IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH TO END CHILD MARRIAGE IN KOGI STATE, NIGERIA: EVIDENCE FOR STATE ACTION

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Abstract

Research Problem:
Child marriage is a pervasive social, cultural and public health challenge in Nigeria, with disproportionate effects on adolescent girls living in rural and economically marginalised communities. Although legal provisions and national policy frameworks exist to eliminate the practice, progress has remained slow due to persistent difficulties in implementation at both state and community levels. This study explored the sociocultural, institutional and implementation-related factorsfor the elimination of child marriage in Kogi State, Nigeria.

Methods/Theory:
A qualitative implementation research design was employed, drawing on participatory and community-engaged approaches. Data were gathered through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) with a wide range of stakeholders. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure inclusion of individuals with relevant knowledge and lived experience of child marriage and related interventions. Data collection instruments were pre-tested and administered in both English and local languages. The data were analysed thematically with the support of NVivo software.

Results:
Findings showed that poverty, low levels of education, weak parental support systems, limited access to adolescent reproductive health information, and restricted economic opportunities were key drivers of child marriage in Kogi State. Institutional challenges such as weak policy enforcement, inadequate funding, poor coordination among stakeholders, and limited community-based child protection systems further sustained the practice. The study also found that communities have already taken several informal actions, including local sensitisation efforts, community dialogue sessions, parental guidance initiatives, and informal sanctions against early marriage.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that child marriage in Kogi State persists due to the interaction of socioeconomic deprivation, entrenched cultural norms, and weak implementation of existing policies, despite emerging community-driven efforts to address the issue.

Contributes to Knowledge:

The study contributes to knowledge byunraveling culturally responsive and community-based approaches to addressing child marriage and similar social challenges affecting girls.

Recommendation:

The study recommends stronger multi-sectoral collaboration among government institutions, traditional authorities, religious bodies, schools and civil society organisations to improve coordination and effectiveness of prevention programmes.

Introduction

Child marriage continues to represent one of the most widespread violations of the rights of girls and adolescents across the world, undermining global efforts aimed at achieving sustainable development, gender equality, and social justice. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union involving one or both individuals below the age of 18 years (UNICEF, 2024a). Worldwide, more than 640 million women currently living were married before reaching adulthood, while an estimated 12 million girls continue to enter marriage each year despite growing international commitments to eradicate the practice (UNICEF, 2024b; United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2023; Girls Not Brides, 2023; Wodon et al., 2017).

The family remains the primary institution within society and plays a critical role in the protection, upbringing, and socialisation of children. In acknowledgement of this responsibility, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) and the Child Rights Act (2003) established 18 years as the minimum legal age for marriage. These provisions were introduced to protect the educational, developmental, psychological, and reproductive wellbeing of children, particularly girls. Nevertheless, despite the existence of these legal and policy frameworks, child marriage remains prevalent in several parts of Nigeria due to deeply rooted cultural beliefs, poverty, low levels of education, gender discrimination, and weak institutional enforcement systems (UNICEF, 2024c; National Population Commission [NPC] & ICF, 2019).

Nigeria continues to carry one of the heaviest burdens of child marriage globally and currently records the highest number of child brides in Africa (UNICEF, 2024d). Recent estimates suggest that more than 23 million Nigerian women were married before the age of 18, while in certain parts of the country approximately 43 per cent of girls marry before reaching adulthood (UNICEF, 2024a; UNFPA, 2023; NPC & ICF, 2019; Efevbera et al., 2019; Parsons et al., 2015).The consequences of child marriage are severe and far-reaching for girls, families, communities, and national development t(UNICEF, 2024e; World Bank, 2023; Girls Not Brides, 2023; UNESCO, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). Existing studies associate the practice with school dropout, teenage pregnancy, maternal mortality, poor reproductive health outcomes, intimate partner violence,

malnutrition, psychological distress, and the continuation of intergenerational poverty (Raj et al., 2019; Wodon et al., 2017). Girls who marry at an early age are frequently denied access to education, economic empowerment, and meaningful participation in decisions affecting their lives (UNICEF, 2024b; Wodon et al., 2017).

In Kogi State, the situation remains troubling. Although the prevalence of child marriage is lower than in some northern states, many adolescent girls in the state still experience early marriage, teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and limited access to sexual and reproductive health information and services (NPC & ICF, 2019). Data from the NDHS show that a considerable proportion of girls in Kogi State begin childbearing before the age of 19, exposing them to increased risks of maternal health complications, poverty, and social exclusion (NPC & ICF, 2019; UNICEF, 2024e; Girls Not Brides, 2023).Although the Federal Government of Nigeria introduced the National Strategy to End Child Marriage in Nigeria (2016–2021) to provide a coordinated framework for intervention, implementation outcomes across states have remained inconsistent.

