

**EFFECT OF HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES ON WOMEN DEVELOPMENT IN  
OBIO/AKPOR LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT AREA, RIVERS STATE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Culture is an essential principle of man with specific cultural values and norms which society always conserve and defend against foreign interference. *The crux of this research is to consider the effect of cultural traditions on women development in Rivers State: a case study of Obio/Akpor Local Government Council. The population of the study consists of all the indigenes of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area and due to the large scale of the indigenes, the indigenes were limited to a sample size of 200 respondents from four communities namely; Ozuoba, Rumuigbo, Eledenwo and Oginigba. The sample size was selected with the aid of simple random techniques and the data from the field were subjected to a descriptive analysis such as frequency tables, simple percentages imputed on the SPSS version 25 software. The study discovered that child marriage, forced marriage, and female genital mutilation were minimal in the study area while degrading widowhood practices remain widely practiced. A corollary of these negative activities is the school dropout phenomena recorded among young girls due to stigma associated with these harmful and inhuman cultural practices. Based on the findings, the study also proposed that consultation should be conducted by the government to reduce the proliferation of cultural traditions that are inimical to the community.*

**Keywords: Cultural Practices, Women Development, Child Marriage, Female Genital Mutilation.**

**INTRODUCTION**

Culture is one of the essential universal principles of man. Each culture, whether in developed or developing nations, has its own specific cultural values and norms. A society always endeavours to conserve and defend its own identity from foreign interference and extinction. The terms 'tradition, 'custom' and "culture" are also used synonymously and inter-changeably but there are some variations among them.

Although, tradition literally means traditions, customs are a way to do something that has long existed in a community of people; culture, on the other hand, is an agreed way of doing or doing things in a society (Hornby, 2005).

Culture itself is a people's way of life that is, a nation or region's traditions, values, art and social organisation (Hornby, 2005). Within sociology, culture is an significant part of the discipline to the degree that there is a sub-field of it known as Sociology of Culture, which deals with systemic study of culture in the community with emphasis on the ensemble of symbolic codes. Culture in the field of sociology is studied from the viewpoints of thought and explaining, behaving and the material artifacts that collectively form the way of life of a group of people. In terms of study, Ariswold and Carroll (2012) notes that sociology of culture frequently attempts to describe certain discretely cultural phenomenon as a result of social studies. Cultural sociology does not limit all human matters to a problem of cultural encoding and decoding, but a relationship between community and total life.

Cultural practice in its general sense refers to the manifestation of either a culture of sub-culture in people's lives, especially in regard to customary and traditional practices of a particular ethnic or other cultural group in a society. However, in practical usage across different societies and backgrounds, it often refers to the traditional practices developed within specific ethnic or tribal cultures, especially those aspects of cultures that have been practiced since ancient times.

In the third world countries, especially Africa, there are several cultural practices, some are good for the development of the society while some are harmful and may subsequently lead to the underdevelopment of the society. Some are equally against the women. Nigeria is a rich and powerful country in Africa with rich cultural heritage as well in music, language, food, dressing, and jewelries, among others. Some of the cultural practice among the people of Nigeria as noted by Alabi (1990) include extended family system, adequate care for the elderly and as well as nursing mothers for at least, a period of ninety days of the child prolonged breast feeding; and respect for elders.

These cultural practices have enabled the nation to build a strong and united family system and these practices are equally preserved and protected for the younger generations to carry on. This brings a very strong bond among members of the families and they are encouraged to perpetuate. In contrast however, some of the cultural practices have also hindered the growth and development of the society, especially as it affects the women folk. According to Alabi (1990) this harmful practices affect the health of children and women; and about 90% of babies are delivered by mostly untrained traditional birth attendants (TBAs) and health workers

Alabi also observed that child marriage/forced or early marriage, and female genital mutilation (fem) are common negative cultural practices among Nigerians. In terms of early marriage, he noted that it deprives the girl child of education and subsequently results in teenage pregnancy. Thus, women and young girls are exposed to many unhealthy practices in the name of preserving our culture or tradition.

