



Conundrum of Child Marriage: Analysis of Influence of Sexuality in Homa Bay County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Child marriage is one of the major challenges of the 21st century. It is recognized in target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which nations are urged to eliminate. There has been concerted efforts by the government of Kenya to deal with the vice. Despite these efforts, the vice continues unabated, especially in Homa Bay County where the prevalence rate (40.0%) almost doubles the national prevalence rate (23%). The study sought to examine the influence of sexuality on child marriage. The study was guided by Social Constructionism Theory. The theory is premised on the fact that social and normative meanings are socially fixed and/or defined. This implies that the meanings attached to any social reality are dependent on what the society builds as models of explaining and understanding such realities. The Study employed mixed method approach in which a cross-sectional household survey was applied. Study targeted 371 young women in Homabay County as the main respondents. Chiefs, teachers and healthcare workers in the area were the key respondents. Cluster, Purposive sampling, Systematic random sampling was used as sampling techniques. Data was collected using questionnaires, key informant interview and focus group discussion. Data was subjected to both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. The study reveals that sexuality plays an important role in child marriage. When subjected to regression analysis, R-value of 0.773 was found showing a moderately strong correlation. R-square value of 0.597 revealed that combined independent variables account for 59.7% of the variation in the dependent variable. Study recommends that sex education to be introduced in schools so as to enlighten children on issues of sexuality. It also recommends that government should develop a framework of implementing the available policies and sensitize members of the public on harmful practice of child marriage.

Keywords: Child; Child Marriage; Sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is one of the major challenges of the 21st century. Together with forced marriage and female genital mutilation, it has been identified in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as one of the harmful practices that all nations are urged to eliminate (UNDP, 2015). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defines child marriage as a formal or informal union where one or both parties are below the age of 18 years (UNICEF, 2019). According to Parsons et al., (2015), child marriage is any marital union involving a boy or a girl below the age of 18 years.

Child marriage is considered a violation of human rights, and continues to be of great concern because it is unabated in many communities in the world. According to UNICEF (2019), approximately 21% of all marriages globally involve children. It is estimated that globally, more than 12 million girls aged below 18 years get married every year, and that more than 650 million women and 115 million men who were alive in 2019 had been married before they reached age 18 years (UNICEF, 2019). Based on the current trends, it is estimated that by 2030, 150 million girls will have been married before they reached age 18 years.

In view of the negative consequences of child marriage, three major international instruments have been enacted to protect the rights of children— 1) the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against



Women (CEDAW) which states that marriage of a child is illegal; 2) the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989; and 3) the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) of 1990 (United Nations, 2015). The CRC specifies several child rights violated by the practice of child marriage such as impairing recognition, enjoyment and exercise of human rights and fundamental rights of children. The ACRWC on the other hand, emphasizes the need for signatories to take action to end child marriage, sets the minimum age for marriage at 18 years and makes the registration of all marriage's compulsory. All signatories to the three instruments are legally bound by the terms of these agreements, and are expected to enact laws to domesticate the same.

Kenya, being one such a signatory to the three instruments, ratified the CEDAW in 1984, CRC in 1990 and ACRWC in 2000. To operationalize the three international instruments, Kenya has enacted several laws, in addition to formulating various policies to domesticate the two international instruments. These include; the Sexual Offences Act (SOA) of 2006, the Constitution of Kenya (2010), the Marriage Act of 2014, Protection Against Domestic Violence Act of 2015 and Revised Children's Act of 2001 all of which prohibit child marriages. Furthermore, in 2017, Kenya became the 19th African country to launch the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa.

Despite the enactment of above laws and ACTs, child marriage is still high in the study area. Its prevalent rate stands at 40.7% against the national average of 23% (NCPD, 2020). This is the backdrop in which this study is premised. The purpose of the study is therefore to investigate influence of sexuality on child marriage in Homabay County, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted mixed method approach that included a cross-sectional household survey, complemented by a desk review. The study was carried out in Homa Bay County, Kenya. The County is situated in western part of Kenya. It borders Migori County to the South, Kisii and Nyamira Counties to the East, Kericho and Kisumu counties to the North East and Lake Victoria to the North West. The county has a population density of 359 people per square Kilometer. Homa Bay County comprises of eight (8) sub-counties namely; Rachuonyo South, Rachuonyo North, Rachuonyo East, Rangwe, Homa Bay town, Ndiwa, Suba South and Suba North. In addition, the county has 40 County Assembly Wards, 19 divisions, 116 locations and 226 sub-locations. Its inhabitants include; Luo and Suba.