Several studies have identified weak institutional capacity, inadequate funding, insufficient monitoring systems, and limited availability of reliable local data as major obstacles undermining efforts to eliminate child marriage (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2022; Population Council, 2021). In many states, including Kogi State, there remains a shortage of context-specific empirical evidence capable of guiding the effective implementation of policies and programmes within local sociocultural settings (Peters et al., 2013). This study is therefore designed to generate empirical evidence that will support state-level action in Kogi State by strengthening child protection systems, informing policy implementation, enhancing legislative advocacy, and promoting social and behavioural change interventions aimed at eliminating child marriage and safeguarding adolescent girls.

Statement of the Problem

Despite growing global and national efforts aimed at eliminating child marriage, the practice remains widespread in Nigeria and continues to threaten the health, education, safety, and future prospects of millions of girls. Nearly two decades after the 2005 World Summit Outcome on Human Security and several years following the adoption of the National Strategy to End Child Marriage in Nigeria (2016–2021), substantial numbers of Nigerian girls are still married before reaching the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2024c; UNFPA-UNICEF, 2022). This persistent trend reflects significant gaps between policy development and effective implementation at both national and state levels.

Nigeria currently ranks among the countries with the highest numbers of child brides worldwide, with more than 23 million women estimated to have been married during childhood (UNICEF, 2024a). National surveys continue to show strong links between child marriage and factors such as poverty, rural residence, low educational attainment, gender inequality, and weak social protection systems (NPC & ICF, 2019). Although there has been some reduction in prevalence rates over time, rapid population growth continues to increase the overall number of girls at risk, thereby hindering progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, which seeks to eliminate all harmful practices, including child marriage, by 2030 (United Nations, 2023).

In Kogi State, adolescent girls continue to face several vulnerabilities that increase their exposure to child marriage and early childbearing. According to the NDHS, many girls within the state begin childbearing during adolescence, a situation associated with poor maternal health outcomes, school dropout, economic dependence, and restricted life opportunities (NPC & ICF, 2019; UNICEF, 2024e; Girls Not Brides, 2023).The situation is further worsened by the limited social support available to many adolescent girls in Kogi State, alongside poor nutrition, inadequate healthcare access, and restricted economic opportunities. Research has shown that girls who marry early are more likely to experience domestic violence, reproductive health complications, depression, and social isolation than girls who marry later in life (Raj et al., 2019; Efevbera et al., 2019; World Health Organization [WHO], 2023; Population Council, 2021; UNFPA-UNICEF, 2022).

One of the major challenges confronting efforts to eliminate child marriage in Kogi State is the absence of reliable, culturally sensitive, and implementation-focused empirical data capable of informing effective interventions. Existing national-level data are often too broad to adequately capture the sociocultural realities, local drivers, and contextual factors influencing child marriage within the state. Most existing studies concentrate largely on prevalence and consequences, while giving limited attention to implementation processes, institutional barriers, community engagement approaches, and strategies for translating policy into meaningful action.

As a result, there is insufficient evidence regarding how state institutions, traditional leaders, community stakeholders, schools, healthcare systems, and civil society organisations can effectively collaborate to implement sustainable interventions aimed at preventing child marriage in Kogi State. Without context-specific implementation research, interventions may continue to yield limited results because they fail to reflect local realities or secure adequate stakeholder ownership.Against this background, the present study seeks to undertake implementation research aimed at ending child marriage in Kogi State, Nigeria.

Materials and Methods

Study Area

Kogi State is located in the central region of Nigeria and is widely referred to as the "Confluence State" because it lies at the meeting point of the Rivers Niger and Benue. Geographically, the state lies between latitudes 6°30′N and 8°50′N and longitudes 5°20′E and 7°40′E, covering an estimated land area of about 29,833 square kilometres (see Figure 1). The state shares boundaries with ten Nigerian states, including the Federal Capital Territory to the north, as well as Edo, Ondo, Ekiti, Kwara, Niger, Enugu, Anambra, Nasarawa, and Benue States. This strategic location positions Kogi State as an important economic and transportation corridor within Nigeria (National Population Commission [NPC], 2006).

The climate of Kogi State is tropical in nature and is characterised by two major seasons: the rainy season, which extends from April to October, and the dry season, which lasts from November to March. Annual rainfall ranges between 1,100 mm and 1,500 mm, while humidity levels are generally high during the rainy period. Temperatures commonly range from 22°C to 35°C, with the hottest months occurring between February and April(Nigerian Meteorological Agency [NiMet], 2020).Kogi

State is richly endowed with water bodies, the most prominent being the Rivers Niger and Benue, which converge at Lokoja, the state capital. Other rivers such as the Mimi, Ofu, and Ozi also traverse different parts of the state, making Kogi one of the best-watered states in Nigeria. However, the extensive river network also exposes many communities, particularly riverine areas, to seasonal flooding. In recent years, flooding has become more severe as a result of climate change and poor environmental management practices, leading to displacement, destruction of farmlands, and significant damage to infrastructure and livelihoods (Federal Ministry of Environment [FME], 2021).

