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Role of Christian Religion in Combating Child Marriage among Ughievwen People of Nigeria

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Abstract:

There are few studies on religion's role in curbing child marriage. Also, there is currently a shortage of information on every aspect of child marriage, especially with regard to changing demographics, fertility, and level of education. In respect of trends on women, spouses, families, or society in general, very few studies have examined the practise from a theological or religious perspective. This research aims to examine the critical role of Christianity in combating child marriage practises among people in Ughievwen land, Nigeria. The study employs both historical and phenomenological methods. At the historical level, it reviews extant literature to elucidate authors' views on the subject. At the phenomenological level, a field survey using a questionnaire is used to gather primary data. The study reveals that the significance of financial transactions at the time of marriage in Ughievwen land encourages parents to marry their daughters out early, thus making them believe that their financial burden of paying a dowry would be lessened. In view of both the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as other human rights legislations that safeguard children against child marriage, this research submits that theologians and religious academics have a significant role in expressing and interpreting the beliefs, teachings, and laws of religious communities to curb the menace.

Keywords: Role, Christian Religion, Child Marriage, Ughievwen, Nigeria

Introduction

Marriage is a big part of becoming an adult, but early marriage, also called child marriage, happens when one or both of the people getting married are younger than 18. This union often causes the child's childhood to be cut short and their fundamental rights to be abused. Several nations in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East have policymakers who advocate upholding existing

laws on marriage age and implementing marriage deferral programmes.[1] The fundamental right to give a free and affirmative decision to matrimony is upheld by the International Declaration of Human Rights, but it also acknowledges that such consent cannot be free and full if one of the parties is not of legal age to make an informed decision about a life partner. Particularly in poor rural areas, girls are often coerced into arranged marriages in many low- and middle-income countries without their knowledge or consent.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) says that a girl's marriage is invalid because she is not an adult and cannot give her free and informed consent. This declaration was reiterated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989.[2] In both Christianity and Islam, marriage is widely advocated for all physically capable individuals and is often seen as a religious requirement.[3] Notwithstanding theological arguments for or against child marriage, there is little study on the impact of religious authorities. Parents believe that marriage is a cultural institution that protects their daughters from sexual assault and gives them a male guardian to look out for them. Statistics should serve as a basis for effective campaigning and as a guide for policies and initiatives in this matter. International agreements and treaties have been signed to prevent child marriage and protect children's human rights, including the 1979 CEDAW and the 1962 Convention on Consent to Marriage, the Minimum Marriage Age, and Marriage Registration.[4]

This research, therefore, looks at the practise of child marriage among the Ughievwen people of Nigeria with a focus on the Christian religion's efforts to address the problem. This study is important in a variety of ways. It enlightens people about child marriage and its detrimental effects. It increases advocacy and awareness and acts as a wake-up call to religious leaders and organizations to put a stop to child marriage in Nigeria and other human societies. It also provides academics who want to look into the topic of marriage with additional research impetus.

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[1] Nguyen, M.C. & Wodon, Q. "Global and Regional Trends in Child Marriage". *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no.3 (2015): 6-11

[2] United Nations Children's Fund Child. *Marriage: Latest Trends and Future Prospects* (New York: UNICEF, 2018), p.26.

[3] Erhabor, F.O. & Ottuh, P.O.O. "A Moral Appraisal of Christian Marriage Vow Violations among Couples in Urhoboland." *Alkebulan: A Journal of West and East African Studies* 3, no. 1 (2023): 30-34.

[4] Walker, J.A. "Engaging Islamic Opinion Leaders on Child Marriage: Preliminary Results from Pilot Projects in Nigeria". *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 3(2015): 48-58.

Conceptualizing Child Marriage

According to Alemu (2006), early marriage or child marriage refers to marriages that take place before the age of 18; however, many girls marry considerably younger. In certain places, families compel girls as young as 7 or 8 years old to marry considerably older males (Bayisenge, 2013). Girls marry early for a variety of reasons, and parents may assume that by marrying their daughters, they are protecting them and expanding their economic chances. Child marriage, on the other hand, puts girls at risk for health issues and violence, limits their access to social networks and support systems, and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and gender inequity.

Gaston, Misunas, and Cappa say that a child marriage is a legal or informal marriage or relationship of a similar kind between a child and an adult or another child under the age of 18.[5] For Parsons, Edmeades, Aslihan, Petroni, Sexton, and Wodon, gender inequality is to blame for the great majority of child marriages, which are between a girl and a boy.[6] Although the age of majority (legal adulthood) and marriageable age are both usually set at 18, the marriageable age varies per nation. Even though the marriage age is set at 18, cultural traditions may prevail, and many countries permit earlier weddings with parental consent or in exceptional situations, such as teenage pregnancy. Child or early marriage, according to Atkinson, Korgen, and Trautner, breaches children's rights and has broad and long-term effects for child brides and grooms.[7] For females, this includes negative health repercussions from early pregnancy (particularly adolescent pregnancy) and delivery, in addition to mental health concerns and a lack of access to school and job options. There is limited study on the impacts of child marriages on males, but they include being unprepared for some duties such as family provision, early fatherhood, and a lack of access to school and job prospects.

