

Full Length Research Paper

Bride wealth payment and girl child development challenges in Ghana: Recounting the narratives

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Bride wealth payment is deeply rooted in most customary marriages in Ghana. This study examines how these entrenched practices undermine the development of the girl child, using the Bongo District in Ghana as a case study. Data were collected from 40 participants who were purposively selected in a case study design. Primary data were generated through interviews, and thematic data analysis was utilized. The study found that bride wealth payment among the study community took the form of animals and other items presented to the girl's family. The girl's family also preserves the bride wealth for the future settlement of the bride wealth of men who marry into the family and for the purchase of food during periods of scarcity, among other things, including the settlement of debts. This, the study revealed, has negative effects as it contributes to girl child marriage, undermining her physical, health, and educational development. Additionally, the girl child experiences early and challenging parental responsibilities and has lower bargaining power. The study recommends sensitization of the public by the government through security agencies and the Social Welfare Department, along with rigorous enforcement of the law prohibiting marriages below the legal marriage age of eighteen (18) years. This will go a long way to discourage the practice and, at the same time, safeguard the development of the girl child.

Key words: Customary marriage, child, bride wealth, development, education.

INTRODUCTION

In Ghana and several other African societies, a common customary marriage practice is the payment of bride wealth by a groom to the bride's family. This practice serves as evidence of the satisfaction and validation of

marriage conditions (Murdock, 1967; Renya, 1984; Conteh, 2016). However, there is an argument that the practice of bride wealth may have negative effects on girls and women because it may: engender early marriage and

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lead to higher fertility; promote the view that husbands have purchased their wives, resulting in maltreatment of wives; and trap women in unhappy marriages due to the common requirement that some of the bride wealth be paid back upon divorce (Lowe and Nun, 2017).

Sideris (2004) lamented the treatment of daughters as commodities in customary marriages, which have evolved into business ventures. The author found that one factor contributing to child weddings in Zimbabwe is the marketing of bride money. In this context, Akurugu et al. (2021) asserted that bride wealth accomplishes vital and contradictory functions in safeguarding yet confusing various categories of rights and prerogatives, such as self-respect, acknowledgment, and admiration for married pairs in most (patriarchal) cultures in Ghana.

Lowe and Nun (2017) suggested that due to bride wealth payment, parents may have the motivation to push their daughters into early marriage. A recent study by Akosewine et al. (2023) found that among the people of Bongo in Ghana, cattle, sheep, and fowls were the main traditional bride wealth payments. The study concluded that these payment systems have now been largely monetized. For example, Hague et al.'s (2011) study found that in Uganda, parents often take children (girls) out of school and give them in marriage early in return for bride wealth. Daughters (young girls) in this sense are considered as family investments and backups in terms of economic hardship. As argued by Corno and Voena (2016), uncertainties in family income increase a woman's propensity to be given out in marriage in return for bride wealth, resulting in many child marriages.

Bride wealth, especially in the patrilineal system, could be seen as reinforcing the theory of patriarchy that underpinned this study. Walby (1990) theorizes that the patriarchal system promotes women's subjugation under men, contending that such a practice is oppressive and exploitative of women. It is against this notion of power imbalance in relationships that Rawat (2014) envisions patriarchy as socially and ideologically fashioned to project men over women, which nonetheless engenders girl child marriage. According to Svanemyr et al. (2013), conventionally, child marriage connotes a legal or customary union where one or both spouses are below 18 years of age. Ghana's Children's Act 1998 (Act 560) construes a child as any person below 18 years. The Act labels any marriage involving a person below 18 years in the country as forced marriage and illegal, unequivocally stating that the minimum age for any kind of marriage shall be 18 years.

Adolescent and child marriage is a common practice in many countries, particularly among girls. A UNICEF Report (2014) revealed that globally, one-third of women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 18, with the worst scenario occurring in the poorest regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for 40%. This has resulted in adolescent fertility (The World Bank, 2014). In Tanzania, for example, 22.8% of girls aged 15-19 had children or

were pregnant in 2010, and the adolescent fertility rate of 126 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 was the highest in the world. Empirical studies by Jensen and Thornton (2003) and Field and Ambrus (2008) found that child marriages increase adolescent fertility, affect the educational attainment of the girl, inhibit her use of precautionary health care services, reduce her power of bargaining within the family, and promote physical and cultural violence.