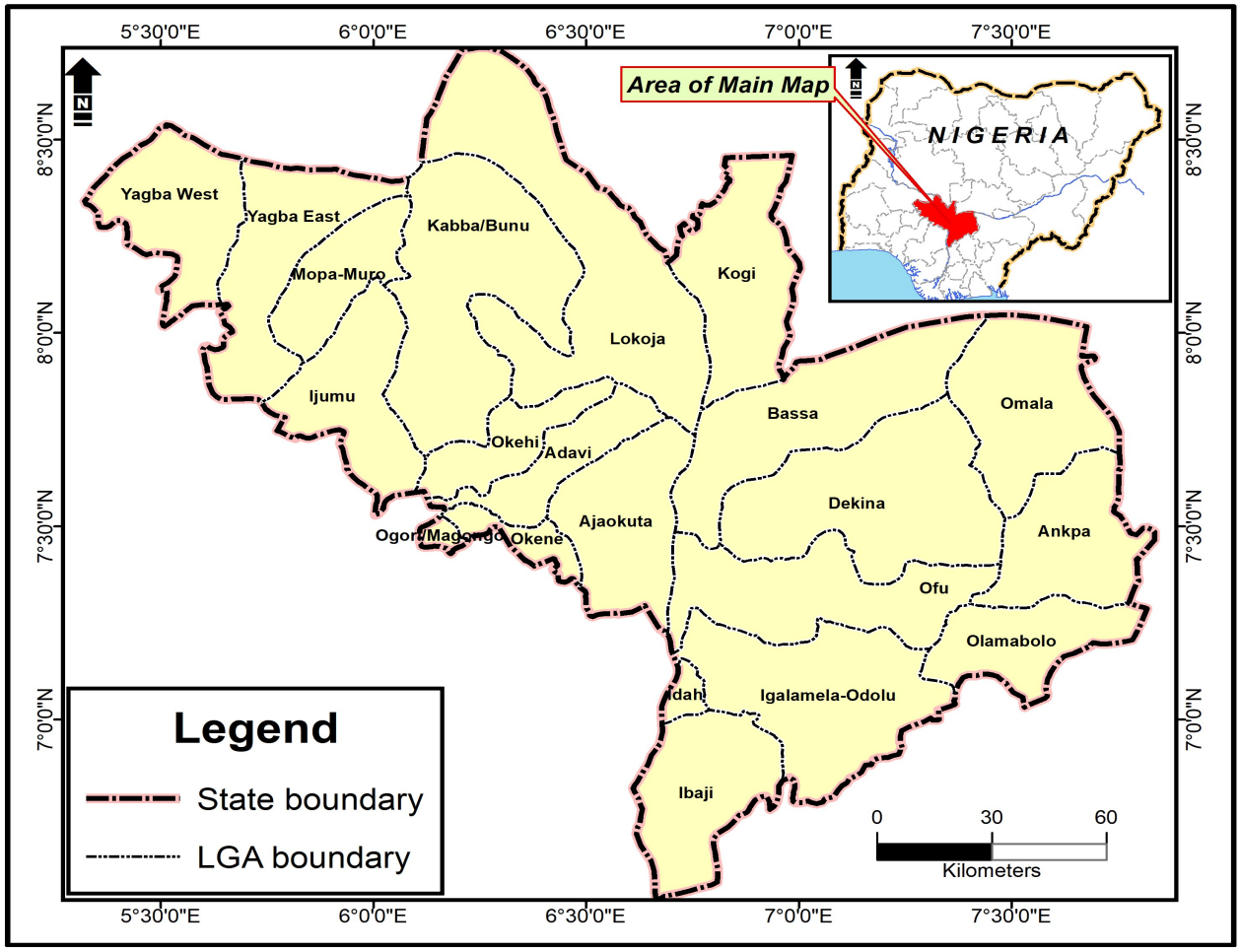


Figure 1: Nigeria showing Kogi State

Source: Kogi State Ministry Lands and Urban Development, 2026.

Vegetation in Kogi State falls mainly within the Guinea Savannah ecological zone, which is characterised by tall grasses interspersed with scattered trees (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO], 2018).The physical landscape of Kogi State is varied and consists of plains, hills, and elevated terrains. Much of the state is characterised by undulating topography, with elevations ranging from about 300 metres in the lowland areas to over 600 metres above sea level in the upland areas around Idah and Okene(Adefolalu, 2007).