Women development is an important aspect of social work programme. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2019), social work as an academic discipline and profession that concerns itself with individuals, families, groups, and communities in an effort to enhance social functioning and overall social questioning and well-being. Women development is a major topical issue across the globe whether developed or developing nations. As a result of its importance, the United Nations set aside an international day to remember the contributions of women in the society and March 8 is recognized as international women day in the world. It may look ridiculous or strange that a day is set aside for the 'women' in the world, especially in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. As far as global development is concerned, it is imperative to have a day set aside for the women among the list of 132 days officially recognized by the United Nations for different purpose.

In Nigeria, the women are not also exonerated as they face a lot of social, economic, political, religious, cultural and educational challenges and often discriminated and marginalized. They appear helpless and vulnerable to these challenges. It is as a result of these challenges confronting women that the Federal Government of Nigeria created the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development in the 1990s which the various state governments followed suit. Furthermore, many advocacy groups and civil societies groups have evolved in recent times to speak against women deprivation in our society. Thus, the ministry on government side and the civil society groups on the private side have all come up to speak and stand for women liberation, growth and development. They have all observed the discrimination against women in different areas of life and have come up to challenge those forces working against women development.

Rivers state is part and parcel of the Nigerian entity and there are also some social, economic, political, educational and cultural practices affecting women development in the state. Such cultural practices as female genital mutilation, widowhood practices, early marriage etc. are very common today in Rivers State society. Having observed the manifestation of these problems in Rivers State, the researcher found it expedient to embark on a study on the impacts of cultural practices on women development in Rivers State with respect to Obio/Akpor local government Area. Thus, the extent to which cultural practices affect women development has not been fully addressed. It is

hoped that the results of this study will bring succor to the generality of women in the society.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Rivers State like other states in Nigeria has a rich cultural heritage which has influenced their people either positively or negatively. Obio/Akpor Local Government Area which is part of the Ikwerre ethnic nationality has a lot of cultural practices that are particular to them and has been their practice right from ancient times to the contemporary society. Some of these cultural practices among others include religious and spiritual practices in their native shrine, forms of artistic expression, childcare practices, everyday life practices (including household relationships), new yam festival, traditional wrestling, female genital mutilation (FGM), early child marriage among the females, delivery of babies through untrained traditional birth attendants (TBAs) and healers, violence against women (wife battering), widowhood practices (such as sleeping with the husband corpse, drinking of the bathed water of the deceased husband, sitting and sleeping on the floor for one month, wearing of black attire, not travelling outside her domain, walking bare footed, taking properties from the wife after the death of her husband if she didn't give birth to a male child), denial of properties or not including the female child in the will of the father, adequate care for nursing mothers, respect for elders, etc.

The implication here is that such identified cultural practices have health, social, psychological, economic and political consequences on the women folk. Victims of these acts can be forced to leave education or even employment, social stigma and isolation, limited career opportunities, financially bankrupt, suffering due to emotional trauma and the like. According to medical reports for instance, female genital mutilation has no health benefits and it's very harmful on girls and women in many ways. Thus, the immediate health consequences include severe pain, hemorrhage, infection, urinary retention and injury and damage to adjacent tissue and organs. The Health Service observed that in some cases it can lead to emotional and psychological shock and even death. In the long term, the body observed that it can lead to recurrent sexual, psychological and physiological problems during childbirth. In a similar vein, early/forced child marriage deprives the child from education and equally results in teenage pregnancy.

The above observations have equally been observed by Alabi (1990) who investigated cultural practices in Nigeria and noted that it has have affected women development in the country. According to Alabi some of these cultural practices include female genital mutilation early marriage, female genital mutilation and delivery of babies through untrained traditional birth attendants. Alibi (1990) noted that early

marriage deprives the girl child of education and results in teenage pregnancy which he said are prevalent in northern Nigeria. The researcher in the course of her interactions among some of the old women folks in the four communities of this study affirm that early marriage has seriously deprived them of western education and that is why they are far behind among their women counterparts from the Kalabari, Okrika and other Ijaw nations. According to them, as soon as they are married, they start raising children and doing farm work and that is where their education ends. They were being told by their men folk that they are made to be the keepers of home.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The broad objective of the study is to examine the impact of harmful traditional practices on women development in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State. The specific objectives are to:

- i. Examine the perception of the people on the prevalence of child marriage among the people of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area.
- ii. Examine the perception of the people on the prevalence of forced marriage among the people of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area.
- iii. Examine the perception of the people on the prevalence of female genital mutilation among the people of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area.