Anderson (2007) indicates that in many parts of the world, the payment of bride wealth, which varies across cultures, is often symbolically interpreted as the acquisition of the rights of a woman in terms of her labor and reproductive ability. In Ghana, among the people of Bongo in the Upper East Region, as many as three cows or two cows and seven sheep may be paid as bride wealth (Akosewine et al., 2023). Young girls are tacitly considered family treasures, as they can be given in marriage early in exchange for bride wealth in times of income and household uncertainties (Anderson, 2007). Chabata (2012) also stated that the monetization of bride wealth inadvertently has promoted the practice of child marriage, especially among poor families. He asserted that girls are often married with the consent of their parents in exchange for food or cattle. This practice, nonetheless, amounts to the abuse of the girls' rights to decision or choice.

UNFPA (2005) earlier found that worsening economic hardships and the monetization of bride wealth have occasioned the practice of child marriages in Zimbabwe. It noted that virgin girls attract high bride wealth payments; as such, parents and elders tend to control their sexuality. It indicated that 42% of girls in Africa marry before attaining the age of 18. It further noted that in Ethiopia and parts of West Africa, some girls are betrothed at age seven. It has also been documented that many parents, struggling in poverty, permit the girl child to engage in sexual activities with rich people in return for monetary compensation to cater to unmet needs. It is also reported that other parents who do not force their young daughters into sexual activities are equally not curious about their sexual relationships with adults as long as they receive financial support (Magwa and Ingwani, 2014). This, as Chiweze (2016) observed, always makes girls (young wives) who are married to far older husbands vulnerable to HIV due to their inability to negotiate for safe sex practices.

According to UNFPA-UNICEF (2017), globally, child marriage has consistently declined over the years by 15 percent from 1 in 4 to about 1 in 5. However, it indicated that a projected 650 million girls and women still married as children. This challenges the SDG target of ending child marriage by 2030, calling for a redoubling of efforts (12 times faster) in reducing child marriage. It further observed that the decrease in child marriage and population growth varies from one region to another, with South Asia performing better than sub-Saharan Africa (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2017).

Svanemyr et al. (2013) indicated that the complexity of

the causes of child marriage is heightened by poverty, gender inequality, marginalization, social exclusion and insecurity. The discussions however, suggest that marriage as an institution with its practice of bride wealth has been the main driver to girl child marriage with its social, health, physical and mental repercussions on the girl child especially, in patrilineal societies. Children are prone to many hazards and therefore required distinctive protection (Marfo et al., 2023). Accordingly, various international policy frameworks and domestic laws have over the years been promulgated to protect the child from all forms of abuse (United Nations General Assembly, 1989; African Union, 1999; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), General comment No. 10, 2007; Penal Reform International, 2013) among others. UNCRC (1989), and African Union (1999) for instance entreat state parties, parents, legal guardians and other individuals to promote the harmonious development of the child and to ensure that he/she grows up in a family environment characterized by happiness, love and understanding. In Ghana for instance, much emphasis is placed on the safety of the child and highlights that children have to be treated with a special care, assistance and maintenance as necessary for their development from natural and other legal guardians (Article 28(1a) of the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana; The Children's Act, 1998 (Act 560). The Children's Act 1998 (Act 560) specifically prohibits any form of marriage arrangements involving a person below the age of 18 years.

Svanemyr et al. (2013) however, expressed that child marriage is still broadly practiced amidst policy interventions. According to recent data, one in three girls (34%) in the developing world marry by the age of 18 with further one in nine girls (12%) enter into marriage before the age of 15. Sub-Saharan Africa is known as the region with the highest rates of child marriage (Svanemyr et al., 2013). UNFPA-UNICEF 2020 Ghana Profile (2021) reported that Ghana has made significant gains in the reduction of child marriage. It however reported that the country still has 2 million child brides population with 600,000 married before age 15. It further stated that 19% of all young women in the country, married before their 18th birthday. This figure was considered as among the lowest in West and Central Africa where the regional child marriage prevalence average stood at 39%.