Kogi State has an estimated population of more than 4.5 million people and is made up of several ethnic groups, notably the Igala, Ebira, and Okun people, the latter being a subgroup of the Yoruba ethnic group. The state is culturally and linguistically diverse, with these major ethnic communities occupying the eastern, central, and western parts of the state respectively. Lokoja, the state capital, is a cosmopolitan town with considerable historical significance, having served as the first administrative capital of modern Nigeria during the colonial period (NPC, 2006).

The economy of Kogi State is largely agrarian, with the majority of residents engaged in farming, fishing, and petty trading. Major agricultural products cultivated in the state include yam, cassava, maize, rice, and cashew. In addition to agriculture, Kogi State possesses substantial mineral resources such as coal, iron ore, and limestone, although many of these resources remain underexploited. The presence of the Ajaokuta Steel Complex further highlights the industrial potential of the state. Despite these economic opportunities and natural resources, poverty and unemployment remain major challenges, worsened by inadequate infrastructure, limited industrial development, and poor access to markets and financial services (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2021).

Methods

Data for this study were collected using qualitative methods aligned with internationally recognised standards for community-based social research and studies involving vulnerable populations. A participatory and community-centred approach was adopted because implementation research requires a detailed understanding of local realities, institutional structures, sociocultural practices, and stakeholder experiences that influence programme implementation and behavioural change processes (Peters et al., 2013; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021).

Before field activities commenced, approval to conduct the study was obtained from relevant institutional bodies and community authorities. Introductory letters were presented to traditional rulers, local government officials, religious leaders, women leaders, youth associations, and other recognised community gatekeepers within the selected study areas. Community entry procedures were carried out respectfully and in accordance with local customs and ethical guidelines in order to promote trust, cooperation, and acceptance among participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018)

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to identify participants who possessed relevant knowledge and direct experience relating to child marriage practices, prevention mechanisms, sociocultural norms, and implementation challenges within the communities studied. Participants included traditional rulers, religious leaders, women leaders, youth leaders, teachers, parents, representatives of community-based organisations, social welfare officers, and

adolescent girls. These groups were selected because of their active involvement in community decision-making, child protection activities, and the transmission of social norms relating to child marriage. The use of purposive sampling enabled the researcher to identify information-rich participants capable of providing detailed and meaningful insights into the issue under investigation (Patton, 2015).

Data collection was conducted primarily through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and In-Depth Interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Semi-structured interview guides were developed based on the study objectives. The interview guides consisted mainly of open-ended questions focusing on cultural beliefs, community practices, implementation strategies, barriers to ending child marriage, child protection systems, gender norms, educational opportunities, and the roles of stakeholders in prevention efforts.To ensure contextual relevance and content validity, the interview guides were reviewed by experts in population geography. In line with international best practices, the instruments were pretested in a community outside the study area but sharing similar sociocultural characteristics. Feedback obtained during the pretesting exercise was used to revise unclear questions, improve the sequencing of items, simplify language, and strengthen the reliability of the instruments overall (WHO, 2021).

Field assistants who had previous experience in qualitative research and were fluent in local languages such as Igala and Ebira were recruited and trained before the commencement of data collection. Interviews were conducted in settings that ensured privacy, confidentiality, convenience, and safety for participants. Depending on participants' preferences, discussions were held either in English or translated into local languages. Where translation was required, careful attention was given to preserving the original meanings and cultural interpretations of participants' responses. Interviews involving traditional rulers, religious leaders, women leaders, and government officials were conducted individually to enable participants to express their opinions freely without external influences (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Before the commencement of each interview, participants were fully informed about the objectives of the study. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation (WHO, 2021). Participants were also assured that no identifying information would appear in the final report and that all information provided would be treated confidentially. To improve data quality and ensure accurate documentation, interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of participants, while supplementary field notes were taken throughout each session. These field notes captured non-verbal expressions, emotional responses, environmental observations, and contextual details considered important to the interpretation of findings. Audio recordings were later transcribed verbatim, while interviews conducted in local languages were translated into English during transcription. To maintain consistency and accuracy, transcripts were cross-checked against both the audio recordings and field notes by members of the research team.Throughout the data collection process, the study incorporated principles of reflexivity and researcher neutrality (Berger, 2015; Guest et al. (2020).

Data analysis for this study followed a rigorous qualitative thematic analysis approach consistent with implementation research methodologies and internationally accepted

qualitative research standards(Braun & Clarke, 2021).All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in local languages such as Igala and Ebira were carefully translated into English while preserving the original meanings, cultural expressions, and contextual nuances embedded in participants' responses. The transcripts were subsequently cross-checked against field notes and audio recordings to ensure completeness, consistency, and accuracy of the data.

