



Ending Child Marriage in Nigeria: Exploring the Actions of Social Work Practitioners

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Abstract. Social workers have long been at the vanguard of combating child marriage in Nigeria, yet little is known of their response in this regard. Social constructive theory was applied to inform the theoretic model of this research, taking into account the previous submission as well as the exploratory aspect of the investigation. Drawing on a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a cohort of five social workers in Nigeria who were working in a mid-scale advocacy organization committed to ending child marriage in northern Nigeria and the results were subjected to thematic analysis. The rigour of qualitative research categories was applied to guarantee the credibility of the data collected. The findings of the study point direction to the roles of practitioners in working to minimize the obnoxious practice but also show that social workers undergo numerous challenges in their quest for combating child marriage. Although combating child marriage requires a multi-sectoral approach and collaboration across key stakeholders as a result of its deep-seated nature, it is highly probable that, with social workers taking the lead role in view of their unparalleled commitment to combating this problem, child marriage will become a phenomenon of the past.

Keywords: Child marriage, Nigeria, person-in-environment, policy advocacy, social work

1. Introduction

Consent is an integral component in any relationship and when it is denied, abuse may become inevitable. This is deleterious enough in a relationship where both parties are adults. However, when such exploitative relationship is contracted between adults and minors, it may not be unreasonable to describe such maltreatment as exploitative and disadvantageous given the devastating toll it would have on the social condition of the child. Put head-on, child marriage is a harmful practice that is real, tearing apart the future hopes and security of the victims. Child marriage, in

its simplest form, refers to a marital contract involving an adult and a minor (that is, someone below the age of 18). In this article, the phrase child marriage and early marriage are conterminously utilized. In Nigeria, the practice of child marriage is real and profound.

1.1 Background

While it is more common in Nigeria's north, child marriage also occurs in more isolated parts of the nation, with females being disproportionately affected by the practice. Of the estimated 90 million women in Nigeria, more than half (47.7 million) get married before turning 18, as 18.8 million, or around 60% of all Nigerian women, do so before the age of fifteen (UNICEF, 2014). Child marriage abound in Nigeria, carrying with it grievous lifelong scars on victims of the practice. Adekola *et al.* (2016) provided a vivid description of the impact of child marriage on the overall well-being of those affected. According to these commentators, child marriage impacts negatively on the physical, psychological, and social health of the victims. The physical health consequence manifests in the elevated risks of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS, and other complicated health problems such as the dreaded Vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF), resulting in infant and maternal mortality. The trauma associated with prolonged restriction, isolation, and abuses, is likely to affect the mental health of victims of child marriage which, if left unattended, would likely result in some form of mental disorder at a given point of their lifetime. According to Adekola *et al.* (2016), child marriage deprives victims of educational opportunities and opportunities to acquire life-changing skills while they remain in an abusive marriage against their will or through deception, plunging them into a life marked by extreme poverty, ongoing domestic abuse, unemployment, and low social status.

Scholarly literature has shown that the determinants of child marriage in Nigeria are situated in the deficient and discriminatory structural institutions such as the sociocultural, economic, and political institutions (Akpan, 2003; Author, 2016, 2021; Atim, 2017). The prevailing normative values (e.g. gender inequality) and belief systems reflect the sociocultural influences. Extreme poverty, limited employment opportunities, and acute inequality mirror the economic effects (Author, 2017). Weak legal institutions and poor implementation of extant laws, as well as failure to prioritize education or the enforcement of the educational policies have been adduced as contributory factors to child marriage in Nigeria. The main causes and effects of child marriage have been highlighted to be poverty and a lack of educational opportunity. For example, the National Demographic and Health Survey, a report published in 2014 by the National Population Commission and ICF International has shown that the rampant areas for child marriage have the least access to formal education in the country. According to the report, 69 percent of women in the northern region where the practice is most pervasive have no access to formal education in contrast to 5 percent of the women in southern Nigeria. More so, there is a discrepancy in poverty level across regional lines as this is evident in the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2012) report which indicated that 61 percent of Nigerians live below the poverty level of the 180 million people who live in the world. However, the indices of poverty are worst off in the northern region with 77.7 percent of people living in poverty compared to 49.8 percent in the south (NBS, 2012).