### **Research Questions**

- i. What is the perception of the people on the prevalence of child marriages among the people of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area?
- ii. What is the perception of the people on the prevalence of forced marriage among the people of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area?
- iii. What is the perception of the people on the prevalence of female genital mutilation among the people of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area?

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Culture**

The word culture has been conceptualized in different words by different scholars, especially among social scientists. When social scientists use the term culture, they tend to be talking about a less restrictive concept than that implied in everyday speech. According to Marshall (1998), in social science, culture is all that in human society which is socially rather than biologically transmitted. Whereas the common sense

usage tends to point only to the arts. Culture is thus a general term for the symbolic and learned aspects of human society, although some animal behaviourists now assert that certain primates have at least the capacity for culture (Marshall, 1998).

### **Development**

Development is a word that is difficult to define because of its different conceptualization by different fields of study that is because of its multifarious contextual usage of the concept. Development is seen as economic growth, as modernization, as distinctive justice and as socio-economic transformation by several scholars, according to their backgrounds. But in its simplest reductionism, the term means more mature, more complete, more organized, more advanced, more transformed etc. (Ikeanyibe, 2009).

### **Women Development**

Development entails increasing sources of revenue for a country or an individual and distributing same for the betterment of the country or the individual or group. According to Okeke (2018), Nigeria has engaged in several developmental plans but the plights of the women were not captured in most of the plans. In the view of Okeke (2018), women development entails the overall improvement in the lives of the women in terms of health, education and literacy and economic participation. Most of the women especially at the rural areas lack adequate health-care especially in the area of sexual and reproductive health.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed the descriptive research design. The area of the study is Obio/Akpor Local Government Area which is one of the twenty-three Local Government Areas in Rivers State. Data collection involved the use of questionnaires and oral interviews. The target population for this study comprised of women, women group, traditional rulers, opinion leaders' girls, women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Ozuoba, Rumuigbo, Elenwo, and Oginigba communities of Obio/Akpor Local Government. The sample size for this study is two hundred (200) respondents, drawn from among men and women, opinion leaders, traditional rulers, women body, girls and women's non-governmental organizations like FIDA from four (4) randomly selected communities in the study area. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select the respondents to be studied.

Data for the study were generated via primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were through a structured questionnaire titled "Cultural Practices Women Development Questionnaire" (CPWDQ) which was designed by the researcher and

an oral interview, while secondary sources were generated via different literatures such as textbooks, unpublished works journals, magazines, newspapers, bulletins and online resources. A total of 200 copies of questionnaires were administered to the respondents, while 196 copies were retrieved from the respondents indicating a 98% completion.

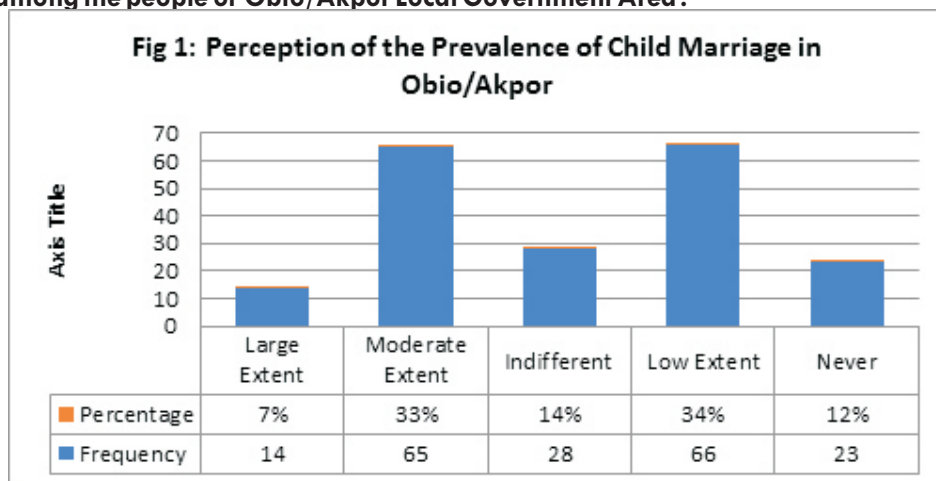
This instrument for the research was validated by the supervisor and other competent hands in test and measurement so as to march the instruments variables with the research questions. The Reliability of the instrument was determined through the test-retest reliability method. The questionnaire was administered on a small group within the sampled area for the first time and read ministered to the whole sampled population.