The analysis process began with repeated reading and familiarisation with the transcripts in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, views, and social contexts. Braun and Clarke (2021) observed that familiarisation with qualitative data represents a crucial first stage in thematic analysis because it enables researchers to identify recurring ideas, meanings, and patterns within the dataset. During this stage, preliminary observations and reflective notes were documented to guide the coding and interpretation processes.

Both inductive and deductive coding approaches were adopted in the study. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge naturally from participants' narratives, while deductive coding was guided by the objectives of the study, implementation research frameworks, and existing literature relating to child marriage, gender norms, child protection, and community-based interventions (Nowell et al., 2017). Relevant sections of the transcripts were assigned codes representing significant statements, experiences, beliefs, actions, and implementation challenges associated with efforts to prevent child marriage.

After the coding process, related codes were grouped into broader categories and themes reflecting major patterns across the data. Thematic categories that emerged from the analysis included community sensitisation strategies, cultural practices relating to child protection, educational empowerment, the role of traditional leadership, implementation barriers, poverty, legal enforcement challenges, reproductive health concerns, and mechanisms for community participation. These themes were continuously reviewed, refined, compared, and reorganised to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and meaningful representation of participants' perspectives.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from different participant groups, including traditional rulers, women leaders, youth groups, teachers, religious leaders, and government officials (Lincoln &Guba, 1985). In addition, peer debriefing sessions were conducted among members of the research team to review coding decisions, discuss emerging interpretations, and minimise researcher bias during analysis.

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to organise, manage, retrieve, and systematically analyse the qualitative data collected during the study. The software facilitated efficient coding, thematic categorisation, comparison of themes, and retrieval of quotations relevant to the research objectives. The use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software is widely recommended in implementation research because it improves transparency, organisation, and analytical rigour when dealing with large qualitative datasets (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).The findings were ultimately presented narratively through detailed thematic descriptions supported by direct verbatim quotations from participants to illustrate major themes and provide contextual depth to the

analysis. The inclusion of participants' direct quotations helped preserve authenticity and ensured that the lived experiences and voices of community members were adequately reflected within the study findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Result and Discussions

i. Community Practices to End Child Marriage in Kogi State

Community Sensitisation and Awareness Campaigns

A traditional ruler from Ihima community interviewed explained that the community has increasingly recognised the damaging consequences of child marriage on the future of girls. According to the respondent, regular sensitisation and awareness campaigns are now organised during village meetings, religious gatherings, and cultural events to educate parents and guardians about the dangers associated with early marriage and the importance of allowing girls to complete their education before marriage. These engagements are intended to challenge long-standing cultural beliefs and practices that encourage early marriage.

The findings further revealed that continuous public sensitisation has become an important strategy within the community. By integrating discussions on child marriage into community gatherings and religious activities, local leaders are gradually encouraging behavioural change and creating awareness about the rights and welfare of girls. The respondent stressed that these repeated engagements are helping community members to reconsider traditional practices that previously normalised early marriage.

Similarly, a woman leader in Idah community, Kogi East explained that increasing awareness of the harmful effects of child marriage on girls, families, and society has generated greater concern among community members. She stated that several preventive strategies are now being implemented within the community to reduce the prevalence of early marriage among underage girls.These findings align with reports by UNICEF, which indicate that awareness campaigns are effective in transforming social norms and improving public understanding of the risks associated with child marriage. The findings also suggest that child marriage is deeply embedded within cultural traditions and social expectations; consequently, changing community attitudes requires sustained dialogue, education, and engagement. Furthermore, the interviews indicate that increasing access to education for girls may significantly reduce the incidence of child marriage within Ihima community. Keeping girls in school has the potential to improve literacy levels, strengthen economic independence, and enhance girls' capacity to make informed life decisions.

Involvement of Religious and Traditional Leaders

The interviews demonstrated that religious and traditional leaders play significant roles in discouraging early marriage within their communities. One male respondent explained that community leaders work closely with Imams, church leaders, and traditional rulers because of the considerable influence they hold over families and social behaviour. According to the respondent, religious leaders frequently use sermons, counselling sessions, and community engagements to encourage parents to avoid marrying off underage girls and instead support girls' education.

This finding highlights the importance of religious and traditional institutions within many Nigerian communities. Such leaders are highly respected and often regarded as custodians of morality and cultural values. Their involvement therefore increases the likelihood that anti-child-marriage messages will be accepted by community members.