According to the United Nations (UN), 37,000 girls under the age of 18 marry every day, resulting in the highest number of married girls and girls in danger of child marriage in history.[8] It went on to say that one in every three girls in the developing world is married before the age of 18, and one in every nine is married before the age of 15. According to the UN estimate, more than 140 million girls will be married before the age of 18 in the next decade if current trends continue.[9] It went on to add that about 400 million women between the

[5] Gaston, C.M. & Misunas, C.C. "Child Marriage among Boys: A global Overview of Available Data'. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies* 14 no. 3(2019): 219-228.
[6] Parsons, J., Edmeades, A., Kes, S., Petroni, M., Sexton, M. & Wodon, Q. "Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: A Review of the Literature". *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 3(2015): 12-22.
[7] *Atkinson, M.P., Korgen, K.O. & Trautner, M.N. Social Problems: Sociology in Action (New York: Sage Publications, 2019), 91.*
[8] United Nations General Assembly. *Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage* (New York: United Nations, 2014).
[9] United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution on Child.*

ages of 20 and 49 were married before they were 18.[10] According to Brown, before the industrial revolution, women in many regions of the globe, including India, China, and Eastern Europe, married as soon as they reached puberty, in their mid-teens. Long into the nineteenth century, these marriage practises characterized cultures where the bulk of people lived in small agricultural villages.[11] Men tended to marry later in cultures where a married couple was expected to start their own family. Males often waited until they had enough money to maintain a new house before marrying teenage females who paid a dowry into the family funds.[12] Girls were often betrothed at or before the age of puberty in ancient and mediaeval civilizations.

Friedman (1980) says that in ancient Israel, a girl's father was in charge of setting up and negotiating her marriage. Most girls got married before they turned 15, usually right when they started to grow up. In the Middle Ages, the age of marriage in Jewish culture seemed to be about puberty (Lowenstein, 2002). According to Lamdan, multiple allusions to child marriage in 16th-century response literature and other sources demonstrate that child marriage was so frequent that it was almost the norm.[13] It is vital to note that the word "minor" under *Halakha* refers to a female under the age of twelve years and one day. A twelve and a half-year-old girl were already regarded as an adult in every way.

Nour says that child marriage is the same as child engagement and that it includes both legal cohabitation and court-approved early marriages after a teen pregnancy.[14] Poverty, bride price, dowry, cultural traditions, religious and societal pressures, regional customs, the fear of the kid being unmarried into maturity, illiteracy, and women's perceived inability to work for money are all factors in child weddings. According to studies, comprehensive sex education may help reduce child marriage.[15] Child marriages have been frequent throughout history and are still very popular now, especially in underdeveloped continents like Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania.

Ughievwen People of Nigeria

One of the twenty-four kingdoms in the Urhobo territory in the Niger Delta of Nigeria is the Ughievwen kingdom. There are 32 villages and communities in it,

[10] United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution on Child.*
[11] Brown, J.AC. *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), p.120.*
[12] *Crone, P. Pre-Industrial Societies: Anatomy of the Pre-Modern World (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), 16.*
[13] Lamdan, R. *A Separate People: Jewish Women in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt in the sixteenth Century* (Toronto: Leiden, 2000), p.51.
[14] Nour, N.M. "Child Marriage: A Silent Health and Human Rights Issue. *Reviews in Obstetrics and Gynecology* 2, no. 1(2009): 51-56.
[15] Houseknecht, S.K. & Lewis, K. "Explaining Teen Childbearing and Cohabitation: Community Embeddedness and Primary Ties". *Family Relations* 54, no. 5(2005): 607-620.

with Oto-ughievwen (Otujeremi) serving as the traditional centre. It is bordered on the south by the Forcados River, the east by Olomu, the west by Udu, and the north by Agbarho and Ughelli.[16] There are four sub-clans in the pre-colonial Ughievwen kingdom: Orhowe, Owahwa, Ukpedi, and Uvburie. When they first came, the people had a distinct culture that distinguished them from their surroundings. The main industries of the Ughievwen people include fishing, farming, creating indigenous gin (*ogogoro*), and small business, producing palm oil, making ceramics, and making mats. While the economy of the land was not self-sufficient, it was diversified and featured a barter system.