The data gathered was collated, coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency tables and simple percentages. Also, bar charts and pie chart were used as part of the statistical tools for the study.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

**Analysis of the Research Questions**

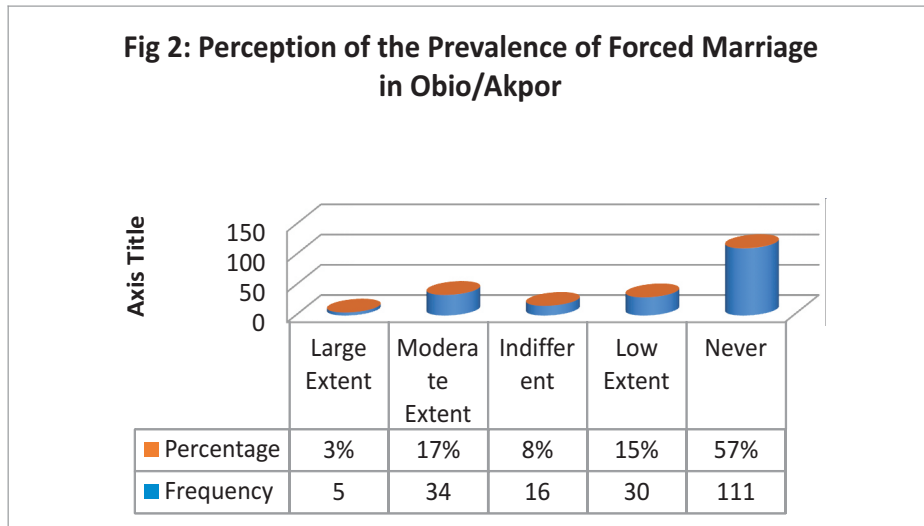
**Research Question 1: What is the perception on the prevalence of child marriages among the people of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area?**



The Chart above assesses the response of the respondents concerning how they perceived the extent of child marriage in their communities. As shown on the Figure 4.1 above, 14 representing (7%) of the respondents agreed that the rate of child marriage in Obio/Akpor is very high. 65 representing (33%) of the respondents saw the extent to be moderate. 66 representing (34%) viewed it to be at low extent.

While 23 representing (12%) contend that it doesn't happen in Obio/Akpor, 28 representing (14%) were undecided.

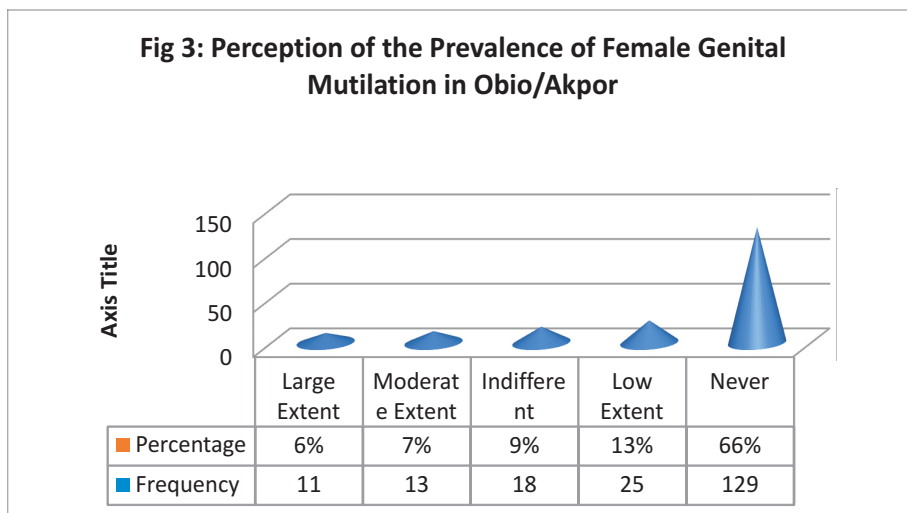
**Research Question 2: What is the perception on the prevalence of forced marriage among the people of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area?**



Again, the prevalence or the extent to which forced marriage is practiced in Obio/Akpor communities was assessed. The findings showed that only 5 of the respondents representing (3%) contend that the practice has gotten to a very high extent, 34 representing (17%) saw it to be moderate, and 16 representing (8%) were silent. On the other hand, 30 representing (30%) saw it to be at low rate while the remainder 111 representing (57%) did not agree that it happens in Obio/Akpor.