In Idah, Kogi East, the interviews revealed that women leaders, religious leaders, teachers, and youth groups regularly organise meetings and outreach programmes aimed at educating parents and community members about the dangers associated with child marriage. During these programmes, attention is drawn to the health risks, school dropout rates, emotional trauma, and economic hardship often experienced by girls who marry at an early age.The findings correspond with studies conducted across Africa, which show that interventions involving local leaders are generally more successful because communities are more likely to trust familiar authority figures. For example, research from Zimbabwe demonstrates that community-based initiatives involving traditional leaders, girls' safe spaces, and mentorship programmes have contributed positively to efforts aimed at ending child marriage. Chiefs in some rural communities reportedly enforce anti-child-marriage regulations and encourage girls to return to school.

The interviews also suggest that traditional institutions in Kogi Central are gradually shifting from preserving harmful cultural practices towards protecting children's rights and welfare. However, respondents acknowledged that deeply rooted cultural norms and beliefs still persist within some families. This indicates that ending child marriage requires long-term cultural transformation rather than short-term interventions alone.

Promotion of Girl-Child Education

Another major strategy identified during the interviews was the promotion of girl-child education. Respondents consistently described education as one of the strongest protective factors against child marriage. Community leaders reportedly encourage parents to keep their daughters in school by emphasising the long-term social and economic benefits of education.

The findings further revealed that some local organisations and well-meaning individuals provide financial support to vulnerable families through payment of school fees and provision of learning materials. Such interventions help to reduce the financial pressures that often encourage families to arrange early marriages for their daughters.

These findings are consistent with existing literature which demonstrates that education significantly delays marriage and improves future opportunities for girls. Recent intervention studies conducted in northern Nigeria similarly reported that programmes supporting girls' education contributed to substantial reductions in child marriage. The interviews also support findings by UNICEF that poverty and limited educational opportunities increase the likelihood of child marriage in Nigeria.Beyond delaying marriage, educational empowerment was also perceived as having wider developmental benefits for communities. Educated women are more likely to contribute positively to household welfare, maternal and child health, and economic productivity. Consequently, increasing girls' access to education may produce long-term

social and economic benefits within affected communities.

Community Reporting and Protection Mechanisms

The interviews further revealed that community members in Ihima are increasingly encouraged to report cases of child marriage to traditional rulers, women leaders, and security agencies. Respondents explained that traditional institutions now openly discourage cultural practices that promote early marriage. In Kogi West, legal awareness has helped families to report cases. In some instances, communities have introduced local bylaws and resolutions designed to protect underage girls and sanction families that violate agreed community standards. These findings indicate the emergence of informal community protection systems aimed at safeguarding children's rights.The results further suggest that awareness of child protection and accountability is gradually increasing within the community. Traditional institutions are becoming more actively involved in child protection processes, reflecting a growing recognition that child marriage constitutes a social problem requiring collective action.

Women and Youth Participation

Women's groups and youth associations were also identified during the interviews as active participants in advocacy, sensitisation, and mentorship activities aimed at reducing child marriage. Respondents explained that these groups organise outreach programmes, school visits, and mentoring sessions to educate girls about their rights, reproductive health, and the importance of personal development before marriage.

The involvement of women and young people is particularly important because girls and young women are directly affected by child marriage practices. Their participation therefore strengthens community ownership of interventions and creates platforms through which girls can access information, guidance, and support.

The interviews additionally highlighted the relationship between child marriage and reproductive health outcomes. Respondents noted that girls who marry early are more likely to experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth because their bodies are not fully developed. Consequently, strategies aimed at reducing child marriage may also contribute to lowering maternal mortality, teenage pregnancy, and other reproductive health challenges within the community.These findings are supported by existing literature indicating that youth-led and women-led interventions are highly effective in promoting reproductive health education, self-confidence, and girls' empowerment.

2. Cultural Practices That Can Be Promoted as Strategies to End Child Marriage

The interviews revealed that several traditional customs, taboos, and moral expectations within Igala and Ebira communities can be positively adapted to support efforts aimed at ending child marriage. Respondents explained that although some cultural beliefs historically contributed to early marriage practices, many indigenous values can be reframed to strengthen modern child protection efforts.

Within many Igala communities in Kogi East, premarital sexual activity among unmarried adolescents was traditionally discouraged and often regarded as bringing

shame to the family. Virginity and self-discipline were historically associated with dignity, respectability, and proper upbringing. Respondents suggested that rather than promoting fear or stigma, these cultural values can now be redirected towards modern sexuality education that encourages responsible behaviour, self-respect, and delayed sexual activity among adolescents. Such an approach may help reduce the pressure that often leads families to arrange early marriages following teenage pregnancy.