Rainforest and swamp forests in flat, flooded valleys and nearby low-lying areas make up the natural vegetation. In Urhobo land, where the soil is often sandy and poorly cemented, is where the Ughievwen tribe is located. The Ughievwen tribe lived among rivulets and Raffia palm trees, and their pre-colonial culture had a number of customs that now seem to have vanished. Tradition controls the Ughievwen marriage system, and non-traditional weddings are frowned upon and socially stigmatized. Parties who adhered to the customs had benefits such as being considered as the wife's in-laws by her parents, being permitted to conduct customary funeral rituals in the event that either of the wife's parents passed away, and receiving respect from other ladies who were legally wed. According to Oghi, traditional Ughievwen marriage has six stages: the wooing stage, the introduction/acceptance stage, the bride wealth (*Oko*) stage, the *Udi-Eghiekhotor* stage, the Emuebro stage, the payment of dowry (*Igho-Oyanvwen*) stage, and the *Aje-Esuo* (wife-escortion) stage.[17]

Theoretical Framework: Theory of Change

With input from a number of organizations, Girls Not Brides (a network of civil society groups working to end child marriage worldwide) developed a theory of change that offers a broad summary of the idea of a world without child marriage and four algorithmic methods for achieving it: empowering girls, mobilizing families and communities, offering services, establishing and enforcing laws.[18] The Theory of Change was developed as a framework for consensus on both long- and short-term actions to combat child marriage and support married women who are victims of child marriage.[19] Its goal is to strengthen collaboration and partnerships across organisations, sectors, and levels. In this way, it both functions as a target and a mirror.

[16] Darah, G.G. "The Ughievwen". In O. Otite (ed.), *The Urhobo people* (Ibadan: Gold Press, 2011), pp. 285-299.
[17] Oghi, F.E. "Cultural Resuscitation and Nation-Building: An Examination of Ughievwen Clan of Western Delta, Nigeria up to 1960". *AFRREV* 8, no. 4(2014): 84-95.
[18] Girls Not Brides. "Theory of Change on Child Marriage". Girls not Grides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage.
https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1308/Girls-Not-Brides-Theory-of-Change-on-Child-Marriage-1.pdf (Accessed March 3, 2021).
[19] Girls Not Brides. "Theory of Change on Child Marriage".

The goal of this study's theoretical framework, or theory of change, is to provide religious, governmental, and non-governmental organizations with a useful framework and tool for developing their own models of change as they respond to child marriage in their communities. It takes care of girls that have gotten married as well as the avoidance and moderation of child marriage. While the impact of child marriage is disproportionately bad for girls, the impact of child marriage on boys is not overlooked since the word "females" is employed throughout the Change Theory.[20] The focus on "children" tends to minimize how gender inequality contributes to patterns of child marriage and how important it is to address this in efforts to stop child marriage. This model's objective is to primarily concentrate on women, yet it ought to be appropriate to boys' needs.

Child Marriage among Ughievwen People

Twenty (20) members of the selected churches in Ughievwen kingdom were chosen at random as the study's population. Five (5) participants from each of the two communities in Ughievwen kingdom that represent a sub-clan (a total of four sub-clans) were chosen to answer the structured questions. This includes churches in Otor-Edo and Edjophe (Orhoghwe), Otor-Owahwa and Egbo-Ideh (Owahwa), Oginibo and Eyara (Ukpedi), and Ekakpamre and Ughevwughe (Ekakpamre and Ughevwughe) (Uhurie). The computations were done using a simple percentage method.

Demographic of respondent

The demographic characteristics of respondents are tabulated and analyzed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Respondents' demographics

V	F	%
Gender		
Male	7	35
Female	13	65
Total	20	100
Age		
20 – 39	3	15
40 – 59	9	45
60 – 79	8	40
Total	20	100

[20] Girls Not Brides. "Theory of Change on Child Marriage".

Church		
Catholic	5	25
Baptist	10	50
Celestial Church of Christ	-	-
Assemblies of God Church	1	5
Others	4	20
Total	20	100

Source: *Researcher's Field Survey, 2021*

The demographic table above shows that out of the number of participants who responded to the questions, 65% were female while the remaining 35% were male. Age-wise, 15% were between the ages of 20 and 39, 45% were between the ages of 40 and 59, and 40% were between the ages of 60 and 79. On the basis of religious affiliation, 50% accounts for Baptists, 25% accounts for Catholics, those belonging to other denominations are 4% and 5% accounts for the Assemblies of God Church. From the above data, it is revealed that those who participated in the structured interview were people who have experience on the subject. This makes the data more objective and reliable.

