



International Journal of  
**Gender Studies**  
(IJGS)

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Journals

## **Antecedents and Consequences of Early Marriage in Damongo in the West Gonja District**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study was to explore the antecedents and consequences of early marriage in Damongo in the West Gonja District in the Savanna Region of Ghana.

**Methodology:** The interpretative phenomenological approach was adopted for the study. An interview guide was used to collect data from 10 women who have experienced early marriage. The snowball method was used to get the participants for the study. The recorded information was transcribed for the analysis.

**Findings:** The study revealed that protection of the status of the family and poverty were the antecedents for early marriage. It was also found that lack of educated females and poverty were the consequences of early marriage.

**Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy:** It was recommended that District Assemblies should open up some loan opportunities for parents to access so that they expand their sources of income to meet their financial obligations rather than pushing their girls into early marriage for financial gains.

**Keywords:** *Adolescents, early marriage, divorce, dowry, wife battering, poverty.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Marriage is a social activity which unites people in a special form of mutual dependence for the purpose of founding and maintaining a family. Many societies have norms that limit the age of females to enter into marriage, but in some cases the age limit does not take into consideration their physiological and psychological readiness for childbearing.

Marriage is a matter of choice and consent. Yet many girls enter marriage without any chance of exercising their right to choose. Thus, according to Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2003), early marriage includes some amount of force operationally. Early marriage is the marriage or union between two people in which one or both parties are younger than 18 years of age. Thus according to Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2003), early marriage include some amount of coercion. United States Agency for International Development [USAID] (2012) describes early marriage as a human rights violation and a practice that undermines efforts to promote sustainable development.

The universal declaration of human right recognized the right to “free and full” consent to a marriage, acknowledging that consent cannot be “free and full” when one of the individuals involved is not mature enough to make an informed decision about a life partner. According to the United Nations International Children Education Fund [UNICEF] (2001), marriage before the age of 18 years is recognized in international legal instruments to be a violation of the child’s human rights.

Damongo in the Savana Region has about 26% prevalence rate of child marriage. Data from the District Health Care Centre (2019) show that, in Damongo, out of 160 recorded births for the first half of 2019, 64 married mothers were between the ages of 14 and 17. Studies conducted by

In relation to the continuous surge of early marriage in Damongo community in the West Gonja District, most of these teenagers are victims of school dropout, lack skills enough to earn them jobs and are also vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases. Again, they are mostly the major victims of domestic violence from their elderly husbands since they are usually forced into marriage. Early marriage holds girls back, denying them of good health and education as well as the chance to success in the society (United Nations International Children’s Education Fund [UNICEF], 2003). Erulkar and Bello (2007) supports UNICEF (2003) when they revealed that the society suffers when girls are not educated and are not physically and psychologically ready to function as parents. These bring challenges to the individual households and the society at large.

Alhassan (2013), Boislard and Poulin (2011), Bala (2003) and Jensen and Thornton (2003) show that there are several factors which contribute to adolescent early marriage. In some families, early marriage is seen as a way to get girls out of frustration experienced by unmarried adults. Bala (2003) observes that families who have female adults who are not married find it difficult to contain them. Such individuals often express anger, frustration, anxiety and sadness because they often think they have been marginalised in society in terms of marriage.

Alhassan (2013) intimates early marriages do not stand the test of time, largely because girls contracted are not psychologically mature enough to think things over per the marriage. He also discloses, once they get married, the adolescent girl is forced to leave her home for husband’s place, where she is expected to take up roles that she is not mentally prepared for. Such responsibilities like that of mother and daughter in-law are too much for an adolescent girl, and it eventually leads to isolation and depression.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Early marriage is largely a phenomenon of girls, which has created a critical and significant experience for many adolescent girls in Damongo. The problem with this phenomenon in Damongo is that many adolescent girls do not complete basic education. That means since education is the key to survival, and is free in this dispensation; many adolescent girls who drop out of school as a result of early marriage have low prospects of being successful in life. The dire consequences that follow early adolescent marriage, particularly for girls who were married when they were not yet 15 years old, are that the girl's education is sacrificed, and they become more vulnerable to domestic violence. Some of them run away for sanctuary far away only to find themselves in deplorable condition. Thus, early marriage deprives girls of the chance to experience emotional and psychological wellbeing as they deserve. It is against this backdrop that the study was conducted to explore the antecedents and consequences of early marriage in Damongo in the West Gonja District in the Savana Region of Ghana.

The objectives of the study were to

1. Indicate the reasons early marriage is encouraged in the Damongo community.
2. Identify how early marriage has affected the lives of the victims.