Similarly, respondents from Ebira communities in Okene and surrounding areas explained that adolescent pregnancy outside marriage was historically discouraged because it was believed to affect family dignity and social reputation. In many cases, elders intervened through counselling and mediation. Participants argued that these traditions can now support initiatives focused on sexuality education, reproductive health awareness, mentoring programmes, and improved parent-child communication. Such culturally grounded interventions may help reduce panic-driven child marriages associated with teenage pregnancy.

The interviews also highlighted the strong emphasis placed on family honour and social respect within Igala culture. Families are traditionally expected to raise children who bring dignity and honour to the household. Respondents suggested that this cultural value can be redirected towards promoting girls' education and successful adulthood as symbols of family pride. Community campaigns can therefore emphasise that allowing girls to complete their education and mature before marriage brings greater honour to families than marrying them off at an early age.

Among Ebira elders, respondents described a long-standing belief that responsibilities should correspond with a person's maturity and capability. Marriage, motherhood, and family management are traditionally regarded as serious responsibilities requiring emotional and physical preparedness. Traditional leaders can therefore utilise these beliefs to argue that child marriage imposes adult responsibilities on immature girls who are not physically or emotionally prepared for marriage or childbirth. This creates a culturally acceptable basis for discouraging underage marriage.

The interviews further revealed that elderly women and family elders traditionally played important mentoring roles in preparing girls for adulthood within both Igala and Ebira communities. Such teachings focused on morality, hygiene, discipline, family responsibility, conflict management, respect, and womanhood. Respondents suggested that these indigenous mentorship systems can be modernised to incorporate child rights education, reproductive health information, leadership training, career guidance, economic empowerment, and education about the dangers of child marriage.

community compliance.

3. Kogi State Government Efforts in Eliminating Child Marriage

The findings revealed that progress has largely been achieved through sustained engagement with traditional rulers, religious leaders, and community gatekeepers, which has helped to gradually reshape long-standing cultural norms that support early marriage in the state. The Director, Kogi State Ministry of Women Affairs disclosed that the approach in Kogi East has been community-driven and culturally sensitive. She expressed that: ‘’We

begin by working directly with traditional rulers and community elders in LGAs such as Ankpa, Dekina, Ofu, and Olamaboro. These leaders are very influential, so we engage them in sustained dialogues to secure their buy-in''. In some communities in Dekina, for instance, traditional councils have publicly declared opposition to child marriage and now refer cases for community mediation. Strong emphasis is placed on girls' education. Through partnerships with development agencies, government provides scholarships, uniforms, and learning materials to girls at risk of dropping out. This has helped reduce school withdrawals linked to early marriage arrangements.

The Director, Kogi State Ministry of Women Affairs stressed that: "……., we engage religious leaders, both Christian and Islamic, so that messaging around the appropriate age of marriage is reinforced from the pulpit". In Ankpa, for example, faith leaders have incorporated child protection messages into weekly teachings, which has helped shift attitudes gradually. Overall, we are seeing increased awareness and a slow but steady decline in reported cases.

Kogi West presents a slightly different picture. While there are more urbanized areas like Lokoja and Kabba, we still have rural and riverine communities where child marriage practices persist. Our strategy here has been more focused on legal awareness and economic empowerment. We conduct regular sensitization campaigns on the Kogi State Child Rights Law. Many people were previously unaware that the law sets 18 as the minimum age for marriage. Through community outreaches in Kabba/Bunu, Yagba East, Yagba West, and Lokoja, we are improving that awareness significantly. This result implies that the response has been more focused on legal awareness and economic empowerment, particularly through sensitization on the Child Rights Law and the provision of vocational skills to adolescent girls and vulnerable households in Kogi West.

Another strategy is women empowerment. The Director, Kogi State Ministry of Women Affairs disclosed that: "we also address one of the root causes like poverty by supporting women and adolescent girls with skills acquisition programmes. In Kabba/Bunu, for example, we have a programme where girls who were at risk of early marriage are enrolled in vocational training such as tailoring, hairdressing, and agro-processing. Some of them have returned to school or become economically independent, which reduces the pressure to marry early. Furthermore, we work closely with education authorities to track school attendance, ensuring that girls who begin to drop out are identified early and supported. This early warning system has helped us intervene before marriages are concluded.

Kogi Central has shown relatively better progress, largely due to higher levels of literacy and stronger community structures. However, we are not complacent. In LGAs like Okene, Adavi, and Okehi, we continue to strengthen prevention mechanisms. A key strategy here is working through Community Development Associations and ward-level child protection committees. These structures help us identify and respond quickly to any reported or planned cases of child marriage. In Okene, for example, these committees have successfully intervened in several cases by engaging families early, providing counseling, and sometimes resolving misunderstandings that could have led to marriage arrangements. We also integrate adolescent health education into both school and out-of-school programmes. Young people are taught life skills, reproductive health, and the

long-term consequences of early marriage. This has improved their ability to resist pressure and make informed choices. In addition, we maintain consistent advocacy through community meetings and radio programmes in Ebira language, ensuring that messages reach all segments of the population. The result is a growing community consensus that child marriage is no longer acceptable. Kogi Central demonstrates relatively stronger community-based protection systems, with active child protection committees and community development associations playing a key role in early detection and prevention of child marriage cases.