**Research Question 3: What is the perception on the prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation among the people of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area?**



Further, the rate of Female Genital Mutilation was also assessed by the researcher. The result shows that out of the 196 respondents in the sample, 11 representing (6%) agreed that it is at the high side. 13 representing (7%) agreed it is at the moderate rate. 25 representing (13%) contend that it is at the lower rate. While 129 representing (66%) did not agree to its existence in Obio/Akpor, the remaining 18 representing (9%) were silent on the issue.

**Discussion of Findings**

The perception of the people concerning the rate at which child marriage, forced marriage, Female Genital Mutilation and widowhood practice are being practice in Obio/Akpor were assessed. The study established the result on Figure 1, 2 and 3. The rate of child marriage in Obio/Akpor communities was at moderate extent in some part of the LGA and low in some other parts. While 33% saw it to be moderate, 34% indicated that it is low but very few respondents 12% indicated that it doesn't happen at all. The result is an indication that there is still some pocket of cases of child marriage in the sample area. The researcher interviewed one participant from Village in ward 14 and she revealed that 75% of the young girls who die expecting and while delivering in Obio/Akpor because the young girls bodies are not yet strong to carry and deliver a child and also that they do not get proper health care because their religion does not allow them to go to the hospital. Another participant in Elelenwo who believes child marriage is good narrated that:

“As I said earlier, girls should be married early.  
 It is easier for them to adjust in their own new

home at a younger age. Women of older age usually cannot adjust with in-laws because of their maturity and they suffer more”.

Again, the study established that young girls particularly those below 15 years of age face serious reproductive health hazards sometimes losing their lives as a result of early pregnancies. If a mother is under the age of 18, her infant's risk of dying in its first year of life is 60 per cent greater than that of an infant born to a mother older than 19. The complications that occur during pregnancy as well as giving birth may also result in the premature birth of the child, low growth rate, poor mental and physical growth of the child. Along similar line, another respondent who married before the age of 16 in Oginigba postulates that:

“I have witnessed so many hardships and troubles just because of my child marriage. I will never let my daughters face those hardships and I will not marry them in their childhood. Instead, I will educate them and try my utmost to give them better life and future”.

Studies carried out by Menhas et al (2013) indicate that a child from an under-aged mother has 40 per cent less chance of surviving during the child's first year. In a child marriage the common factor is that the husband is older than the wife and this has intensified the problem of domestic violence in child marriages. Girls find themselves in new homes where they have more responsibilities than before, without much independence or decision-making power and have no sexual experiences and do not know how to negotiate sex with their partners within the marriage. Therefore, the girl is likely to lose influence and this sometimes results in domestic violence. The assault can be physical such as beating, it can also be psychological they cause anxiety and, in some cases, can result in suicide.

The cases of domestic violence it has been as a result of misunderstanding between the husband and the wife on issues of taking care of children and the home because the girls are too young to be responsible for being the mother of the household. One participant who refused to disclose her identity also pointed out that economic dependency on the husband and lack of social support that expose the girl child to some kind of violent ordeal during marriage among the child marriages of the communities in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. The participant also reveals that in most child marriages young children are not allowed to use money in the house and only the father of the house is allowed to go to work leaving the mother with no options but rely on the husband. Therefore, this has caused a lot of physical assaults of the girls in child marriages.

Young brides either through child marriage or arrange marriage face a higher risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases in her marriage with an older

man with more sexual encounters. The risk of contracting STI's and HIV rises and married girls are unable to negotiate safe sex and are more likely to be married to older men with more sexual experience who are more likely than single men to be HIV positive. Girls that got married to elder men at their tender age are most likely not to be able to resist sexual intercourse with the partner and this has resulted in sexual abuse of young girls and also wide spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV & AIDS in Obio/Akpor communities. As a result of the death toll stemming from HIV/AIDS, most surviving children turned to marriage as a way of fending for their siblings and this has made the young girls vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and their chances of contracting HIV & AIDS increased. This trend was also witnessed in rural communities in Rivers State.