### Research questions

The research questions for the study were:

1. What are the reasons for early marriage in Damongo community?
2. How has early marriage in Damongo affected the lives of the victims?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The concept of early marriage

Early marriage also called child marriage is defined as a formal marriage or informal union of children before 18 years of age. It is considered a violation of human rights and a harmful traditional practice affecting more girls than boys leading to numerous negative health and developmental consequences (UNICEF, 2001). The marriage of girls before the legal age of marriage is widespread in some regions of the world especially in the sub-Saharan Africa. The latest comparable figure for the sub-Saharan Africa region suggests an incidence of 39 per cent (UNICEF, 2006). Child marriage poses both adverse health and socio-economic consequences for the victims and their societies. However, as a results of many campaigns some local and international organisations, the global incidence of child marriage has declined significantly (Nguyen and Wodon, 2015).

### Antecedents of early marriage

Poverty world-wide influences early marriage. Alhassan (2013) asserts that economic factors have links to girls' early marriage. The author reveals that child marriage could be an avenue for parents to reduce the economic burden of providing for their young daughters. In societies where bride prices are paid, parents may make some economic gains in the process. There is an incentive to

marry girls off early in countries where dowries are paid as part of the marriage contract since the cost of the dowry increases with the age of the girl.

Another factor of child marriage is family honour. Jensen and Thornton (2003) and Wanjiku (2015) noted that in some societies the honour of women and, by extension, the honour of their family depends in great measure on their virginity and good conduct. For example, in societies where a premium is placed on virginity prior to marriage and pre-marital pregnancy casts shame on girls' families, parents will marry off their daughters at an early age to avoid this. Also Jensen and Thornton (2003) believe families encourage early marriage in order to escape the disgrace in the community where female girls lose their virginity before marriage. In communities where teenage pregnancy is high parents give off their girls into marriage to maintain the family's good name and societal reputation as well as status.

### **Consequences of early marriage**

The literature on child marriage is replete with evidence of the adverse effects of child marriage (Otoo-Oyortey 2003; Jensen & Thornton, 2003). Poverty is another challenge which is constantly influencing early marriages in most communities. In a situation where there is much poverty, young girls are given out into marriage to rich men for economic gains (Alhassan, 2013). This of course has negative consequences on their children, families and society as a whole (Singh & Samara, 1996; Erulkar & Bello, 2007). Erulkar and Bello (2007) argue that it is not only girls that pay for early marriage but also the society as a whole. Population pressure, health care cost and lost opportunity for human development (lack of education). Early marriage according to United Nations Population Fund (2011) also undermines international efforts to fight against poverty in developing countries since the education which will equip the girl with knowledge and skills for personal and national development comes to abrupt.

Additionally, early marriage predisposes girls to abuse in their marriages. The Forum for African Women Educationists [FAWE] (2000) identified child marriage as potentially affecting the physical well-being of the victims. Child brides are vulnerable to and experience physical, sexual and emotional abuse by their husbands. They can be socially isolated because their husbands restrict their movements and who they can socialise with. As Otoo-Oyortey (2003) and Diop et al., (2002) noted, early marriage often isolates girls from their peers. Several studies have concluded that early marriage deprives children of their childhood.

Child marriage is considered a violation of human rights and a harmful traditional practice affecting more girls than boys leading to numerous negative health and developmental consequences. This also has the tendency of widening gender discrimination gap between boys and girls (UNICEF, 2016). FAWE (2000) and Bayisenge (2010) revealed child marriage has excessive disastrous and life-threatening risk factors with regard to health, economic, social and psychological development and wellbeing of victims. Early marriage among adolescent girls limits their access to education, sexual and reproductive health care and increases their isolation. A girl under 15 years is more likely to die in childbirth than a grown woman; young girls are at increased risk of contracting HIV due to a lack of negotiation power for safe sex and are more likely to experience domestic violence than those who marry later

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the interpretative phenomenology. The approach was particularly useful in describing the experience they have in common from their lived experiences (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009). The population for the study was 110 women who married before 18 years and were staying in Damongo (District Health Care Centre, 2019). Snowball sampling method was used to contact 10 married women who were married when they were below 14 years and were interested to share their lived experience for the study.

An interview guide was used to collect data for the study. For the purpose of this research, one-on-one interviews were conducted for the collection of data. Each participant was ensured of her privacy during the interviews (Fontana, 2002). The use of individual interview was for free flow of information from participants. The interviews which were recorded were conducted in Gonja language which is spoken by the people in Damongo. One of the researchers was from Damongo so she took it upon herself to conduct the interviews and transcribed the responses. Respondent validation was ensured.

## RESULTS

### **Research Question 1: What are the reasons for early marriage in Damongo community?**

The themes of protecting the status of the family and poverty emerged from the analysis of this research question.