The target population for this study was a general population of females in Homa Bay county between the ages of 18 and 24 years. The total number of females in this category were 80, 213 as documented by the Kenya National Census of 2019 (Republic of Kenya, 2019). Data was collected using a questionnaire which was administered to 339 respondents. The sample size was determined using a formula proposed by Fisher et al. (1998) $n = Z^2pq/d^2$.

In addition, data was also collected from area chiefs and community health supervisors within the study area using key informant interview guides so as to obtain their opinions and thoughts on the research question.

The study employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. It utilized cluster sampling, purposive sampling and systematic random sampling techniques. The county was clustered into sub-counties. Three sub-counties were purposively selected based on their unique characteristics. Systematic random sampling was employed to get respondents from the households.

Quantitative data from questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive statistics and displayed in frequency distribution tables. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study sought to establish the influence of sexuality on child marriage. Descriptive analysis of the findings is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents’ demographic characteristics

		Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative
Age of respondents	18 years	23	6.78	6.78
	19 years	34	10.03	16.81
	20 years	39	11.50	28.31
	21 years	48	14.16	42.47
	22 years	54	15.93	58.40
	23 years	71	20.94	79.34
	24 years	70	20.65	100.00
	Total	339	100.00	
Marital status	Married	273	80.53	80.53
	Separated	54	15.93	96.46
	Widowed	12	3.54	100
	Total	339	100.00	
Age of respondents at time of marriage	14 years	14	4.13	4.13
	15 years	23	6.78	10.91
	16 years	119	35.10	46.01
	17 years	183	53.98	100
		339	100.00	

The age distribution in Table 1, reveals that the majority of participants were aged 23 (20.94%) and 24 (20.65%) years, reflecting a relatively young population whose early marriages occurred within the last few years preceding the study. This enhances the reliability of self-reported information on adolescent attitudes and behaviors related to sexuality—key elements in the study’s first objective. As suggested by UNICEF (2020), understanding the age cohorts affected by child marriage is essential for designing context-specific interventions.

On marital status, data revealed that most respondents (80.53%) were still married, while 15.93% were separated and 3.54% widowed. These figures point to significant marital instability within a short timeframe—a pattern that may be linked to the maturity as well as emotional, economic, and psychosocial preparedness of those married as children, aligning with findings by Nour (2006) on the fragility of child marriages.

Notably, a significant proportion of respondents (53.98%) had married at age 17 years, including 35.10% at 16 years, 6.78% at 15 years and 4.13% at 14 years. This confirms that the sample entirely consisted of individuals who experienced child marriage, thus grounding the subsequent analysis in lived experiences.

Table 2. Distribution of adolescent sexual behaviour and child marriage

		Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative
Age at sexual debut	10-11 years	21	6.19	6.19
	12-13 years	37	10.91	17.10
	14-15 years	198	58.41	75.51
	16-17 years	83	24.48	100
	Total	339	100.00	
Types of first sexual experience	Penetrative sex	63	18.58	18.58
	Non-penetrative sex	84	24.78	43.36
	Kissing	45	13.27	56.63
	Touching private body parts	147	43.36	100.00



		339	100.00	
Number of sexual partner(s) before marriage	Multiple	285	84.07	84.07
	One	54	15.93	100.00
		339	100.00	
First sexual partner	Classmate	19	5.60	5.60
	Boyfriend	211	62.24	67.84
	Current husband	12	3.54	71.38
	Girlfriend	4	1.18	72.56
	My teacher	48	14.16	86.72
	Relative	37	10.91	97.63
	Elderly man	8	2.36	100.00
		339	100.00	
Place of first sexual intercourse	Boyfriend's house	189	55.75	55.75
	Sugarcane plantation	36	10.62	66.37
	Maize plantation	84	24.78	91.15
	Guest house	30	8.85	100.00
		339	100.00	

As shown in Table 2, a majority of the respondents (58.41%) reported having their first sexual experience between the ages of 14 and 15, while 10.91% had their debut between the ages of 12 and 13 and 6.19% had sexual debut between the ages of 10 and 11. Only 24.48% delayed sexual debut until 16 and 17 years. This early onset of sexual activity reflects a significant proportion of adolescents becoming sexually active before reaching legal adulthood age, a factor widely associated with increased vulnerability to early marriage and related reproductive health risks (Pourtaheri et al., 2023; Bengesai et al., 2021). The finding is in agreement with the study of Asante et al. (2018) who found that in Kenya at the age 15 years, a substantive number of women and men have had their first sexual intercourse at least ones in their lifetime. The finding is equally consistent with the findings of Petroni et al. (2017) who in their study found that early sexual debut may lead to marriage of such girls especially when they get pregnant. A study also supports the findings of Hansen et al., (2020) in Scandinavia who found that the age at first intercourse among the younger cohorts was lower. They engage in sexual activities before attaining the legal age of consent.