Following the enactment of the landmark legislation: the Act for the Welfare of Children (hereinafter, Child Rights Act 2003) into law in 2003, the practice of child marriage has been declared illegal and therefore prohibited in Nigeria. In describing the extensive coverage of the CRA (Braithair, 2014; Author, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2020b) explains that the CRA is the most comprehensive law pertaining to children's rights in Nigeria since it addresses every circumstance in which a child may be abused. Alongside [with] a significant ban on child marriage page 480). For example, the CRA stipulates that "anyone under the age of eighteen is incapable of contracting a valid marriage, and accordingly a marriage so contracted is null and void and of no effect whatsoever." (CRA, 2003, pt.3, sec.21). Despite the explicit provisions of the law, why then has the phenomenon continued unabated? Two possible explanations may suffice in this regard. The first is linked to the nature of the legal system in Nigeria. In short, Nigeria has a distinct and often contradictory (e.g. civil, customary, and sharia) legal

framework so that child marriages formed, amended, and dissolved by sharia and customary law are unaffected by civil legislation (Braithair, 2014). Second, federal laws cannot be implemented unless it is enforced by the various Houses of Assembly across the states of the federation. Right now, 24 of Nigeria's 36 states have domesticated the CRA (Braithair, 2014), with the outstanding states being those in which child marriage is predominant.

In Nigeria, several organizations, local and international have pooled resources together to combat child marriage in Nigeria. Although these organizations are largely privately-controlled; comprising civil society organizations (CSOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and advocacy groups; they have played key roles in combating child marriage in the country. Despite this, the Nigerian federal and state governments have joined the battle against child marriage by means of the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development. Within these establishments, social workers believe a critical role in the planning and execution of programs that are designed to combat child marriage since they occupy leadership positions within these establishments. While social workers, especially those in the third sector, have for long been at the forefront of combating Nigerian child marriage, there is scant literature that has examined the nature of their role in this regard. This study thus fills the gap in the literature in Nigeria.

Unless Nigerian social workers begin to amplify the nature of their interventions in ridding society of its most intractable social problems, the profession would continue to face serious backlash from critiques that are of the view that the profession has lost its relevance in the country (Author, 2021). It against this background that this study attempts to spotlight the role of social workers in the fight against child marriage in Nigeria. It specifically aims to explore and describe the nature of social workers' roles in combating this obnoxious practice (Author, 2023). Besides, such understanding is crucial not solely for evaluative purpose but, more importantly, for planning future intervention programs that could lead to policy action necessary for a child marriage-free society. It is vital to ask the following questions before moving on to the actual research: what is social work and what roles does it play in society? For readers in Nigeria who might not be as familiar with the principles of the profession and/or what the profession stands for in society, this is very crucial.

2. Understanding Social Work

The field of social work is associated with a number of values, goals, approvals, skills, and applied methods (Bartlett, 2013). As per the authoritative definition provided by the IFSW (2014), social work is a profession that is grounded in practice and an academic field that aims to promote social development, social harmony, and the empowerment and emancipation of individuals. Since it clearly emphasizes the goals, objectives, knowledge-based character, and intervention-focused approach of the profession, this definition has come to be recognized as the gold standard for defining the essence of social work. Because of the person-in-environment (PIE) orientation of the profession, social work services are by their very nature broad and thorough. The PIE system's fundamental tenet is that therapies seek to improve people's social functioning. Thus, social work differs from other helping professions in that it places equal emphasis on people in their social and environmental environments, which also enables it to provide interventions that are inclusive. The person-in-environment perspective has been a major factor in shaping the profession's body of knowledge and methodology, according to Greene (2009) (p.1). "The person-in-environment perspective may have been the single most characteristic and definitive element of social work practice from its beginnings" (Saari 1992, p. 205), echoing this idea. In the field of social work, the emphasis on individuals and their interactions with their surroundings has become standard practice and permeates every facet of social work treatments (Author, 2020a).

According to Kemp (2001), "statements of the profession's purpose and mission, professional literature, and practice all support the simultaneous commitment to person and environment" (p. 7). These two fundamental tenets of the National Association of Social Work (NASW, 2014) Code of Ethics's emphasizes: putting an importance on each client's individual well-being within a social context and working to advance social justice and change on their behalf. Implying that social work's primary goal is to assist individuals in carrying out their daily tasks as well as help them in developing and utilizing social and community resources to foster relationships.

According to Weiss-Gal (2008), the primary objective of the field is to improve people's ability to implement social reforms aimed at removing societal obstacles to people's well-being, reducing inequality, and enhancing social justice in order to solve issues, reach potential, and enhance their lives (p. 65). According to Kondrat (2002), in comparison to other helping

professions, social work has historically led the way in behavior analysis from a holistic viewpoint when compared to other helping professions. Karls and O'Keefe (2009) highlighted the shared element of people's interactions with their surroundings when they stated that among the human service professions, social work stands out for its emphasis on improving individuals' social functioning and its consideration of the PIE perspective.