Child marriage could be seen as a violation of human rights. Odala (2013) wrote that implementation and enforcement of laws on child marriage have been a challenge across Africa. Notable common problems identified include: weak judicial systems in general; lack of effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms that could prevent or sanction child marriages; poor understanding of the laws; lack of adequate training and poor coordination between relevant government ministries; lack of a clear delegation of responsibilities to specific authorities, a lack of guidelines on how to handle child marriage cases, and ad hoc responses. He claimed

that the literature has cited few examples of prosecution across the African continent. He concluded that in instances where enforcement on child marriage has been rigorous, it has resulted in secret practice, a disregard to the law in general (Odala, 2013). The question then is, 'why in spite of the negative consequence of girl child marriage borne out of bride wealth payment, and amidst the promulgation of laws and policies on child welfare and development, an enforcement of laws on child marriage been a challenge in Ghana? This requires a deeper examination, proper education and sectorial/institutional collaboration.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilized the case study design involving 40 participants purposely selected from three communities in the Bongo District namely; Soe, Bongo and Beo. Baseline information (2023) suggested that these communities traditionally are much immersed in the practice of bride wealth payment. The case design thus, enabled the researchers to understand the issue of bride payment, its associated girl child marriage and the attendance effects from the perspective of the research participants. In the opinion of Leedy and Ormrod (2010), a case study design is worthwhile, in that it allows for learning and understanding more about a diminutive or poorly known situation. This accentuates the reason for the selection of the case study design.

On the basis of the research design and objective, six elderly women and men respectively were purposely selected from each of the three identified communities. The same purposive sampling technique was employed to select four key informants, comprising the gender Desk official of the Bongo District, Ghana Education Service, a Queen mother, and two male traditional authorities of the Bongo Traditional Area. The experiences of the selected participants were critical for gaining an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the research problem. The selection of the 40 participants was informed by the principle of saturation. All the participants fell within the age bracket of 40-90. The implication was that they were fairly matured and knowledgeable to provide the needed information (Table 1).

Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather relevant primary data from the participants with the aid of an interview guide. Each interview session lasted averagely about 28 minutes. Follow up interviews were done where appropriate. A thematic analytical approach was employed in analyzing data. The data were first transcribed, edited where appropriate and categorized into themes. Quotes from the participants were captured to support the discussions. To authenticate the issues raised, the draft report was first presented to the participants for their confirmation or modification. The researchers employed this approach to ensure that the findings reflected the true views of the participants. For the purposes of anonymity and confidentiality, invented names were used in the analysis and presentation of findings.

RESULTS

This study examines the practice of bride wealth payment system and how it influences the development of girl child marriage with its associated development challenges. The researchers first sought to establish the rationale for bride wealth payment. All the respondents were of the view that

Table 1. Summary of the selected participants.

Category	Male	Female	Total
Soe Community	6	6	12
Bongo Community	6	6	12
Beo Community	6	6	12
Ghana Education Service	0	1	1
Traditional Authorities	2	1	3
Total	20	20	40

Source: Feld Study (2023).

such a payment system is a public acclamation of the genuineness of a union between two people - male and female here known as a husband and a wife. The participants cited cattle, sheep and fowls and money as forms of bride wealth payment system paid by the would-be husband and or his family to the family of the would-be wife as customary practice by the people of Bongo District.

Probing further as to how the practice of bride payment is linked to girl child marriage in the Bongo District, overwhelming majority (32/40) admitted that bride wealth payment system profoundly influences child marriage in a number of ways. It was found that children at pre-adolescence and during adolescent ages are being betrothed, even to polygamous marriages. These children are not allowed to reach adult age before they are introduced into adult life. The instance the girl begins to develop primary and secondary characteristics, for instance the appearance of breast, the assumption is that she is matured. Mr Anoore (45 years) narrated:

Maturity is assessed by physical appearance, so if a child is the early maturing type in the teenage age she could be forcefully married to her betrothed husband, who is already matured and probably has a wife or more and grown-up children’.