Table 2: Age at the time of first marriage

Question	No	Percentage
What was your age at the time of your first marriage?		
12 – 14	6	30
15 – 17	13	65
18 – 20	1	5
21 – 23	-	-
Total	20	100

Source*: Researcher's Field Survey, 2021*

Table 2 above shows that 65% of the participants married between ages 15 and 17; those who married between ages 12 and 14 account for 30%, while only 5% account for those between ages 18 and 20. None of the participants married at ages between 21 and 23. In Ughievwen, 65 percent of child marriage victims married when they were between the ages of 15 and 17. To begin, it is clear from the foregoing analyses that Ughievwen people marry young. The majority of those who replied to the question confirmed that Ughievwen people practice child marriage.[21] They also argue that victims of child marriage are unable to make acceptable marital decisions because they are unable to anticipate the implications of their choices. As a result, they accepted their parents' or uncles' marriage-related choices, as the case may be.

[21] Okotie, P. oral interview, at Ekakpamre, December 2, 2021.

Several studies have shown that cultural defence arguments are used in various situations and in different ways.[22] Child marriage, according to the study, might be part of a conflict over cultural norms and their future significance. Proponents of child marriage say that it would protect girls and their families from the shame and humiliation of sexual encounters that were not planned.[23] In war-torn places, child marriage might provide girls with a sense of security or provide for their basic requirements of food, water, and shelter when their parents are unable to do so. There are several excellent customs that unite communities. Traditions, on the other hand, are not static; they change throughout time. People may also claim religious backing for damaging traditional behaviours, although this is not the case with the Ughievwen people.

Table 3: Level of education at the time of your first marriage

Question	No	Percentage
What was your level of education at the time of your first marriage?		
Primary school	8	40
Post-Primary	1	5
Post-secondary	-	-
None	11	55
Total	20	100

***Source**: Researcher's Field Survey, 2021*

Table 3 is on the level of education at the time of the participants' first marriage. The table reveals that 55% account for those with no formal education, while 40% account for those with primary school educational attainment. While only 5% account for those with post-primary school qualifications, none of them had post-secondary educational qualifications. For many females, the final day of school is the day of their wedding. Girls who become pregnant while still in school are expected to drop out and raise their children at home. They seldom attend lessons again. In a 2013 study titled A girl's right to refuse marriage: Plan International researchers working to stop child marriage and keep girls in school found a definite association between education and age at marriage in underdeveloped countries: the more education a girl receives, the less likely she is to get married before the age of 18.[24]

Girls without a secondary or higher education were more than three times as likely to marry or engage in marriage before the age of 18 in the 78 developing

[22] Nour, "Child Marriage", 53
[23] Jain, S. & Kurz, K. "New Insights on Preventing Child Marriage: A Global Analysis of Factors and Programs". International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) on behalf of Pact Inc., 2007. http://wpfpak.org/pdfs/GBV-RH/ProgramResources/2007-new-insights-preventing-childmarriage (Accessed December 16, 2022).
[24] Davis, A., Postles, C. & Rosa, G. *A Girl's Right to Say no to Marriage: Working to End Child Marriage and Keep Girls in School* (London: Plan International, 2013), p.101.

nations studied by the UNFPA (63 percent compared with 20 percent). Girls with a primary education were more than twice as likely as those with a secondary or higher education to marry or enter into union (45 percent vs. 20 percent). Twenty-two of the twenty-five nations with the highest rates of child marriage have statistics on education levels for women who married before they turned eighteen. By the age of 18, over half (49%) of females had married. In those nations, approximately 70% of females without an education were married by the age of 18, compared to 56% of girls who finished elementary school and 21% of girls with a secondary education or higher.

Table 4: Predominant victims of child marriage

Question	No	Percentage
Who are the predominant victims of child marriage in Ughievwen land?		
Boys	3	15
Girls	17	85
Total	20	100

Source: *Researcher's Field Survey, 2021*

The responses on the predominant victims of child marriage in Table 4 show that 85% account for girls while only 15% account for boys. This means that the female children are the most affected in terms of practicing child marriage in Ughievwen land. According to the findings, approximately 65 percent of 30-65-year-old women in the Ughievwen community were married before the age of 17. One of the primary reasons offered is the necessity to respect custom, strengthen links within or across communities, and safeguard females from unintended pregnancy. All choices on the date of marriage and the choice of partner are determined by the fathers in the communities. Many girls in Ughievwen towns and villages marry young after puberty, partially to relieve their parents of financial burdens and partly to safeguard the girls' sexual purity. When a girl's family is destitute or she has lost her parents, she may marry a much older man as a third, fourth, or even fifth wife to fulfill the position of sexual and domestic servant.

Certain families in rural sections of the community urge their daughters to marry young in order to capture possible husbands before they travel to the metropolis in pursuit of better jobs and, in some instances, to escape the possibility of abduction on the way to school. When families live in dangerous areas, parents may assume that marrying their daughters out is the best way to keep them safe. A girl in a conflict-affected community, for example, could marry a warlord or similar authority figure who can keep her and her family safe. According to Erhabor and Ottuh, parents are under pressure in numerous cultures and communities to marry off their daughters as soon as possible in order to prevent them from being sexually active before marriage; a woman

who does so brings shame to her family and society.[25] Because in many communities, marriage defines a woman's position, parents are concerned that if they do not marry their daughters according to societal standards, they will be unable to marry them at all.