Regarding the type of first sexual experience, 43.36% of respondents reported ambiguous encounters involving touching of private body parts, while 24.78% experienced non-penetrative sex, and 18.58% had penetrative sex. Additionally, 13.27% indicated kissing as their first experience. Such findings echo concerns raised in prior studies about adolescents' limited agency in early sexual encounters and the blurred definitions of sexual encounters (Jewkes et al., 2010). The finding is in line with those of Hegde et al. (2022) who asserted that majority of the adolescents' experiences noncoital sexual behaviors as the first sexual experience. This finding was consistent to those of Cacciatore et al. (2020) and Li & Davis (2020) who posited that touching body parts is the most prevalent first sexual encounter among children. On the contrary, the study is inconsistent with the studies of the same scholars that kissing is equally most prevalent sexual encounter among young people.

On the number of sexual partners prior to marriage, 84.07% reported multiple partners, while only 15.93% had a single partner. This pattern may suggest gaps in sexual health education or negotiation power in adolescent relationships—factors linked in other contexts to early marriage and poor reproductive health outcomes (Bankole & Malarcher, 2010).

The data further reveals that most respondents (62.24%) named a boyfriend as their first sexual partner. Alarmingly, 14.16% reported a teacher, 10.91% a relative, and 2.36% an elderly man. These findings reflect disturbing patterns of abuse and exploitation, often perpetrated by adults in positions of power, a trend similarly documented in studies on gender-based violence and early union formation (UNICEF, 2014; Moore et al., 2007).



The finding is in consistent with the findings of Carella et al. (2020) who found that women tend to choose an older partner to have their first sexual experience with and are less likely than men to be involved in a first sexual relationship with a younger partner.

Finally, over half (55.75%) of the respondents reported that their first sexual experience occurred at the boyfriend’s house, while others cited maize plantations (24.78%), sugarcane plantations (10.62%), and guest houses (8.85%). This informal settings underscore adolescents’ vulnerability to unprotected sex, coercion, and social pressures that may lead to early marriage (Biddlecom et al., 2008).

REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCE OF SEXUALITY ON CHILD MARRIAGE

Multiple regression analysis

The study sought to establish a linear model that could be used to describe the influence of sexuality on the level of child marriage in the study area. It was done by use of standard multiple regression analysis, where three independent variables were factored in the model at once. It was suitable because it could help to investigate how well the set of the independent variables was able to predict the level of child marriage in line with the assertions of Creswell (2014). The analysis provided information about the relative contribution of each of the variables that make up the model. Each aspect of sexuality was evaluated in terms of its predictive power, over and above that offered by all the other independent variables. It enabled the investigator to know how much unique variance, in the dependent variable, each of the predictor explained.

Table 3: Regression Analysis Model summary output: Influence of sexuality on child marriage

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.773 ^a	.597	.591	.50497

Predictors: (Constant), First sexual partner, Type of sexual experience, Number of sexual partners, age at sexual debut, place of first sexual intercourse. The R-value 0.773 shows strong correlation. R-square is 0.597 which means that combined independent variables account for 59.7% of the variation in the dependent variable. This means that there are other factors that account for 40.3%.

Model formula: $Y = B_0 + B_1 x_1 + B_2 x_2 + B_3 x_3 + B_4 x_4 + B_5 x_5 + \epsilon$.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study concluded that sexuality plays an important role in child marriage. When subjected to regression analysis, R-value of 0.773 was found showing a strong correlation. R-square value of 0.597 revealed that combined independent variables account for 59.7% of the variation in the dependent variable. Study recommends that sex education to be introduced in schools so as to enlighten children on issues of sexuality. It also recommends that government should develop a framework of implementing the available policies and sensitize members of the public on harmful practice of child marriage. It recommends further research on child marriage among boys in the study area.

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