#### **To protect the status of the family**

Families consider it prestigious when their daughters enter into marriage without any blemish in terms of premarital sexual relationship. For fear of their daughters being caught in the web of teenage pregnancy which is prevalent in many communities in the district and subsequently losing suitors, they ensure their daughters are given to suitors at an early age. Out of 10 respondents who were interviewed, 6 had a common view that they considered going into early marriage to please their parents who place a high premium on family status. Living in a community where early marriage family value its childbearing concomitant is upheld, conscious efforts to minimize the phenomenon yields little or no results. It becomes the culture of the people; hence nobody sees anything negative about it. One of the interviewees indicated:

*It's a disgrace not to be married when one's virginity is lost in some communities. To be on a safer side, we are given into early marriages to avoid a where our virginity would be broken by another man and tarnish our reputation when the token of virginity is not found when we are married (R3)*

A respondent said:

*In my tribe, it's considered an honour to be married at the age I did. I knew I would marry but not as early as I was given to a man (R6)*

Another respondent said:

*It is considered a disgrace to be married when one's virginity is lost (R10)*

## Poverty

Out of the 10 respondents interviewed, the response of 6 spoke about a common theme which is poverty. Poverty is another strong drive that sends the main drive pushing respondents into early marriage, ostensibly, against their wish.

A respondent revealed:

*I'm from a family of 12 ... caring for us was not easy for my parents so to ease the financial burden on them, I had to be given into marriage when I was 16 years old. I had no choice. So were my other sisters. (R2)*

Another respondent said:

*I married at a very early age. I remember there was drought throughout the district and as a result, my uncle, who was a farmer, could not pay the loans he got from some people. He agreed when a man, now my husband, wanted me for a wife. Even though I was young, I knew at that time it was an opportunity for my uncle to get some money to pay some debts (R5)*

Another one said:

*After completing primary school, I had no financial support from my parents to continue with my education. In order not to become a burden on the family, I was given into marriage. So you see, the results for exchanging school with marriage? (R9)*

An interviewee revealed:

*I did not intend to go into early marriage. My father, was sick, dying. So when my husband proposed marrying me I was given out for marriage at age 17 so that they could get money for his medical bills (R8)*

Another one said:

*I was staying at home because I was not good at school. My father could not afford to buy my needs for me so when a man approached my parents to marry me I did not object. I felt I was going to live better. (R5).*

## Research Question 2: How has early marriage in Damongo affected the lives of the victims?

Lack of educated females and wife battering was the themes that strongly emerged from the interviews.

### Lack of educated females

Comments from participants interviewed suggest that early marriage made them lack the knowledge and skills to function. The lamentation from this respondent spoke the minds of many interviewees.

*There was no way I could have attended school because a rich man had already finished arrangements with my parents to marry me. I did not want to disobey my parents' demand so I gave in to the marriage. Moreover since I was getting married to a rich man from my*

*town I had to agree to marry him. Now, I cannot read and write. Some of my mates have completed the College of Education and Nursing Training College. I cannot speak good English because I dropped out of school to marry. I wish I could start my teenage all again to resist early marriage and go to school and become educated. (R4)*

Another woman who had no skills in getting income because her husband was very rich and did not allow her to finish school expressed regrets for giving in to early marriage. She lamented:

*My husband is dead and feeding my children is a problem because I have not learned a trade. The man who succeeded my husband has a large family so it is very little he can do to support me and my children. If I knew I should have refused the pressure from my parents to marry at that time and rather attended school and acquired some skills for a job. (R9)*

### **Wife battering**

Respondents revealed that they experienced different forms of domestic violence from their husbands. One of the respondents who was 18 years at the time of the interview narrated how her inability to meet her husbands' regular sexual demands made her regret her decision to marry her husband. She lamented:

*I am not able to satisfy my husband sexually because of my age. My husband is 48 years old. Any time I resist his sexual advances he beats me. I do not have the right to inform my parents about the maltreatment I receive from my husband. I am not happy at all. I have some other friends who are suffering the same. (R1)*

Another respondent who experienced wife battering revealed:

*I have not been happy for the 6 years that I have been with my husband. When I see "the man" I become angry. I do everything for him including sex but he is never satisfied. Sometimes, he does not come home to sleep and when I complain he insults and beats me mercilessly. My sister, I am not in this alone. But for my three children, I would have run away to Accra. (R8)*

Another said:

*My husband used to tell me that I was a lazy woman because I found it difficult to perform some marital roles when he married me. He sent me to his family house where there were a lot of occupants. In fact, I always wept if I looked at the house chores I had to perform. There was no way I could complain. As if I was bought to come and serve a huge group of people. I wish my parents had not pushed me into marriage at that time. (R7)*

### **DISCUSSION**

On the analysis of research question 1, the theme of prestige and poverty emerged as major antecedents of early marriage.