4. Implementation Challenges to Ending Child Marriage in Kogi State

Despite the positive potential of some cultural practices to end child marriage, respondents acknowledged that some traditional beliefs historically contributed to child marriage. For example, fear of premarital pregnancy sometimes encouraged families to marry off girls early, while traditional gender expectations occasionally limited girls' educational opportunities. Consequently, respondents stressed that interventions must preserve positive cultural values while simultaneously reforming harmful interpretations and practices.

The study identified poverty as one of the major drivers of child marriage within affected communities. Respondents explained that families experiencing financial hardship often perceive early marriage as a survival strategy capable of reducing economic burdens within the household. Consequently, respondents suggested that economic empowerment programmes targeting vulnerable households may reduce the pressure to marry off young girls. These findings are consistent with broader evidence showing that child marriage contributes to economic losses, poor health outcomes, and reduced productivity. Existing studies estimate that child marriage imposes significant economic burdens on Nigeria through reduced educational attainment, increased health complications, and limited economic opportunities for women.

One respondent further explained that despite ongoing interventions, poverty, low literacy levels, and deeply rooted cultural beliefs continue to encourage child marriage within some families. According to the respondent, stronger law enforcement, sustained public enlightenment campaigns, and increased economic support for vulnerable households are necessary to completely eradicate the practice.The interviews also revealed concerns regarding weak implementation and enforcement of child protection laws in Nigeria. Respondents noted that unlike some countries where anti-child-marriage laws are more effectively enforced, implementation challenges in Nigeria remain significant due to institutional weaknesses and cultural resistance within certain communities.

The situation described by respondents reflects experiences reported in several parts of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty, gender inequality, and cultural traditions continue to sustain child marriage practices. International literature consistently demonstrates that educational opportunities and economic empowerment remain among the most effective long-term solutions to the problem.Similarly, studies conducted across Africa indicate that successful interventions usually combine educational support, community sensitisation, economic empowerment initiatives, and active engagement with religious and traditional leaders.

Respondents referenced intervention programmes in northern Nigeria involving community leaders and educational support which reportedly achieved significant reductions in child marriage among adolescent girls.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings from this implementation research indicate that Kogi State has adopted a deliberate and multi-layered approach towards addressing child marriage across its three senatorial districts. The strategies identified in this study reflect a growing recognition that child marriage is driven by interconnected cultural, economic, and social factors, thereby requiring equally diverse and coordinated interventions.Although significant efforts are currently being implemented, the findings demonstrate that child marriage has not been completely eradicated within the state. The persistence of the practice in some communities remains closely associated with poverty, limited access to education, and deeply entrenched traditional beliefs. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence of increasing public awareness, growing community resistance to the practice, and gradual behavioural change, suggesting that ongoing interventions are beginning to produce positive outcomes.

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that enforcement of the Child Rights Law in Kogi State should be strengthened to ensure that existing legal provisions are not only widely known but also effectively implemented across all communities. This should be supported through improved coordination among relevant institutions at both state and local government levels in order to address existing enforcement gaps, particularly within rural areas.

There is also a need to expand and strengthen community engagement structures by further empowering traditional rulers, religious leaders, women leaders, and community-based organisations, as these groups have demonstrated considerable influence in changing attitudes and practices relating to child marriage. Their involvement should be sustained and formally integrated into state-level child protection mechanisms.

Furthermore, government and development partners should increase investment in girl-child education through scholarships, school support programmes, and school retention initiatives, especially within high-risk communities in Kogi East. Education remains one of the most effective protective factors against child marriage and should therefore remain a central priority.

Targeted economic empowerment programmes should also be expanded to address household poverty, which continues to be a major driver of child marriage. Supporting vulnerable families through sustainable livelihood initiatives may significantly reduce the economic pressures that encourage early marriage decisions.

The establishment and strengthening of child protection committees across all wards within the state is equally essential, as these structures can provide effective early warning and response systems for preventing child marriage. Such committees should receive adequate training and institutional support to enable them function effectively.

Finally, there is a need to improve data collection, monitoring, and reporting systems within the Ministry of Women Affairs to ensure that interventions remain evidence-based and outcomes are properly tracked. This should be

complemented by sustained behavioural change communication campaigns using local languages and community media platforms in order to reinforce positive social norms over time.

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