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**DEPARTMENT**: MBBS

**COLLEGE**: MHS

**TOPIC**: RECURRING ISSUE OF UNDERAGE MARRIAGE IN NIGERIA

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“In 2017 in Nigeria, 43% of girls are married off before the age of 18. 17% are married before they turn 15. Nigeria is the 11th highest nation in the world for percentage of child marriages. Data shows a 9% decline in the prevalence of child marriages compared to 2003. These figures are higher in the North-East and North-West, where nearly 3 out of 4 girls are married before becoming 18-years-old. Married girls are often pressured into early and repeated pregnancies.

 To make matters worse, the Nigerian Constitution does not establish a minimum age for marriage. The Child Rights Act, which was passed in 2003, sets age of marriage at 18-years-old. However, only 23 states of the 36 Nigeria states have begun to take steps to implement the minimum age of marriage1.

 Now, there are three forms of marriage in the country: monogamous marriage registered under the civil marriage law, customary marriage and Islamic marriage. In Southern Nigeria, the minimum legal age for marriage is between 18 and 21 years of age, depending on the region; in the North it ranges from 12 to 15 years. In some regions, customary laws allow girls to marry from the age of nine years; such marriages are banned in two states, but remain common overall2.

 The issue of underage marriage in Nigeria is a recurring issue that has planted roots into the Nigerian culture so deep, it is seen as a norm in some Nigerian States. Young girls are shipped off for marriage to men, sometimes almost as old as their fathers. Many are forced to engage in sexual activities with their husbands and this affects them physically and psychologically, exposing them to increased health problems and violence. In the case of conception, she suffers more as she is burdened with the responsibility of a child while still being a child herself.

 Why are young girls forced into underage marriages? Some cultures believe that the girl child is ripe for marriage at ages like 15. This is especially seen in the North. Some other reasons include that the parents of the child believe they are protecting their daughters. Some of them consent to it to increase their economic opportunities

 While some of these issues can be solved with medical attention, the scars will always remain, deeply imbedded in her skin and her soul. Physiological consequences like Rectovaginal fistula and Vesicovaginal fistula (as a result of sexual intercourse with a prepubescent teenager and injuries during childbirth), higher risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections and cuts, bruises and swelling (as they are often victims of physical abuse in their homes) and even death are rampant.

 Psychological effects include depression, a major problem. This could be as a result of the fact that her childhood is over, her education is cut short, her economic opportunities minimized, risk of domestic violence and early, frequent and high-risk pregnancies are increased. They become too depressed to take care of their families. Their children suffer because of the neglect. Children of child brides are 60 percent more likely to die in the first year of life than those born to mothers older than 19. The families tend to be poor and unhealthy3.

 However, there is a solution to this recurring issue. The world is slowly recognizing this and putting measures in place to reduce it. Enlightenment campaigns are being held. Foundations are being set up to increase awareness. One of such notable movements is the Girls Not Brides movement. There are even national campaigns going on in some states in Nigeria concerning underage marriage. With all this effort being put in, hopefully, this reccuring issue will be curbed, both in Nigeria and globally.

1Culled from Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia

2Source: chartsbin.com, “Minimum legal age to marry in Nigeria”

3icwh.org, “The facts on Child Marriage”