Examining Gordon's six key concepts for social work practice can help one understand the philosophical foundations of the PIE perspective, which are in line with the six core values of social work (service, social justice, human dignity and worth, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence).

1. The individual is this society's top priority.
2. That people in a society are interdependent;
3. That people owe each other a social obligation;
4. That while everyone has basic human needs, everyone is fundamentally unique and different from everyone else.
5. Realizing each person's full potential and accepting their social responsibilities via active engagement in society is a fundamental characteristic of a democratic society.
6. It is the duty of society to offer strategies for resolving and preventing barriers to this self-realization, or the imbalance that exists between the individual and his surroundings (Gordon, 1965, p. 32).

In general, social work services are characterised by an attempt to gain the most comprehensive understanding of the circumstances of those receiving care by examining the root causes of their issues. Based on this understanding, The next areas of focus for services are: (a) restoring social functioning through a developmental paradigm, as this is crucial to their long-term recovery and integration into mainstream society; (b) rehabilitating cognitive functioning through an assessment of their strengths; and (c) functioning to forestall the issue from continuing. These all highlight how the philosophy behind social work services is micro- and mezzo-focused on rehabilitation or therapeutic practices, macro-focused on concerns related to development and structure, as well as micro, mezzo, and macro-focused on prevention.

3. Theoretical Framework

According to Cooper (2001), the field of social work has changed from depending on other professions to create social theories to starting to create its own original constructions that depend on the complex

interactions and understandings that occur between individuals and their social environments. Social constructive theory was applied to inform the theoretic model of this research, taking into account the previous submission as well as the exploratory aspect of the investigation. According to Cooper (2001), studying the social mechanisms via which individuals interpret and characterize their surroundings is the main objective of constructivism in research (p. 721). Constructivism was thus utilized to investigate social workers' perspectives of the type of services they provide to child abuse victims.

4. Methodology

4.1 Sample and Procedure

The study's participants are licensed social workers who were employed by a significant non-profit advocacy group dedicated to putting an end to child marriage in Nigeria. The five participants of this study held executive and administrative roles in the organization, which is headquartered in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, and were chosen using the purposive sampling technique. Obtaining the social workers' permission to take part in this study was not as difficult as it may have been because the researcher had already done some research for the organization. Every participant was a licensed social worker with at least a bachelor's degree in the field. Despite being classified as administrative personnel, these practitioners were given job titles that corresponded with their duties, such as child welfare officer, monitoring and evaluation worker, and so on.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Based on one-on-one interviews with the participants, a semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data for this study, which used a qualitative research methodology. Each 45 to 60 minute interview was audio recorded via a tape recorder, and with the participants' consent, the transcript was written. Thematic content analysis was employed to examine the interview data. The thematic data analysis was conducted following the guidelines provided by (Terre et al., 2006). Familiarization and immersion, theme-

inducing, coding, elaboration, interpretation, and testing are a few of them. In qualitative research, the five rigour categories proposed by Maxwell (2008) were applied to guarantee the authenticity of the data collected.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Important ethical consideration was observed in this study. Permission was sought from the social work organizations used as well as the informed consent of the participants. Voluntary involvement, privacy, confidentiality and protection against harm were the other ethical issues this study addressed. As a result, personal information about study participants and their organizations is kept secret. Their answers are given as a group narrative, thus obscuring individual identity.

4.4 Limitations of The Study

The limitations of this study include the non-generalizability of its findings due to its qualitative nature. The study was further limited by the fact that it only included social workers employed by nongovernmental organizations; had social workers in the public sector been included, the results would have provided more balanced insights as well as alternative conclusions. However, as social workers in NGOs are the ones fighting child marriage and there isn't a specific public organization in Nigeria dedicated to the cause, this study had to include their perspectives. Despite these drawbacks, the study has paved the way for upcoming debates and assessments of social workers' contributions to the nation's effort to end child marriage.

5. Findings / Results

The data analysis revealed two themes (see table 1): the role of social workers and the obstacles to ending child marriage. Following a literature control, the results are drawn from the theme that emerged from the qualitative research and are represented by the exact quotes from the participants (who were known by status and gender).

Table Description

Table 1. This table presents the thematic framework or description of the responses of the participants regarding their roles and observed challenges that they encounter in their daily activities against child marriage.