Buttressing the point, Akanane (67 years) expressed that the quest for animals and other items to pay for the bride wealth of women married to the family often leads to girl child marriage. She recounted that when a family needs cattle to pay the bride wealth of a woman who has been married to the family and is unable to get cattle, the family would betroth a female girl out to someone who is capable of meeting their demand. When this child is of age she is forced to join the man as wife to perform her responsibilities. Madame Atampogbilla (62 years) indicated that the marriage tradition of the Bongo Traditional Area permits the marrying out of girls below the age of marriage, in order for the family to collect money to settle debts, purchase items, especially food to feed the family during periods of severe food shortages in the family. Mr Ayaane (56 years) also added that, girls below marriage age can also be married to friends of the family

who have been very supportive. They can also be betrothed to any prominent person as compensation for their goodness and support to the family. He lamented that because of poverty a child could be given out to marriage in order to get food to take care of the rest of the family. According to her:

“They will just take the girl like a goat and hand her over to a friend who is wealthy enough to provide them with what they are in need of.”

Madame Aguripoka (87 years) pointed out that child marriage was more rampant during her days when most children were not attending school. The father of the girl child could give out his child in marriage in exchange of resources in order to solve problems. This according to her is termed in the gurene language as ‘tari ka gwe tampugre’ meaning marrying out the girl before she is ready for marriage. According to Mr Ayamdor (41 years), even though the practice is still on-going, it is now difficult for girl child marriage to take place openly especially in the district capital of Bongo District and in few of the bigger communities because of the watchdog role of the school authorities. He asserted that if a parent wants to give a girl child attending school to marriage, the authorities of the school do report them to the law enforcement agencies. According to him, the schools do monitor what is happening to the girls in the schools by the District-Officer in-charge of girl child education and the teachers. This was confirmed by an official from the gender Desk of the Ghana Education Service, Bongo District. Mr Ayamdor (41 years) added that, in the situation where a girl is betrothed out to a man, the small girl can be made to join the man as a maid, working and supporting the man’s family until they feel she is ready for marriage. Thus, when she is observed to be mature enough to sleep with the man, he concluded that it is during this time that the necessary marriage rites are performed to make it traditionally legal for her to be considered as a wife.

In furtherance, the participants were of the view that the girl child marries without her knowledge and has no right to resist. This practice according to them has a number of developmental challenges on the girl child and was

captured under eight broad but interconnected challenges.

Early marriage and educational challenges

The participants (15/40) claim that girl child marriage affects the education of the girl in that once the physical characteristics like the breast begin to develop the husband starts to have sex with her. The assumption usually is that she is matured and therefore should be able to play her role in bed as a wife regardless of the age. This leads to early pregnancy and child birth thereby truncating the education of the girl. They noted that as a girl without the opportunity to practice family planning, she is bound to give birth to many children, and this serves as a disincentive for her to be interested in schooling. Moreover, the upkeep of the family especially the husband, children and some of the members of the extended family partly rest on her. She has to be actively engaged in the economic activities of the family like farming, rearing and trading in order to provide food for the family. Marriage in the traditional sense is such that it is the duty of the woman to get money to buy ingredients like salt, fish, pepper and others to enable her make soup for the family's meal. One of the respondent's Madame Apoka (59 years) remarked sarcastically that:

"They just marry you and give you nothing to buy ingredients for the meals and expect to eat delicious meals. It is so funny. This is actually funny because when your meals are not delicious they attribute it to the fact that you do not know how to cook and a comparison is made among the women as to who cooks well."

This kind of marriage according to the participants sometimes suffers from instability because if the child grows up and realises that the man is not of her taste, she can decide to escape from the house and sometimes travel away from the village. According to Madame Assibi (42 years), most of them travel down to the southern parts of the country to make a living far away from home.

