

Girl-child education



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Right of a child to free, compulsory and universal primary education—
Section 2 (15) of the Child Rights Act signed by 16 states in Nigeria) “ Any woman who is married shall be deemed to be of full age. ” — Section 29 (4b) of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution.

Social media was awash last weekend with news that the Senate had signed a ‘ child marriage act’ into law, legalizing marriage for girls under the age of 18. Although lawmakers have corrected this notion, saying that the section stated above only relevant to “ renunciation of citizenship” alone, the ruckus has created ample opportunity for well meaning Nigerians to campaign for education for the girl-child instead of under-aged marriage. With the highest number of out-of-school children-about 10. 5 million, about 6 million of whom are girls, the reasons for such campaigns are not farfetched.

Child marriage, from available statistics, ultimately hampers the efforts of these young adolescents from acquiring an education, as sooner than later, they find it difficult to combine the onerous responsibilities of being a wife and mother, with schooling,” says Maryam Wais, chairperson of the Isa Wali Empowerment Initiative (IWEI). The IWEI boss, continuing on the dire consequences of early marriage on education said: “ They drop out, if they have not been removed for the purpose of marriage, in the first place. Consequently, 70. 8% of young women aged 20-29 in the North West zone are unable to read or write.

Due to the fact that these girls are deprived so early of an education (including the access to information and knowledge), they remain bereft of the purchasing power necessary for an adequate diet, healthcare, skills, or

even recourse to support in emergencies, all of which would enable them rise above the circumstances of abject poverty. It is paradoxical that Muslims like Senator Yerima would rather their wives and daughters be treated by female medical personnel if they fall ill, and yet they are, by continuously advocating for child marriage, deliberately closing the avenues for girls to aspire to such professions. ” In 2003, Nigeria adopted the Child Rights Act to domesticate the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Although this law was passed at the Federal level, it is only effective if State Assemblies also enact it.

To date, only 16 of the country’s 36 States have passed the Act. The National Coordinator, Education Rights Campaign (ERC), Mr. Hassan Soweto believes that the issue is not just with the institution of laws, but instead with the implementation. Soweto said: “ Even though it is true that there aren’t adequate laws in place to ensure the right to education for the Nigerian child, and protect the girl child against early marriage, the laws in place are not being properly implemented. More than half of the 10. 5 million out of school kids in the country are girls.

“ Girl child marriage is largely a poverty escape mechanism. A lot of people might attach religion to it, but such people simply use religion as a cloak. The issue usually is that a lot of parents especially in northern Nigeria cannot afford to cater for themselves or their children. That is why they give their children out in marriage at such a young age. This is rarely the case with privileged families.

Early child marriage is a threat to education, health and the human right of the girl child, but it cannot be stopped until the right infrastructure and facilities are put in place and poverty is a thing of the past. Nationwide, 20% of girls are married before age 15. In the Northwest of the country, 48% of girls are married before age 15. Worse of all, 27% of married girls aged 15-19 are in polygamous marriages, and most of these child brides are also not in school. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA), “ only two per cent of 15–19-year-old married girls are in school, compared to 69 percent of unmarried girls. Some 73 per cent of married girls compared to 8 percent of unmarried girls received no schooling, and three out of four married girls cannot read at all.

Senator Ahmed Yerima, former Zamfara State governor who represents this troubled region in the Senate was quoted as saying that: “ Nigeria has many uncountable problems and none of them is early marriage. As a matter of fact, early marriage is the solution to about half of our problems. ” Although there are doubts as per the veracity of this quote, there are wide spread reports that Yerima married a 13-year- old from Egypt in 2009. If, however, the millennium development goals are anything to go by, it seems next to impossible to imagine early marriage and solution in the same sentence. MDGs 1, (relating to eradicating extreme poverty and hunger), 2 (on education), 4 (on reducing child mortality), 5 (on maternal health), 6 (on combating diseases) are unlikely to be met as a result of this.

Wais argued that: “ Deprivations of formal and non-formal education translate, at such an early age, into restrictions on mobility, domestic burdens, the denial of sundry freedoms in respect of survival, development

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and participation, as well as the loss of adolescent years. Indeed, children of young, uneducated mothers are also less likely to attain high levels of education, perpetuating cycles of low literacy and limited livelihood opportunities. Child marriage, therefore, ultimately deprives societies of the intellectual and financial/livelihood contributions of girls, and of their offspring. It is no wonder then that the North continues to portray such poor ratings in almost all aspects of human endeavour. ”