Table 1: Thematic framework of the result

Theme	Subtheme
The role of social workers	Educator Resource Mobilizer Advocacy
Barriers against combating child marriage	Poor funding to implement programs Opposition from community members Insufficient social workers

Theme 1: Role of Social Workers

The social workers provided a vivid description of their roles in combating child marriage. They highlighted their roles as consisting of educating, advocating, and facilitating services on behalf of the victims of child marriage.

Subtheme 1.1: Educator

The social workers discussed that they combat child marriage through the instrument of education. They spoke of their educator role as comprising of organizing public workshops with the intention of enlightening families, and community members and leaders about the hazards of child marriage:

We do and we must have to educate people because when you consider the fact that many people are totally ignorant of the harmful effect of child marriage, it becomes a matter of necessity to educate the general public. (Social worker female).

Organizing conference for the purpose of discussing issues with community members is what we frequently do so as to intimate them of the reality that this problem is really more than it may appear. (Social worker, male).

Education can never be finite unless when the problem is over... as the problem continues, so too do our efforts to pass information across continue. (Social worker, female).

Additionally, they explained that their role required that they stepped out of the confines of organizing symposiums to engaging members of the public through streets sensitization campaigns in the heart of the city. In this context, they inform the public about the harmful effects of child marriage not only on the victims but also on the community at large:

Every time issues like this happen, who do you consider when making decisions about service

delivery? Of course, you consider those who are most ignorant about happenings, as well as the community leaders who have influence in calling their subjects to order. On this note, we make arrangements engage in enlightenment campaigns. (Social worker, male)

Through careful planning, we take our enlightenment campaigns to the streets and markets so that those people from afar... will understand our collective and come to terms with the fact that no religion condones the evil and wickedness of ruining the life of a child just because she is a girl. (Social worker, female).

Subtheme 1.2: Mobilizer

The social workers noted that effect effectively combating child marriage without addressing the issue of widespread poverty is tantamount to dereliction of duty. They described their efforts in this regard as mobilizing resources necessary for the empowerment of the victims. Through the facilitation of short-term skills learning programs, accompanied by the provision of micro-credit facilities, they stated that many victims of child marriage have become self-reliant:

The issue of empowerment for victims of child marriage is non-debatable and indispensable too... because they have been abandoned after they have been diagnosed with fistula, they become incapacitated since they do not have any skills... so we mobilize resources on their behalf and sooner than later, they stand on their own. (Social worker, female).

There is a deliberate plan to make their life a living hell... they are denied access to education and as if that is not enough, they are also prevented from acquiring any skill while they are cohabiting with their so-called husbands. For this reason, they are powerless and highly dependent which further opens the floodgate of incessant abuse and human rights violation... to make sure they get back on their feet, we

make sure we create a platform through which they can become empowered or connected to facilities where they are empowered. (Social worker, female).

Subtheme 1.3: Advocacy

Social workers spoke of advocacy as central to combating child marriage in Nigeria. They avowed that without advocacy it would be doubtful if the scourge would be eradicated. They mentioned that their advocacy efforts targeted a wide range of issues aggravating child marriage such as lack of availability of education for girls as a result of the overwhelming preference for male children, and the failure to execute the Child Rights Act:

Advocacy stand as the heartbeat and soul of social work without which social workers cannot achieve tangible results especially in a heartless society that allows its children's future to be truncated. (Social worker, female).

The twin obnoxious reality of patriarchy and poverty as the main drivers and sustainers of early marriage in Nigeria... and so if we don't focus our attention on this issue how can we address this problem? And what better way to do this than through advocacy? From our years of experience, advocacy has helped a lot and we will keep using it in our service delivery. (Social worker, male).

Theme 2: Challenges Against Combating Child Marriage

The participating social workers identified some challenges that have inhibited efforts aimed at preventing child marriage in Nigeria. They were unanimous in their assertion that when these issues are resolved, the problem of child marriage would become a phenomenon of the past.

Subtheme 2.1: Poor funding

To the participants, combating child marriage requires adequate funding in order to implement programs and carry out far-reaching services. They described how insufficient budgetary allocations have limited their capacity and proclaimed that unless this situation is reversed, eliminating child marriage would continue to be a mirage:

Is it possible to address a monumental problem like forced marriage if you don't deploy resources to combat the menace? As you might have noticed, our organization is nongovernmental but because there is no specialized unit in the women affairs and social development ministry combating forced marriage, there is the partnership between our organization and the government... it was agreed that they will be supporting us with funds but that has ceased as we speak. (Social worker, male).