Forcing children to marry is also a way to solidify family, clan, and tribe ties or settle responsibilities. For example, it is common to marry off young girls to help the families of the grooms pay off debts or solve problems between families. Early marriage is steeped in tradition at its foundation. Customs and traditions, on the other hand, evolve. According to one of the participants, traditional and cultural family values are one of the key elements impacting their marriage-related decision-making.[26] Marriage, according to some participants, makes individuals mature and responsible.

Table 5: Factors responsible for child marriage

Question	No	Percentage
What are the major factors responsible for child marriage in Ughievwen land?		
Poverty	5	25
Culture/tradition	9	45
Religion	-	-
Conflicts/insecurity	4	20
Personal decision	2	10
Total	20	100

***Source**: Researcher's Field Survey, 2021*

In Table 5, it is revealed that, with the exception of religion, poverty, culture, and tradition, conflicts, insecurity, and personal decisions account for the factors that are responsible for child marriage in Ughievwen land. According to the table, 25% accounts for poverty; culture and tradition account for 45%; conflicts and insecurity account for 20%; and personal decisions account for 10%. Child marriage is the tried and true means of arranging the passing on of property and money within the family, according to some parents. It is common knowledge that many impoverished families marry off their daughters at a young age as a method of economic survival; it means one less person to feed, clothe, and educate.

The significance of financial transactions at the time of marriage in Ughievwen Land also encourages households to marry their daughters early. For example, a girl who marries as she approaches puberty receives a premium bride price. Parents believe that if their daughter marries early, their financial burden of paying a dowry will be less. Forced child marriage is far more widespread in impoverished nations and areas across the world, and it is concentrated among

[25] Erhabor & Ottuh, "A Moral Appraisal of Christian Marriage", 32.
[26] Ovwigho, J. oral interview, at Ughevwughe, October 13, 2021.

the poorest families within those countries.[27] A girl from a poor family is four times more likely than a girl from a wealthy family to marry as a kid in Ughievwen. Many parents in economic settings have few options for their daughters other than early marriage.

Being married off at a young age is significantly linked to a lack of or limited education. On the other hand, UNICEF in 2014 says that girls are less likely to get married young if they go to school and learn more.[28] In many nations, teaching girls is generally a lower priority than educating boys. When a woman's primary responsibilities are perceived to be those of a wife, mother, and housewife, education and career preparation may be overlooked. Even when impoverished families desire to send their girls to school, they often lack access to good schools in the area as well as the financial means to pay school fees. Spending limited resources on educating men rather than girls is typically safer and more financially profitable. In this situation, families have no alternative except to marry off the female child early.

Table 6: Challenges of child marriages

Questions	No	Percentage
What are the challenges of child marriages in Ughievwen land?		
Psychosocial disorder	2	10
Health and reproduction risks	1	5
Denial of education	5	25
Violence and abandonment	3	15
All of the above	9	45
Total	20	100

***Source**: Researcher's Field Survey, 2021*

Table 6 shows the challenges posed by child marriage to the future of Ughievwen land. The respondents who identify psychosocial disorders account for 10%, health and reproduction risks for 5%, denial of education for 25%, and violence and abandonment for 15%, while 45% of the total number identified all the challenges listed above. Some of the primary problems or impacts on child marriage are psychosocial disorders, health and reproductive hazards, educational disadvantage, violence, and desertion. Child marriage has long-term effects on girls' emotional and physical health, as well as their educational and social development. Physical discomfort and pregnancy-related disorders, such as obstetric fistula, are linked to sexual activity at a young age. Pregnancy-related health issues may have emotional and social implications as well as cost the family money. These ramifications continue much past adolescence.

[27] Walker, J.A. "Early Marriage in Africa – Trends, Harmful Effects and Interventions". *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 4(2012): 22-39.
[28] UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund. "UNICEF Data: Monitoring the situation of women and children: Child marriage is a violation of human rights, but is all too common". 2014. http://data.unicef.org/child-protection/childmarriage (Accessed August 13, 2021).

Pregnancy and delivery are one of the leading causes of mortality among females' aged 15 to 19 in poor nations. Boys are occasionally married as youngsters, according to UNICEF, but girls are disproportionately impacted.[29]

Child marriage is just one-sixth as common among guys as it is among girls globally. However, there is little study on the impacts of child marriage on adolescent males, which experts believe is due to the fact that boy marriage is less prevalent than girl marriage and girls are at risk for ill health effects from early pregnancy and delivery.[30] Child marriage has a number of negative consequences for guys, including being unprepared for certain duties such as family support, early parenthood, and a lack of educational and employment options.