Early marriage and parental responsibility

One of the factors that were of concern to the participants (18/40) was that the girls as young as they are in their matrimonial homes, face early and difficult parental responsibility. They opine that as the girl child is given out for marriage at that tender age, she is often not able to take good care of herself, the children and the family. This is because such a child might not have learnt enough of the domestic skills from her family, especially from her mother. As remarked by Mr Akolgo (49 years):

'It becomes difficult for her to be independent as a wife and able to shoulder the responsibility of the family. In the long

run, this affects the upbringing of the children such that it can affect their socio-economic outcomes in life. When this happens, the children can become liabilities to the family and society at large'.

Early marriage and physical development challenges

Another implication of girl child marriage as expressed by the participants (26/40), is the physical development concern of the girl. The participants were of the view that girls could get serious virginal wounds because the men (their husbands) force them into early sex. The concern was that once the husband sees some small breast on the child she is considered as mature, even though she might still be a child. A participant observes that:

'These injuries are not only limited during love making but also during child birth. This is because the child's organs might not have been matured enough for such activities. This affects the health of such children and for that matter their growth and development into adult life. This has implications on their productivity, in terms of labour, thereby leading to less income and food for her and the family. This affects the children's growth and development and this aggravates the poverty situation in the family making the vicious cycle of poverty entrenched'.

Early marriage, health and economic challenges

Girl child marriage was found to have a serious health implication for the girl ranging from sicknesses, emotional and psychological stress as argued by the participants (21/40). They agreed that when the girl child is married, she is saddled with a lot of problems and responsibilities. It was gathered that immediately the teenage mother delivers, she is often confronted with financial difficulties due to sicknesses emerging from labour related complications. The child may equally suffer similar poor health condition. Consequently, the teenage mother may have to spend her meagre savings, if there is any, to cater for herself and the child, and at the same time, preoccupied with household chores and responsibilities as a mother. Her inability to find time to invest in any gainful economic venture, renders her financially incapacitated. In the view of Teacher Johnson (49 years), this plunges the teenage mother into a vicious cycle of poverty and frustrations in her marital life. Nma Ayampoka (59 years) laments:

'Marrying at that tender age can affect her health, especially during pregnancy and after birth. Because of the age, the girl can have complications during and after birth. This is because the organs might not have developed well to withstand the pressure of carrying a pregnancy and child-bearing. I have seen a good number of them finding

it difficult to deliver normally. Some of them get the birth canal tear and this affects them a lot. Also breastfeeding the child is another area that affects the girl's health. This is because such a girl is still growing and also needs nutrition to enable her grow, so when the baby is sucking from her body, she can fall sick or become malnourished"

Corroborating, Mr. Atinga (54 years) also bemoaned the practice indicating that some of the girls do not even survive because proper care is not given them. He was of the view that, this should be discouraged completely. The participants agreed that this practice is no longer widespread as before. It emerged from the study that some children occasionally, voluntarily go out of the family to enter into marriage relationship. One of the women narrated an incident where one teenage girl about fifteen years old threatened to kill herself if the family would not permit her to marry a certain man. As a result, the family had no choice than to allow her marry. The participants attributed such a condition to lack of parental control and poverty.

Early marriage and abuse of the girl's rights of choice and bargaining power

The participants were of the view that girl child marriage undermines the rights of the girl to independent decision and power of bargaining. Aguripoka (87 years) said:

'Marrying at a tender age makes the girl a servant to the man. This is because at that age she cannot demand for her rights because she is too young to insist on her rights. It is intimidating for her to fight for her rights because of the age difference. This can lead to depression, affects her education and the general welfare of the children and the entire family. However, if she thinks that, the husband is caring enough and is able to take good care of her, she may not experience anything detrimental to her life'.