Our activities are based on a memorandum of understanding with the government to provide the necessary financial backing as and when due, but

today, such commitment is no longer tenable as the ministry is underfunded. When this shortfall happens, our services are also affected as we cannot give what we don't have. (Social worker, male).

Subtheme 2.2: Opposition from community members
The participants mentioned that the constant opposition they have received from some community members has impinged their work against the scourge of child marriage. They highlighted how most of these opposing community members have used Islam as a pretext to perpetuate the cruelty of forced child marriage. As one participant notes:

We have faced severe opposition on numerous occasions but thankfully not terrible happens because we go with security personnel in this situation. The interesting thing we have come to notice is that most of the people who are so passionate about the continuation of this terrible practice are not adherents of Islam but they use religion to perpetuate this evil... because they want to keep people in fear and oppressed. (Social worker, female).

Subtheme 2.3: Insufficient social workers

Participants vehemently emphasized the essence of employing the services of more social workers in order to adequately address the problem in view of the wide reach of child marriage. They believed that by employing more social workers, remote locations that have been cut off and inaccessible would be covered since it is within such locations that the obnoxious practice is overly pervasive:

It is no gainsaying the fact that social workers are the livewire of social service delivery and that we have a long-standing commitment. However, in a situation where we have a shortage of social workers, what would you expect? Do you think that ending child marriage will be possible 2030 as the government has planned if more social workers are not employed? The government knows what to do if they are truly serious with the 2030 agenda. (Social worker, male).

The heart of the wicked practice of forced marriage is in rural locations and how are services going to get to these people who may not recognize the risks to the fullest of the practice as well as educational opportunities that are available in their states if social workers are not on the ground to educate them... since these communities don't have access to electricity where they may get such information. (Social worker, female).

6. Discussion

One mainstream feature of the social work profession finds outlet in our quest for normalizing social conditions for all people and our specific involvement

in combating norms and practices which are inimical to the overall wellbeing of our prime target populations such as children who are vulnerable to forced/early marriage. In this regard, practitioners utilize wide-ranging methods in their work in order to help prevent and minimize such harmful practices. Specifically, Amadasun (2020a) mentions the pivot of assuming the role of educators and policy advocates as a strategy for degrading challenges faced by vulnerable children. Lee-Rife et al. (2012) stated that combating child marriage requires educating the people of the dangers of the phenomenon. They argued that through educating the populace of the dangers of the phenomenon and the rip-off it has incurred on society in terms of economic loss, people may become prone to reconsidering the continuation of the practice. However, such outreach programs should have a far reach especially in the rampant areas of the practicing communities (Lee-Rife et al., 2012). According to scholars (Lyons, 2012; Amadasun, 2020a), social workers are well positioned to challenge existing practices that contravene the tenets of its value principles of human rights and social justice throughout the world and they often do this by drawing on their role as educators.

Badri and Al-Husseni (2014) emphasized that without directing resources to combat poverty which is the root cause of the phenomenon, any efforts aimed at eliminating child marriage would create a backlash especially on those affected as they would be exposed to the dangers that triggered their vulnerability in the first place. According to the Population Council (2007), many victims of child marriage lack the necessary entrepreneurial skills to become self-sufficient and independent during the period of their marriage and even when they have been deserted as a result of the emergence of health complications. Thus, isolated and without livelihood skills, child brides run the risk of sliding into more acute poverty more than they were while they were married (Population Council, 2007).

Mobilizing resource is a critical role that social workers utilize when working with vulnerable populations, such as victims of child marriage, in any context of practice (Lyons, 2012). Adding to the advocacy discourse, Wilks (2012) and Amadasun (2020b) note that advocacy is the cornerstone of the social work profession as it enables social workers to extend their intervention efforts to the community and wider society. There is evidence that through advocacy, the girl-child in many parts of Africa have gained entrance to educational opportunities, yet millions more are still denied access to education not because educational coverage at least at basic levels

are not universal but due to the limitations of extending advocacy programs to remote locations (Nguyen and Wodon, 2013). Combating poverty and patriarchy requires that social workers play a vital role not only in case advocacy but in policy advocacy as it is from within the policy sphere of influence that these problems are aggravated and can equally be eliminated (Amadasun, 2020a; Darlymple & Boylan, 2013).