Table 7: Current attitude towards child marriage

Questions	No	Percentage
What is your attitude towards child marriage now?		
I support child marriage	4	20
I do not support child marriage	15	75
Not decided	1	5
Total	20	100

***Source**: Researcher's Field Survey, 2021*

Table 7 shows the current attitudes or perceptions of respondents towards child marriage. Most of the respondents, representing 75% of the total population, said that they do not support child marriage. Those who still support child marriage account for 20%, while only one respondent, representing 5%, did not decide on the answer to give. Nowadays, the increasing awareness of the harmful effects of child marriage on one's health, severe laws against the practise and their upholding, and advancing women's civil, sexual, and reproductive rights, including religious influences, are contributing to the decrease of child marriage in Ughievwen land. However, some women who supported the practise of child marriage opposed outlawing it in the kingdom. The great majority of women regarded it as strictly a family affair in which the government or religion should not meddle, while some thought it was important for the state to create and enforce strong regulations that forbade underage marriages.

[29] UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, "UNICEF Data".
[30] Pankhurst, A. "Child Marriage and Female Circumcision: Evidence from Ethiopia. Young Lives and Save the Children". Young Lives Policy Brief 21, 2014. http://www.younglives.org.uk/publications/PP/child-marriage-and-FGM-in-ethiopia/pb21-child-marriage-and-fgm-in-ethiopia/view (Accessed August 27, 2021).

Role of Christian Religion in Curbing Child Marriage

According to Ottuh and Idjakpo, religion is an important tool for averting personal and social problems, such as early or child marriage.[31] To combat child marriage, the Christian religion can recognize the factors that contribute to its persistence and put girls at risk. Marriage's purpose is to build a happy union that promotes love, peace, and compassion, but child marriage negates all that. Religion is a powerful tool for social control because members place great importance on the doctrine and beliefs of organized faiths.[32]

Table 8: Role of religion in curbing child marriage

Question	No	Percentage
What role can Christian religion play to curb the practice of child marriage in Ughievwen land?		
Stop child marriage	17	85
Reform child marriage	1	5
Leave child marriage as it is	2	10
Total	20	100

Source: *Researcher's Field Survey, 2021*

Table 8 shows that 85% of the total respondents indicated that churches should stop the practise of child marriage in Ughievwen land. Those who said that Christianity should not stop the practise of child marriage but do something to reform it account for 5% of the respondents, while those who said that child marriage should be left as it is account for 10%. The majority of respondents (representing 85%) thought that religion should do something to halt the behaviour or practise. Marrying girls before 18 is predicated on gender inequity, as it fosters early and continued childbearing while prioritizing male education. The Church addresses social issues with zeal and vigour, portraying itself as a community opposed to society's established institutions. Women's inferior talents are encouraged by mindsets that perceive them as a burden or an asset. Ottuh and Idjakpo opine that religiously committed individuals are more likely to allow their beliefs and behaviours to be influenced by their faith.[33] Therefore, the church can combat child marriage through its preventive, supportive, prophetic, collaborative, and punitive roles.

[31] Ottuh, P.O.O. & Idjakpo, O.G. "Ludwig Wittgenstein: Language Game and Religious Belief." *Interference: Journal of Languange, Literature, and Linguistics* 1, no. 2 (2020): 166-81.
[32] Gaffney-Rhys, R. "International Law as an Instrument to Combat Child Marriage". *The International Journal of Human Rights* 15, no. 3(2011): 359-373.
[33] Ottuh, P.O.O. & Idjakpo, O.G. "Problem of God and the Absolute: The Radhakrishnan View". *Pinisi Journal of Art, Humanity and Social Studies* 1, no. 3(2021a): 26-36.

Preventive role

Christianity is a valuable resource for preventing serious personal and social issues. Christianity, on the other hand, is fundamentally diverse in world views, interpersonal groups, and rituals. Recognizing the different causes that contribute to the practice's continuance is necessary for addressing child marriage in order to avoid it. Economic factors, such as the need to support several children or pay a lower dowry, are among them, as are structural factors, such as a lack of educational opportunities, and social factors, for example, a sense of tradition and social obligation, the risk of pregnancy out of wedlock, avoiding criticism whereby older unmarried girls may be considered impure, and the belief in some communities that religion encourages marriage as of puberty. Although child marriage might be difficult to avoid, concerned churches and Christian religious organizations can take some preventative actions. Empowering girls at risk of child marriage via programmes that minimize social isolation by offering knowledge, safe places, skills, and support networks is one of these methods. Second, increasing child marriage victims' access to education while also improving the quality of that education; third, providing financial assistance and incentives to girls and families who are victims of early marriage, including unconditional cash gifts to parents who delay their daughters' marriages; and fourth, assisting in the creation of an enabling legal and political environment, as well as educating and mobilizing parents and community members to see and understand the dangers of child marriage.

