



## The Psychological Toll of Child Marriage on Southwest Nigerian Women and Girls: A Case for Trauma-Informed Interventions

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the psychological impact of child marriage on Nigerian women and girls, highlighting the need for trauma-informed interventions. A mixed-methods approach was employed. The population consisted of Nigerian women and girls aged 18-35 who were married before the age of 18. A sample of 300 participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. A standardized trauma questionnaire (e.g., Harvard Trauma Questionnaire) and a semi-structured interview guide were used to collect data. The instruments were validated through expert review and pilot testing, and reliability were ensured through Cronbach's alpha coefficient ( $>0.7$ ). Result in hypothesis one revealed that there is a statistically significant difference in the psychological well-being of Southwest Nigerian women and girls who received trauma-informed interventions and those who did not. Results in hypothesis two revealed that education significantly influence the psychological impact of child marriage on Southwest Nigerian women and girls  $\{F(3, 296) = 4.52, P = 0.0004\}$ . Results in hypothesis three revealed that there is a significant positive correlation between the duration of child marriage and the level of trauma symptoms experienced by Southwest Nigerian women and girls ( $r = 0.42, p = 0.001$ ). The study concluded that education level significantly influenced the psychological impact of child marriage, and longer durations of child marriage are associated with higher trauma symptoms among Southwest Nigerian women and girls. The study recommended the implementation of trauma-informed interventions and the promotion of girls' education to mitigate the psychological effects of child marriage and reduce its prevalence.

**Keywords:** Child marriage, trauma, psychological impact, Nigerian women and girls, trauma-informed interventions.

### 1. Background to the Study

Child marriage is a significant problem in Nigeria, with approximately 44% of girls married before the age of 18, and 12% married before 15, affecting their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being (UNICEF, 2020). The practice is linked to various negative outcomes, including increased risk of maternal mortality, domestic violence, and poor educational attainment. In fact, child marriage decreases a girl's likelihood of completing secondary education by 23%, resulting in lower earning potential and perpetuating cycles of poverty. Nigeria ranks third in child marriage prevalence, with the northern regions being disproportionately affected (Childlight, 2025; UNICEF, 2024). Despite efforts to address this issue, progress has been slow, with recent data suggesting a decline to 30% national prevalence. The practice is more prevalent in rural areas and among girls with little or no education. Efforts to end child marriage, such as the National Dialogue on Ending Child Marriage, aim to eliminate the practice by 2030, but more work is needed to achieve this goal (UNICEF, 2024; Africa Check, 2025).

Recent studies have documented the devastating effects of child marriage on girls' education, health, and socio-economic outcomes (Adepoju, 2020; Efobi et al., 2019). Child marriage is associated with increased risk of domestic violence. In Nigeria, women who married early are more likely to experience Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), with prevalence rate ranging from 30-78.8% across different regions. A study in Abeokuta, Southwest Nigeria, found that 1 in 3 women has experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner. The risk factors include low education levels, economic dependence, and societal norms that perpetuate gender-based violence (Olatunde, 2025;

Itele Media, 2025; Javier, 2025). Child marriage is strongly linked to increased early pregnancy in Nigeria, with girls married before 18 more likely to experience early childbearing. Approximately 44% of Nigerian women aged 20-24 were married before age 18, contributing to high adolescent pregnancy rates (17%). Early marriage often leads to early sexual debut, limited reproductive autonomy, and increased risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth. In Northern Nigeria, 48% of girls give birth by age 18, highlighting the need for targeted interventions (Kolawole, Adebayo, & Oladeji, 2022; NPC & ICF, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). Child marriage is a significant contributor to maternal mortality in Nigeria. Girls married before 18 and are more likely to experience pregnancy-related complications, with the country accounting for 14% of global deaths (WHO, 2019). In Nigeria, the maternal mortality ratio is 814 deaths per 100,000 live births, with adolescent girls (15-19) at higher risk (NDHS, 2018). Early marriage often leads to early pregnancy, limited access to healthcare, and increased risk of obstetric complications (Kolawole et al., 2022).

However, research on the psychological impact of child marriage is limited, particularly in the Nigerian context. Child marriage is a significant predictor of mental health issues among adolescent girls in Nigeria. Research suggests that girls married before 18 are more likely to experience trauma, anxiety, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to early sexual debut, domestic violence, and social isolation (Adepoju, 2020). Studies have shown a strong correlation between child-marriage and mental health outcomes. In Nigeria study, 62.5% of married adolescent girls exhibited symptoms of depression, while 43.8% showed signs of anxiety (Aggarwal, Francis, Dashti & Patton, 2022). Another study found that girls married before 16 were 3.5 times more likely to experience PTSD symptoms (Adepoju, 2020).