In the *Ending Child Marriage* conference organized by the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development in partnership with Save the Child advocacy group, the Minister, in her keynote address, declared that funding is crucial to eradicating child marriage but has been inadequate, calling for stakeholders to pull resources together to eliminate the scourge (cited in Bigila, 2016). The fight against child marriage requires a public-private partnership. However, such collaboration should allow for more subventions from the government to frontline organizations as a panacea to their limited resources to enable them to effectively address the problem. The Population Council (2007) explained that ignorance about the tenets of Islam has been employed to perpetrate child marriage and advocated for the need to educate people about Islamic injunctions in which the practice is opposed.

According to Amadasun (2020a), social workers, while being at the forefront of providing crucial social care services to at-risk populations, have long had their efforts stymied due to what the authors characterized as a broad spectrum of inherent challenges in specific to the Nigerian context. These challenges range from shortfall of social workers in many human service agencies to the issue relating to the non-professionalization of social work, to inadequate funding of cardinal social programmes designed to promote social inclusion and minimize poverty, among others. The author concludes that unless these issues are sufficiently addressed, social workers may continue to attain suboptimal performance in their quest to drastically reduce the phenomenon of child marriage. As a corollary, Trevithick (2000) highlights that social workers carry with them enormous skills and expertise but that such competence can only be deployed to target audience only when their services are utilized. Thus, the commitment to ending child marriage must take into cognizance the importance of engaging the services of social workers given that they represent the cornerstone of social services delivery to undervalued people worldwide.

7. Conclusion

Examining how social workers can help prevent child marriage, it is argued that unless social workers holistically respond to the problem in consonance with person-in-environment focus of the profession, any efforts aimed at eliminating the phenomenon might continue to yield sub-optimal impact. Findings show that while social workers are contending with enormous challenges, they have, nevertheless, showed resolve in combating the obnoxious practice by utilizing their role as educators, advocates, and resource mobilizers. Without a doubt, when enabled with the right resources and motivations, there is every reason to believe that social workers have the ability to eliminate child marriage or, at the very least, reducing it to the barest minimum. Although combating child marriage requires a multi-sectoral approach and collaboration across key stakeholders as a result of its deep-seated nature, it is highly probable that, with social workers taking the lead role in view of their unparalleled commitment to combating this problem, child marriage will become a phenomenon of the past.

8. Recommendations

Social workers in this study have played some critical role in combating child marriage in Nigeria, adopting the social work profession's person-in-environment viewpoint. In spite of the considerable obstacles they confront, more could be done to end child marriage. Hence, it is further recommended that social workers should do as follows:

As part of a prevention-focused intervention, social workers should continue to educate community members, families, and parents of child brides about the physiological and psychological health hazards, as well as the accompanying socioeconomic costs of child marriage. Such campaigns should have a broader reach, extending to remote locations as this is where the practice is almost commonplace.

Continue to mobilize resources that would uplift the socioeconomic status of poor households and communities so that the practice of forcing the girl-child as a means of economic survival is eradicated.

Social workers should expand their advocacy efforts from case to cause advocacy in which the collective interests and needs of all the girl-child are emphasized. Advocacy should particularly focus on expanding educational opportunities given the correlation between education and delay in marriage. However, in cases where such opportunities may be opposed by

parents or communities, instruments of incentives or sanctions may be advocated so as to ensure hitch-free access to education by the girl-child.

In advocating for resources, social workers should also assert their influence in the policy arena given the overwhelming reach of policies among large sections of a population. Policy advocacy means that social workers lobby policymakers (e.g. by writing letters to lawmakers and sensitization their constituents), for the purpose of ending child marriage.

Social workers should understand that the fight against child marriage is not a solo-professional activity but rather, it is an effort that requires a collaborative approach among key stakeholders. Thus, it is important that social workers execute their intervention programs in conjunction with others who share a similar aim of eliminating the scourge.

Eliminating child marriage requires a certain degree of cultural competence. By this, I mean that social workers demonstrate appreciation for, understanding of, and respect to people culture. One way they can display such competence is by engaging with religious leaders and traditional rulers so that they can add their voice and direct efforts towards combating child marriage given the strong influence that these leaders wield on their people.

9. Implications for Future Research

Given the nature of this exploratory-descriptive study, it is sufficient to state that additional research is being done on this topic in an effort to increase the body of literature, which will provide social workers in Nigeria with a wealth of evidence-based knowledge to utilize in their efforts to end child marriage. Subsequent studies could focus on assessing the efficacy of social work treatments aimed at preventing child marriage. Studies could also look at what motivates social professionals to end child marriage in spite of their lack of resources and official professional recognition. The kind of social work services provided to victims of child marriage could also be one of the study's objectives, allowing for comparisons between such services and

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