Protective role

Teenagers who do dangerous things may be less likely to do them if they are Christian. In general, the goal of marriage is to create a happy partnership that fosters love, peace, and kindness. It should be voluntary, and silence or coercion cannot be construed as consent. In this perspective, the minimal requirements for persons entering marriage are that they have attained adulthood and have the complete maturity to comprehend and perform their rights and duties in marriage. Child marriage, according to Christian religion, breaches God-given human rights as well as the sacredness of marriage and family life. Religion has a significant impact on both health and development.[34] Child marriages are most common in patriarchal civilizations, as new brides are incorporated into their new homes as domestic servants. Christian and religious leaders are urged to lend moral authority to campaigns to end child marriage, advocate for changes in policy and legislation to protect children, and support families who are struggling in the face of adversity by advocating for and providing detailed guidance on their involvement around issues of child marriage.

[34] Greene, M., Rao, A. & Perlson, S. *Human Rights and the Cultural and Religious Defense of Child Marriage: Finding Middle Ground* (Nairobi: Pre-publication, 2015), p.97.

Supportive role

Church social support may help people deal with problems in society by encouraging healthy ways to deal with problems and helping them finds meaning and purpose in their lives. According to Ottuh and Idjakpo, Christian religious ethical and social support may bring a feeling of shared morality, hardship, and consolation to people.[35] Social norms have an impact on and determine the acceptability of particular behaviours or practises. Child marriage is a societal norm in places where it is common. As a result, opinions about popular culture may have an impact on anything from medical treatment to whether or not it is acceptable to marry children under the age of 18. The Christian religion has a significant impact on societal values and conventions. The Ughievwen people, for instance, have a strong Christian population, and child marriage is common.[36] Marriage takes on numerous local traditions and cultural forms in Ughievwen villages, and occasionally the people's original religion permits this variety as long as the rituals do not damage them. By bringing a meaningful theological viewpoint to attempts to halt the epidemic, churches have the capacity to impact the culture and practises that encourage child marriages. Christian faith leaders have a unique position of trust and power in their host communities, allowing them to advocate for child rights, address parental duty and accountability, and help survivors of child abuse as a consequence of child marriage. Christian religious organizations, in addition to providing services, are capable of major social mobilization and have a particular moral position.[37] Christian religious organizations' capacities in fighting child marriage should not be underestimated at a time when conventional secular development is facing its most severe set of resource problems. In this way, other religious groups may play a critical role in ensuring that children grow up in an environment free of child marriage.

Prophetic role

The Christian religion's prophetic function, on the other hand, is primarily about witnessing and converting people. In this method, the Church, for example, tackles social concerns with great clarity and intensity, demanding action and positioning itself as a community in opposition to society's established institutions.[38] According to Ottuh and Onimhawo, the Christian religion's prophetic function includes challenging the existing order, refusing to sanctify traditions that are in conflict with one's faith's principles, furthering

[35] Ottuh, P.O.O. & Idjakpo, O.G. "Imperativeness of Ethics in Christianity: Perspectives and Praxis". *KIU Journal of Social Sciences*, *7*, no. 1(2021b): 129-135.
[36] Nukueye, J.E. *The Ughievwen kingdom: Cultural antecedents* (Effurun: P.E. Chams Publishers, 2003), p.10.
[37] UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund. *Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice – A Statistical Exploration* (New York: United Nations, 2010), p.7
[38] Ottuh, P.O.O. "A Prudential Personalist Ethical Appraisal of Human Cloning". *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs 7*, no. 3(2021): 310-330.

justice, and promoting the general good of society. Child marriage is influenced by some religious beliefs and practises.[39] Some Christian religious leaders and groups are often involved in betrothal and marriage ceremonies.[40] Many families contemplate the marriage of their children based on their understanding of religious duties. Family honour is dangerously intertwined with beliefs about culture, tradition, and religion. Christian religious actors have power over norms and behaviours because of these ties and because religious leaders are frequently trusted more than other kinds of leaders.

Collaborative role

Collaboration has long been seen as both a method and an outcome in and of itself. It may be used to build strategic alliances with other groups or congregations as well as a method of dispute resolution.[41] This collaborates with Ottuh and Jemegbe's assertion that religious cooperation offers an integrative approach by bringing together the thoughts of people from various backgrounds in order to develop commitment by merging issues into a consensus.[42] Marrying girls before the age of 18 is based on gender inequality, since it encourages early and ongoing childbearing and gives males' schooling priority. The educational approach conforms to a viewpoint that regards the Christian religion as having a global mission and duty for all of humanity. The Christian religion, as a tolerant but strong social actor, embraces the fact of social plurality and attempts to impact change via long-term collaboration with society's institutions.[43] To combat child marriage, the Christian religion may work with other advocacy organizations. The event, which will take place on International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, will, for example, open up a discussion about the role of religion in protecting the rights of girls and women, as well as how faith can help prevent child marriage and provide support to married women. This will be a chance to discuss best practises from religious groups' efforts to eliminate early marriage as well as establish advocacy strategies to do so.

