season by contributing in the tilling of the soil or provide seedlings. Though bride price and dowry helps to bring the groom and bride’s families together it could sometimes be dangerous to the girl if it is considered as a financial strategy, or if one spouse does not have a voice in the arrangement.

The level of illiteracy amongst girls and women in Magba has equally contributed greatly to high level of child marriage in the area. Though the government has made an effort to construct schools, people in the area are reluctant to send their female children to the schools. They believe that school has a negative impact by delaying marriage, especially as early marriage earns them a higher bride price. The fact that girls do not go to school makes them to have very low self-esteem and self-actualisation. They are usually not able to take decisions especially in relation to their own sexuality. They have little or no knowledge of contraceptives, spacing of children and the health needs of the children. Also laid down in Articles 28 and 29 of the convention on the Rights of a Child, all children have the right to education. Education offers a female child an improved opportunity to be less dependent on men in later life by developing her personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to her fullest potential. Thus, increases her prospects of obtaining work outside the home. According to Alvarer (2003), education is measurably associated with positive effects on health, well-being and productivity. For girls, research shows that those with more years of education marry later, have smaller families and survive childbirth at higher rates. They experience reduced incidences of HIV/AIDS, earn more and live in societies with higher national rates of economic growth (Hargreaves et al.2008). Our study showed that, out of the 251 young girls interviewed, 84 had never gone to school, 106 had been to the primary school and 59 had dropped out from secondary schools. Of this 251 young girls interviewed, 20 of them had never married and among this figure 11 of this number admitted ran from the villages to Magba because of forceful early marriages by their parents with older persons of up to 70 years of age.

The immaturity and lack of education of these young girls undermines their capacity to resist early marriages. Those few who bravely refused were obliged to leave the villages for fear of possible threats on their lives. As Debora recounts: ‘when I refused the old man of about 65 years I was forced to escape from Magba for fear that my parents will kill me’. Fanny, age 20, revealed that she was given to her husband at the age of 14 without her consent. ‘The first time I had sex I cried because it was painful and I did not know what it meant and what to do’.

Lack of schooling in the area also means that those girls and women who must work to earn a living have no skills and qualifications. Illiterate girls and women who are abandoned, widowed or divorced or who are victims of acute poverty, are forced to leave from Magba to other cities for jobs such as cleaning, cooking, or house help. A good number of highly desperate girls even enter the commercial sex trade. This has led to a wide spread of HIV/AIDS, STDs among young girls. (Many become young widows due to marriage with elderly men)

Cultural norms and beliefs are also a contributing factor to the practice of child marriage in Magba. In this community, it is believed that a woman has no voice in the presence of a man. According to them, a woman should be seen and not heard. Therefore whatever men say is correct and has to be taken into consideration. This is a cultural norm that does not exist on official principles or
policy. Unfortunately some women have taken it as truth and adopt ‘Yes’ in response to everything a man says. This explains why mothers have no objection in relation to their daughter’s marriages. The decisions taken by men are reinforced by the women.

WOMEN AS PERPETUATORS OF CHILD MARRIAGES IN MAGBA

Most social groupings in the world have specific cultural norms and beliefs, some of which are beneficial to all members, while others are harmful to specific groups such as women. Cultural norms of the people in Magba like early marriages, denied access to education, perceptions of fertility, reflect the values and beliefs of members of the community. Most often decisions are taken by men and executed by the women. In almost all the rural communities in Cameroon, women are very influential especially in the lives of their children. The practice of child marriage and refused access to education helps to strengthen and reinforce gender roles and stereotypes in the Magba community. The women who spend more time with their children than men, prepares them for marriage and socializes them towards cultural stereotypes that helps to maintain a woman in a subordinate position. This inferior status makes women ‘undervalued’ and are considered as ‘property’, a view reflected clearly in practices such as early marriage, wife inheritance and dowry payment. Women are easy manipulated and used. In such situations, violence is perpetuated by men against women and sometimes by women against other women. Female genital mutilation for example is a cultural practise that is carried out by women on girls. This alone is considered as violence on girls with physical, psychological and health consequences.

