Child marriage, VVF and national development

By **ROSE MOSES**

AMINA Abdullahi (not real name) is one of the hundreds of teenage-patients at the Vesico Virginal Fistula (VVF) Ward, Gambo Sawaba Hospital in Zaria, Kaduna state. Her parents married her off at the age of 13 to a man old enough to be her grandfather.

The result is that Amina, along with these other victims at the moment, is unable to stay dry and the smell of urine or faeces around her is constant and humiliating. More pathetic is that rather than being comforted for the loss of her child and the situation she now finds herself, Amina has been rejected by her 'grandpa' husband, shunned by her community and blamed for her condition.

Amina is just one out of teeming young girls whose lives have been so traumatised for the simple reason that they married before their bodies could fully develop.

But Amina is lucky to have found herself in a hospital, just as several other victims, who wallow in this misery at the Murtala Mohammad Specialists Hospital, Kano, where the Chief Medical Director, Dr. Ado Sorandini, after several appointments with our Correspondent, still failed to allow us access to the centre.

Cases abound of those who have resorted to begging as their only hope for life. These young girls not only face a life of shame and isolation, those of them who remain untreated, experts say, may face a slow, premature death from infection and kidney failure.

In Nigeria, the condition is said to affect around 150,000 women, with 80-90 per cent of these child wives divorced by their husbands. Globally, obstetric fistula affects estimated 50,000-100,000 women each year.

Early marriage represents a major threat to a child's well being, says Dr. Nafis Sadik, currently Special Adviser to the UN Secretary General with additional responsibilities as Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Asia, and former head of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

While the practice affects both girls and boys, the most fundamental rights of a child bride - to survive, to develop - are undermined. She is left with little or no opportunity to influence her own sexual life or the number, timing and spacing of her children.

Both Dr. Mike Igbine, a medical practitioner based in Abuja and Dr. Collins Chibueze Ajaele, who works with Keffi Hospital in Bauchi, similarly added that child marriage denies the girl child opportunity to fully develop before she is exposed to motherhood.

The medical complications, according to them, have posed serious challenges to health workers and governments alike.

And from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), child marriage undermines global development efforts focused on creating more educated, healthier and economically stable populations.

Since the body system is yet to fully develop and mature for child bearing, most victims of early marriage develop complications that stay with them for the rest of their lives, Dr. Igbine said.

The tragedy of an obstetric fistula, for instance, which often becomes the fate of these girls (some married off as early as nine years), is that it touches the young girl at the very essence of her being - her childbearing capabilities. It touches her when she is too young to understand what has happened.

Indeed, and as medical experts say, an obstetric fistula is more than a hole. For those afflicted, it is a comprehensive social and psychological disaster.

But despite this, the practice of child marriage, though now widely recognised as a violation of children's rights and a direct form of discrimination against the girl child, is still very much with us.

Tradition, religion and poverty continue to fuel the practice despite its strong association with adverse reproductive health outcomes and the lack of education of girls.

Research has shown that girls living in poor households are almost twice more likely to marry before 18 than girls in higher income households. Similarly, girls with higher levels of schooling are less likely to marry as children.

According to ICRW, girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence than their peers who marry later. Child brides often show signs symptomatic of sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress such as feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and severe depression.

Among others, child brides face a higher risk of contracting HIV because they often marry an older man with more sexual experience. Girls ages 15-19 are two to six times more likely to contract HIV than boys of the same age in sub-Saharan Africa.

•Face of a child bride

In northern Nigeria, for instance, more than 50 per cent of girls are married off before the age of 15, which mostly accounts for the high incidence of VVF and its sister ailment, vesico-rectal fistula in states like Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara, Katsina, some parts of Kaduna and Jigawa states.

Though this trend (early marriage) is not completely absent in the Southern part of the country, the practice is not as common, mainly because more girls in the South are exposed to education than their counterparts in the North.

No doubt, educating adolescent girls has been a critical factor in increasing the age of marriage in a number of developing countries, including Nigeria.

And as Dr. Nafis said, it is only through the development of gender equality, both inside and outside marriage, that such rights violations can be overcome.

Cultural beliefs and tradition

AMONG the reasons said to be accountable for child marriage include a widely held belief that the longer a girl is unmarried, the higher the risk of her becoming promiscuous and the likelihood of her bringing shame to the family by getting pregnant out of wedlock.

Mallam Aliyu Usman, 70, though from Katsina state, has lived all his life in Kaduna. The father of eight believes that once a girl's breast begins to develop, it is better to marry her off "before she starts sleeping with men."

"We are afraid our girls will become loose and end up being pregnant outside marriage, if we don't marry them off early," he told us in Kaduna.

According to Mallam Usman, young girls are often married off to older men because of the belief that an older husband is in a better position to act as a guardian to the girl and direct her affairs.

In Kano, an *Ullama,* or better still, an Islamic scholar, Sheik Aminu Daurawa, while speaking on the position of Islam on the matter, noted that Islam does not prescribe particular age a girl should be married. She could however be given out by her parents or guardian at any age they so desire as is the case with the Prophet of Islam, Mohammed, when he married his last wife and they stayed till the end of his life, he said.

Daurawa insists that linking VVF to early marriages is nothing but deliberate misinformation, which arises from lack of knowledge, since according to him, a woman who has been so familiar with the business of childbearing could still suffer VVF, even on her eight of more trip to the labour room.

In buttressing his point, Daurawa noted that today, most people within the age bracket of 50, 60 and 70 years, as well as those in their 30's and 40's, can attest to the fact that their parents got married at ages below 18 without having to suffer VVF.

Now, if you think the above reasoning may have been shaped by an illiterate background, you will have to think again. This crime against humanity, so to speak, is being practiced by the rich, the powerful and the elites, who ordinarily, ought to protect these girls.

Only recently for instance, a serving senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Alhaji Ahmad Sani Yerima, travelled all the way to Egypt, where he took as wife a 13-year-old girl.

In rare instances, however, where child marriage is recorded in the Southern part of Nigeria, especially in Ogidi educational zone of Anambra state, a research by Dr. Chinyelu

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