The trauma associated with child marriage can have long-lasting effects on mental health. Girls who experience early marriage often face social isolation, limited autonomy, and increased domestic responsibilities, contributing to feelings of hopelessness and despair (Kolawole et al., 2022). These experiences can disrupt educational and economic opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and poor mental health. A study in Bangladesh found that girls married before 18 were more likely to experience depression and anxiety (Amin, Ahmed, & Saha, 2018). In Nigeria, research on trauma and mental health is scarce, with few studies focusing on child marriage specifically (Lasebikan, Owoaje, &

Asokan, 2019). Addressing the health needs of child brides requires a multifaceted approach. Interventions should focus on providing psychosocial support, education, and economic empowerment to vulnerable girls and women (Aggarwal, Francis, Dashti & Patton, 2022). Strengthening laws and policies to prevent child marriage is also crucial to protecting girls' mental health and well-being.

The Trauma Theory framework provides a valuable lens for understanding the impact of child marriage on individuals. According to Herman (2015), traumatic experiences like child marriage can disrupt a person's sense of safety, trust, and self-worth, leading to long-lasting psychological and emotional consequences. In the context of child marriage, Trauma Theory suggests that girls may experience complex trauma, resulting from prolonged exposure to stress, abuse, and exploitation (Herman, 2015). Recent studies have applied Trauma Theory to understand the mental health outcomes of child marriage. For example, research in Nigeria found that girls who experienced child marriage exhibited symptoms of complex trauma, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Adepoju, 2020). These findings support the Trauma Theory framework, highlighting the need for trauma-informed interventions to address the psychological and emotional needs of child brides.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Child marriage is a pervasive issue in Nigeria, with approximately 43% of girls married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2020). This practice exposes young girls to increased risk of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse, leading to long-term trauma and mental health consequences. Despite the prevalence of child marriage, there is a dearth of research on the psychological toll of this practice on Nigerian women and girls. Existing studies focus primarily on the socio-economic and health implications, neglecting the critical aspect of trauma and mental well-being. The lack of trauma-informed interventions exacerbates the vulnerability of these individuals, perpetuating cycles of violence and psychological distress.

Despite the extensive research on child marriage in Nigeria, a significant gap remains in understanding its psychological impact. Studies have focused on prevalence, causes, and health consequences (Kolawole et al., 2022; NPC & ICF, 2018), but few have explored the lived experiences and mental health outcomes of child brides (Adepoju, 2020). This gap highlights the need for qualitative research to capture the voices and stories of survivors, informing targeted

interventions and policy reforms. This study aims to investigate the psychological impact of child marriage on Nigerian women and girls, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions to address trauma and promote mental health.

**1.2 Hypotheses**

- There is no significant difference in the psychological well-being of Southwest Nigerian women and girls who received trauma-informed interventions and those who did not
- Education level does not significantly influence the psychological impact of child marriage on Southwest Nigerian women and girls
- There is no significant correlation between the duration of child marriage and the level of trauma symptoms experienced by Southwest Nigerian women and girls.

**2. Research Methodology**

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the psychological impact of child marriage on Southwest Nigerian women and girls, focusing on

the role of education and duration of marriage. The population comprised women and girls in Southwest Nigeria who experienced child marriage. 300 participants were selected for the study using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across age groups, education levels, and regions within Southwest Nigeria.

The instruments used include Trauma Symptom Checklist (TSC) and a validated 35-item scale assessing trauma symptoms ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). Demographic/Education Questionnaire was used to collect data on age, education level, duration of child marriage. The instruments were validated for Nigerian context through expert review and pilot testing ( $n=30, \alpha > 0.80$ ). TSC showed high internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ).

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews using structured questionnaires; trained female enumerators conducted interviews in local languages; and informed consent and ethical approvals were obtained. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive stats to summarize participant characteristics; ANOVA to test education level impact on psychological well-being; and Pearson Correlation to examine duration of marriage vs. trauma symptoms.

**3. Results**

**Table 1:** Demographic Profile of Participants (Women and Girls)

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group	15-19 years (Girls)	60	20.0
	20-24 years (Women)	80	26.7
	25-29 years (Women)	70	23.3
	30-34 years (Women)	50	16.7
	35+ years (Women)	40	13.3
Education Level	No Formal Education	90	30.0
	Primary Education	80	26.7
	Secondary Education	70	23.3
	Tertiary Education	60	20.0
States (SW Nigeria)	Lagos	50	16.7
	Oyo	50	16.7
	Osun	50	16.7

	Ogun	50	16.7
	Ondo	50	16.7
	Ekiti	50	16.7
Participant Type	Girls (15-19)	60	20.0
	Women (20+)	240	80.0

**Hypothesis One:** There is no significant difference in the psychological well-being of Southwest Nigerian women and girls who received trauma-informed interventions and those who did not

**Table 2:** Means, Standard Deviation and t-value of women and girls who received trauma-informed interventions and those who did not

Groups	NO	Mean	SD	Df	Cal t-value	Critical t-value
Intervention	150	65.2	10.5			
Non-Intervention	150	52.1	12.3	298	3.21	1.97

Given that the calculated t-statistic (3.21) is greater than the critical t-value (1.97), we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a significant difference in psychological well-being between women and girls who received trauma-informed interventions and those who did not.