The ability to bear children is considered as one of the most important factors in every marriage in Magba. Both families of the groom and the bride expect children from this union. The families exert strong pressure on the newly married couple to begin child bearing quickly. Since the people believe that the most fertile period of a woman is in her teens and that it can be difficult for a girl to get pregnant after the age of 20, most parents would like to give out their daughters for marriage early in life. When these girls fail to get married, the blames goes to the mothers for lack of proper home education and training. This pressure and blame usually comes from the girl’s father as well as her extended family. The girl’s mother is often embarrassed within the society. In Magba, perceptions of a good family include stable early marriages of the daughters. These cultural beliefs push mothers to be perpetrators of early marriages.

EFFECTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN MAGBA

Early marriage deprives a girl of her childhood. This is the most important period for her to develop herself physically, emotionally and psychologically. Early marriage inflicts great emotional stress as the young girl is removed from her parent’s home to that of her husband or in laws. Her husband who will invariably be many years her senior, will have little in common with the young teenager except to have sex and to bear children. One of our informant revealed her experience with tears ‘since I got married to one man in my village, I have never been free in his presence….I always consider him as my father than my husband because of his age. There are moments I will cry alone in the room and when I complain to my mother she will shout at me…. Claiming that she went through the same experience and she sees nothing wrong with it. It is my friend who is a student in the Government High School in the city Bafoussam who advised me to escape to the city’. This young lady was obliged to develop an intimate, emotional and physical relationship with this strange and very old man. She was forced as well to have intercourse, although physically she was not fully developed and emotionally prepared. Another case was that of Emilia who was betrothed to a man when she was just 3 months old. Though such practice is no longer very common in the area, we found some women who narrated their experiences. The common experiences shared by these women were that: their
parents were already receiving items such as food, dresses, jewels and other items from the grooms’ families when the girls were as young as 3 months. As they were growing up, they noticed some degree of ‘generosity’ through ‘gifts’ and other ‘services’ from these men to their parents. One of the women said: ‘I was handed over to this man at the age of 9 on condition that he will not have sex with me until I am mature enough but 2 years later he had sex with me… it was so painful and I bled out much blood’. Most of the early marriages in the area lead to violence against the young girls by their husbands.

According to UNICEF (2010), no girl should become pregnant before the age of 18 because she is not yet physically ready to bear children. Babies of mothers younger than 18 tend to be born premature and have low body weight; such babies are more likely to die in the first year of life. This is risky to the health of most young mother’s. Pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of mortality for 15-19 year-old girls (married and unmarried) worldwide. Mothers in this age group face a 20 to 200 percent greater chance of dying in pregnancy than women aged 20-24. Those under the age 15 are five times likely to die as women in their twenties. Some of the young girls we interviewed were widows. These young widows suffer from psychological stress because their late husbands’ families often threatened to hand them to their brother-in-laws who already have several wives. When they refuse, they are usually cast out of the family and denied the properties of their late husbands. Most of them are mocked by the entire village and as a result, they move to the nearest villages or towns for safety.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Child marriage does not only deprive girls their legal rights, but also creates serious biological, physical, social and psychological effects on the young girls in Magba community. Generally speaking the practice of child marriage is reducing in most of the rural areas of Cameroon but there is however need for continuous education and sensitization so as to completely eradicate this harmful cultural practice. Eradicating child marriage will involve the sensitisation of young girls, their fathers, mothers and even their relatives. This implies that the entire community needs to be educated on the harmful effects of child marriage. This will therefore include the traditional rulers, the religious authorities, the government and other stakeholders. The government will have to strictly reinforce the laws and international conventions that protect the rights of children especially those related to child marriage. The eradication of child marriage will mean combating the causes such as poverty, high illiteracy rates, ignorance and detrimental cultural norms. To effectively do so, women and girls must be educated. The government and stakeholders must take particular action in order to promote the education of the girl child in Magba. This can be done by providing free education to girls and by opening up more adult literacy and vocational training centres for women and school dropouts. Education will not only break the yolk of ignorance, but it is going to go a long way to increase the ages of marriage, create employment and make the girls to develop self-esteem and self-actualisation. The government should also come up with effective programs that can help in the economic empowerment of women. This can be done through introducing them to income generating activities and giving them micro credits to help support their activities. Another measure will be for the government and stakeholders to develop health sensitisation programs, especially on reproductive health. These programs will enable the community to be aware of the health risks involved in child marriage.
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