#### **To protect the prestige of the family**

Respondents recounted early marriage as prestigious which is socially accepted. For example, R3 talked of 'reputation', R6 talked of 'honour' and R10 alluded to these when she said it is a disgrace



to lose one's virginity. This is in consonance with Wanjiku's (2015) assertion that, in a community where early marriage prevails, the community comes to see the phenomenon as normal, thereby even encouraging it subtly. FAWE (2000) noted that because some parents want to protect their teenage girls from having children out of wedlock, they are kept under a man's control to serve him as a husband in the man's home. Buttressing the above report, Watch (2014) reveals that it is the desire of families to see their daughter having successful marriages when their virginity is not lost as a result of premarital sex. Bayisenge (2010) revealed that families deem it a sign of responsible and good parenting in their communities if their girls marry when they are virgin. Bayisenge added that in certain communities, women are valued based on their virginity before marriage and how many children they can produce for their husbands, not how educated or economically successful they are. So in Damongo the theme of family status protection is paramount.

### **Poverty**

Money is the life wire for families. Arguably, human beings would do anything to save a terrible situation by yielding to some other demands. Largely, lack of finance makes individuals search for alternative means to solve pressing financial problems. From the comments as in the words: ease the financial burden (R2); opportunity for my uncle to get money to pay some debts (R5); no financial support from my parents (9); so they could get money for medical bills (R8); my father could not afford to buy my needs, it was revealed that parents' inability to meet their financial obligations resorted to giving out their daughters into early marriage. This finding supports the report of the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] (2011) when it revealed that poverty was a major factor for early marriage among girls in poorer households in Northern Ghana. To them, poverty forces many parents to regard their daughters as sources of money to the family. Young girls are most often given into early marriage when parents are financially stressed. This is in line with Erulkar and Bello's (2007) view that daughters are considered an economic burden and that; feeding, clothing, and educating girls are costly and girls will eventually leave their homes to join their husbands. A family's only way to recover its investment in a daughter may be to have her married in exchange for a dowry. In some communities, the dowry decreases as the girl get older, which may tempt parents to have their daughters married at younger ages.

UNFP (2011) assert that poverty has links to girls' early marriage, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. The foregoing is confirmed by Owusu-Ekuful's (2015) finding that financial challenges are among the reasons causing the rise in child marriages. He concludes that poverty plays a central role in perpetuating child marriage.

Analysis of Research question 2 found lack of educated females and wife battering as consequences of early marriage.

### **Lack of educated females**

The comments from the women showed that they were not happy that they stopped schooling to marry - cannot read and write; drop out of school (R4); rather attended school and acquired skills for the job (R9). Lack of educated females as revealed Bayisenge (2010) is a major consequence of early marriage in Rwanda. The author revealed that in Rwanda women population is higher than

men and if this category of the population lack knowledge and skills it means they are cut off from employment opportunities and chances for personal growth. UNFP (2011) also observed that early marriage undermines international efforts to fight against poverty and women empowerment in developing countries. This point to the fact that the widespread practice of child marriage makes it increasingly difficult for families to escape illiteracy and poverty.

### **Wife battering**

The comments as suggested in ‘maltreatment, suffering, he beats me (R1); insults and beats me (R8); used to tell me I was a lazy woman (R7) collaborate with Bala (2003) when he revealed that young girls are deprived of their dignity and require to take on roles for which they are not psychologically and physically prepared. They develop frustration and anger for their husbands which most often lead to divorce. The finding also supports Amoakohene (2004) when he opines that wife battering was prevalent in early marriage because of misunderstanding and lack of love among spouses.

### **Conclusion**

If families in Damongo could shirk off the culture of family status protection and also find other ways of coping with financial problems the practice of early marriage would be minimized if not eradicated. Early marriage brings about illiteracy as a result women lacked employable knowledge and skills for personal and national development. This situation draws back effort for women empowerment. It is high time the Damongo community saw the need to discontinue early marriage to empower the women educationally for their development and growth.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- i. The National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) should mount sensitization programmes for communities to educate them on the need to seek the welfare of their teen girls rather than thinking about the prestige that they want to achieve in the community.
- ii. The District Assemblies should open up some loan opportunities for parents to access so that they expand their sources of income to meet their financial obligations rather than pushing their girls into early marriage for financial gains.
- iii. The NCCE in collaboration with Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) should mount sensitization programmes on human rights and domestic violence to make the men know that their limits in disciplining their wives, and also making women know their rights and responsibilities.
- iv. The District Assemblies should enforce the policy on Girl Child Education by encouraging community leaders to enact laws to sanction parents against child marriage.

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