DISCUSSION

The study discovered that bride wealth payment is not synonymous with girl child marriage, but rather it legitimizes the relationship between a man and a woman who officially arranged to become husband and a wife. This finding corroborates the work of Murdock (1967), Renya (1984) and Conteh (2016). In their respective studies, they found that this practice is a proof of the consummation and authentication of the marriage conditions (Renya, 1984; Conteh (2016). The finding suggests that marriage as an institution is a revered one to the people and has to be safeguarded through various regulatory and conventional norms.

The study revealed that a supposed traditional act of solemnizing marriage nonetheless has resulted in girl child

marriage. This could explain why Akurugu et al. (2021) wrote that bride wealth performs significant and contradictory roles. Laws are meant for the good of the people and if it affects people negatively, then a second look has to be taken. Marriage institution has to be protected. However, if its practices undermine the rights of the child, then those aspects have to be expunged. The study found that girls end up in marriage or betrothed when economic circumstance forces their families to collect other household animals and money from someone to settle debts, purchase food and other items. The study further revealed that girls often are offered as compensated wives to people considered as being supportive or prominent to a family. Poverty and economic survival in this regard were seen as the persuasive factors. These findings are in line with previous studies which found bride payment as economic avenues for families to give up the girl child as a wife (Sideris (2004; UNFPA (2005; Chabata (2012; Corno and Voena (2016).

The study found that early marriage has various implications for the girl child. Ill-health, emotional and psychological stress, physical injury, early parenting with its attendant economic and social hazards as well as reduced educational status. These findings were in tune with the works of Chiwese (2016), Jensen and Thornton (2003) and Field and Ambrus (2008). Hague et al. (2011) study revealed that due to bride wealth payment, girls of school going age habitually are taking out of school and giving out in marriage by their parents in Uganda. The findings showed that frantic efforts have to be taken to end girl child marriage as the practice is entrenched and grounded in the principle of people's livelihood and survival.

The study found that the practice of girl child marriage has been drastically reduced especially in towns and other urban communities in the study locality due to the watchdog role of school authorities and the law enforcement agencies. This agrees with a recent report by UNFPA-UNICEF (2017) which indicated a decline of child marriage globally over the last decade. It further noted that the percentage of young women who were married as children decreased by 15 per cent, from 1 in 4 to about 1 in 5. The fact that the practice is still on-going though under quiet implies that the rights of the girl child are abused besides the overall ramification on her development.

Conclusion

This study examined how bride wealth payment occasions girl child marriage and its associated development challenges for the girl. The study found that some children at birth, pre-adolescent girls, and adolescent girls were betrothed or given out as wives. The drive for this action is to collect animals, such as cattle and sheep, for the settlement of social and economic problems confronting a family. This, as the study found, negatively affects the

educational, physical, health, social, and economic advancement of the girl. The implementation of the development policy for the child should, therefore, be all-inclusive and demands a holistic governance architecture by law enforcement agencies, the social welfare department, the National Commission for Civic Education, traditional authorities, and school authorities, among others. Besides, effective economic policy is required to reduce the triggers of the demand for a high level of bride wealth payment, which inadvertently resulted in girl child marriage.

Recommendation

Based on these implications, the study recommends that related government agencies, such as the social welfare department, National Commission for Civic Education, the Gender Desk of Ghana Education Service, traditional authorities, and some Non-governmental Agencies (NGOs), including well-established men and women associations in the district, provide stakeholder education on the effects of this practice of customary marriage on the girl child's development.

In addition, government agencies, such as the security agencies, should be sensitized and empowered to enforce the law prohibiting marriages below the legal marriage age of eighteen years (18). This will go a long way to discourage the practice and, for that matter, reduce the implications on the growth and progress of the girl child.

Effective economic policy by the government to reduce poverty should be vigorously pursued. This will help avert the situation where girls become the only economic asset and are given out in marriage in times of economic distress in return for bride wealth payment or financial support from a husband or a 'perceived good man'. The government's 'one dam one community policy' should not be seen as only a political gimmick but should be boldly implemented to provide the people with the needed resources to embark on livelihood activities. As an agrarian community, this will go a long way to boost farming activities for the people, making them economically independent and free from other encumbrances.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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