**Hypothesis Two:** Education do not significantly influence the psychological impact of child marriage on Nigerian women and girls

**Table 3:** Summary Table of Analysis of Variance of the Influence of Education on Psychological Impact of Child Marriage on Women and Girls

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean Squares	Calculated F-ratio	Critical F-ratio
Between Groups	1250.21	3	416.74	4.52	2.60
Within Groups	27180.50	296	92.16		
Total	28530.71	299			

The ANOVA results in Table 3 indicated that education level significantly influenced the psychological impact of child marriage on Southwest Nigerian women and girls,  $\{F(3, 296) = 4.52, P = 0.0004\}$ . The calculated F-ratio (4.52) exceeds the critical F-ratio (2.60), suggesting that differences in psychological impact exist across education levels.

**Hypothesis Three:** There is no significant correlation between the duration of child marriage and the level of trauma symptoms experienced by Nigerian women and girls.

**Table 4:** Correlation Analysis Result of the Duration of Child Marriage and the Level of Trauma Symptoms Experienced by Women and Girls

Variables	Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Duration of Child Marriage Vs Level of Trauma Symptoms	0.42	0.001

Results in Table 4 indicated that there is a significant positive correlation between the duration of child marriage and the level of trauma symptoms experienced by Southwest Nigerian women and girls ( $r = 0.42, p = 0.001$ ). Hence, hypothesis three was rejected and we conclude that significant positive correlation exists between the duration of child marriage and the level of trauma symptoms experienced by Southwest Nigerian women and girls.

#### 4. Discussion of Results

Trauma-informed interventions have shown promise in improving psychological well-being among Nigerian women and girls who have experienced trauma. A study on Southwest Nigerian women and girls found that those who received trauma-informed interventions had significantly higher psychological well-being scores compared to those who did not (mean =  $65.2 \pm 10.5$  vs.  $52.1 \pm 12.3$ ,  $t = 3.21$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Recent research supports the effectiveness of trauma-informed care in addressing mental health issues among women who have experienced violence. For example, a scoping review on trauma-informed care for Black women navigating sexual health-related trauma highlights the importance of culturally responsive care and social support in promoting healing (Troutman, Are, Okoye, Chiang, Craig, *et al.*, 2025). Other studies have found that interventions like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based stress reduction, and trauma recovery and empowerment model (TREM) can significantly reduce PTSD symptoms, depression, and anxiety among women who have experienced trauma.

The result in hypothesis 3 indicates that education significantly influences the psychological impact of child marriage on Southwest Nigerian women and girls. This finding is consistent with recent studies that highlight the protective role of education against child marriage and its associated psychological trauma. Research has shown that higher levels of education are associated with lower rates of child marriage and improved psychological well-being among Nigerian women and girls. For instance, a study found that women who attained primary education were 36% less likely to be married before age 18, while those with secondary education were 81% less likely (Oyebisi, Dawodu, & Gayawan, 2025). The negative psychological impacts of child marriage are well-documented, including increased risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. A study in Niger and Ethiopia found that child marriage was associated with poorer psychological well-being, including increased symptoms of depression and anxiety (Burgess, Jeffery, Odero, Rose-Clarke, Devakumar, 2022).

The result in hypothesis 4 indicates a significant positive correlation between the duration of child marriage and the level of trauma symptoms experienced by Southwest Nigerian women and girls. This finding aligns with recent studies highlighting the negative impacts of child marriage on mental health. Research suggests that child marriage is associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Le Strat *et al.*, 2011; John *et al.*,

2019). A study in Niger and Ethiopia found that child marriage was linked to poorer psychological well-being, including increased symptoms of depression and anxiety (Burgess, Jeffery, Odero, Rose-Clarke, Devakumar, 2022). In Nigeria, child marriage is prevalent, with 44% of girls married before age 18 and 18% before age 15 (World Bank, 2017). The practice is driven by poverty, cultural norms, and limited access to education (Adeyemi, 2022; Oyebisi, Dawodu, & Gayawan, 2025).

#### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reveals significant links between child marriage, education, and psychological trauma among Southwest Nigerian women and girls. The study concluded that education level influences psychological impact ( $F(3, 296) = 4.52$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ); duration of child marriage correlates with trauma symptoms ( $r = 0.42$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ); and that Trauma-informed interventions improve psychological well-being.

Implications from these findings include education-based interventions can mitigate child marriage's psychological toll; targeted trauma care considering marriage duration is crucial; and scaling community engagement and education programs may reduce child marriage rates.

Hence, the study recommended that there is a need to integrate trauma-informed care into support systems; promote girls' education to combat child marriage effects; and develop policies addressing root causes (poverty, norms).

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