Punitive role

According to Curry, Durkheim thought that cultures use punishment to create norms and demonstrate the consequences of disobeying them.[44] Even if the

[39] Ottuh, P.O.O & Onimhawo, J.A. "A Critical Assessment of the Role of Religion towards Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria". *Pinisi Discretion Review* 4, no. 1(2020): 21-32.
[40] Amruwhre, F., oral interview, at Otor-Edo, December 2, 2021.
[41] Herman, R.D. *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management.* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005).
[42] Ottuh, P.O. O. & Jemegbe, M.O. "Communication in Religion and Its Integrative Implications for Society". *Pinisi Discretion Review 4,* no. 1(2020): 1-10.
[43] Ottuh & Onimhawo, "A Critical Assessment of the Role of Religion", pp.24.
[44] Curry, T.R. "Conservative Protestantism and the perceived wrongfulness of crimes: A research note". *Criminology* 34, no. 3(1996): 453-464.

crime rate did not warrant it, society, according to his view, would continue to hunt for new methods to punish people. It has been shown that the Christian religion has a direct effect on how people feel about a number of social and policy issues.[45] The Christian religion has a direct impact on people's actions, attitudes, and perceptions. However, findings from many religious faiths have been mixed. Criminal activity has been considered morally wrong and worthy of punishment by Protestants, who advocate tougher penal procedures.[46] Individuals with direct religious impacts get moral instructions about what is true and how they should behave, as well as logical and material resources to support those teachings. Idjakpo and Ottuh argue that individuals with a stronger religious commitment are more inclined to let their religion influence their views and everyday actions.[47] Indirect religious impacts are behaviours taken by persons unknowingly for a religious goal that allow for the encouragement of unique consequences. Christian religious education, sermon exposure, contacts with family members, and interactions with congregation members are all possible indirect impacts on child marriage. Christian religious and cultural views on marriage are inextricably linked to views on gender roles, especially those of women. The emphasis on the family in many religious traditions is accompanied by expectations of female subjugation within the family. That implies that a girl's marriage desires and opinions are often overlooked. Women's inferior capabilities are bolstered by attitudes that see females as either a burden or an asset to guard from shame or profit from via a bride price. Although society has much more to do with these views than religious ideas and teachings, there are components in most religious traditions that assign women separate and frequently inferior positions.[48] The task is to put our understandings of the actual equality of all God's children into practise, particularly in the case of women. Ending child marriage and ensuring that weddings are engaged in freely should be a top focus for Christian religious organizations and authorities. They should also consider the aim as one in which they have a direct, often leading role. Action may take numerous forms, ranging from global campaigning to family counseling. But, for starters, no pastor (or priest) or Christian should bless or preside over any child marriage.

Conclusion

So far, the study has shown that over 65 percent of child marriage victims in Ughievwen Land married between the ages of 15 and 17. In Ughievwen Land, factors such as poverty, culture, custom, conflict, instability, and individual choices all contribute to child marriage. Traditions and culture are the key determinants, and the biggest obstacles include psychological problems, threats to one's health and ability to reproduce, a lack of access to education, violence,

[45] Frost, N.A. "The Mismeasure of punishment". *Punishment & Society* 10, no. 3(2008): 277-300.
[46] Curry, "Conservative Protestantism", 458.
[47] Idjakpo, O.G. & Ottuh, P. O.O. "Ludwig Wittgenstein: Towards a Meaningful Talk about Religion." *Predestination: Journal of Society and Culture* 1, no. 2 (2021): 51-63.
[48] Curry, "Conservative Protestantism", 458.

and abandonment. Child marriage has long-term repercussions on girls' mental and physical health, as well as their scholastic and social development. To oppose early marriage, the Christian religion should acknowledge the many circumstances that contribute to its continuance and empower at-risk females through social isolation reduction activities. Christian religious leaders and groups should hold a unique position of trust and authority and play a significant role in ensuring that children do not grow up in an environment where they are forced to marry young. By enabling girls and women to engage more fully in society, ending child marriage will help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Furthermore, in view of both the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as other human rights legislation that safeguards children against child marriage, theologians and religious academics should play a significant role in expressing and interpreting the beliefs, teachings, and laws of religious communities in order to combat the menace of child marriage.

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