Poverty is also another factor that results from harmful traditional practices such as child marriage, force marriage, FGM and widowhood practice. The harmful practice hinders the ability of the women in reducing or eradicating poverty through depriving the girl from education which negatively affect her ability to get a proper job and get income. In order to show the social effects of the girl-child the researcher generated data from the participants that depicted that almost 50% of young girls married before 18 years are poor. This is because some of them inherited the poverty from where they were married to and also due to the beliefs that deprive girls from education when they get married the aspect of being unemployed and being a house wife contribute as well. There is evidence from direct observation that the girl-child's pattern of life in the marriage relationship was characterized by poverty, sorrow and anguish like a slave in a marriage relationship. The researcher observed young mothers coming from the forests to fetch firewood on barefoot carrying their children on their back. Due to the participants' religious ethics and fear of their husbands they refused to talk to the researcher about their way of life.

On Figure 3, the finding established minimal level of FGM in the sampled communities. Out of the total respondents, 66% posits that there are no more cases of female genital mutilation in the LGA. But discussions with health personnel and leaders of the sampled communities as well as some of the respondents' shows there are some hidden cases of female genital mutilation going on in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. The health implication analysis shows that the health issues cause permanent physical damage to the girls and women. A nurse Elemenwo who was interviewed explain as follows

“If they survive the bleeding, which causes a lot of blood loss and infections such as tetanus, urinary infections and fever then they continue to have other health issues following the healing process that takes many days. Once the organs are cut, they affect the other organs and muscles surrounding the vagina and this leads to the

women's elasticity at the virginal opening lost”.

Furthermore, the damage did to most of the victims 'causes' problems during delivery with increased risks of tearing when pushing the baby out if they do not have cesarean section and bleeding which puts the mother's health and baby at risk. The psychological problems from the interview revealed recurring nightmares about the mutilation day, the pain they went through and fear associated with that particular day. Some of them were psychologically traumatized wondering why those they trusted to protect them such as their parents and grandparents, would allow such a painful operation to be performed on them. Difficulties to sit and sleep were reported which were associated with the pain of cutting. Another nurse in Rumuigo narrated the difficult situation for the girls who go through FGM. She stated that:

“Due to the removal of the clitoris, which is the sexual stimulant in women many did not experience a lot of satisfaction when having sex with their husbands. Many found sex painful because of the penetration and the virginal hole being too small. Lack of sexual desire was also reported which leads to high cases of divorce because men are not satisfied and because of the pain women experience, they withdraw from having sex”.

Embarrassment was a social consequence that was reported by many women when they visit the doctors/gynecologists because of the way their organs look due to the disfigurement caused by FGM. In some communities, it was also found that in some cases it is the girls who choose to undergo the procedure because of social pressure from peers, to avoid name-calling and find husbands in the future. In addition, the fact that the mutilation is associated with receiving gifts for those who undergo the procedure.

### **Conclusion**

A girl in a child marriage is likely to be sexually abused by the husband because of age difference because of lack of knowledge. Young girls with low levels of education are more likely to experience violence by an intimate partner. A young girl who is still struggling to understand her own anatomy is forced to make conjugal relations and often show signs of post-traumatic stress and depression owing to sexual abuse by her older partner. Neither their bodies are prepared for that nor their innocent little minds. Forced sexual encounters lead to irreversible physical damage to the girl child and also psychological damage. In a child marriage the girl child experience marital rape whereby the husband sexually exploits the child and the children are reluctant and scared to report.

The girls in Africa who are in child marriages are not allowed to report any case of

sexual abuse to the relevant authorities before they report to their parents and the church leaders. After interaction with one girl who refused to disclose her identity the researcher came to an understanding that the sexual abuse cases in a child marriage do not go further to the police or relevant authorities but instead the issues are discussed by the church leaders and the victims are just called for guidance on how to handle a husband in a marriage and some of the victims of sexual abuse are scared to report the abuse but just suffering in their marriage. This has therefore resulted in physical damage of the girl child and also anxiety. Some of the girls who marry young also join the bandwagon of perpetuating cruelty against women. Sex determination and female feticide continue, for a girl child would possibly further add to their woes.

### Recommendations

1. There should be severe penalties to the parents who force their children to undergo child marriage and FGM and also law enforcement agencies should ensure all the culprits are apprehended. Also, alternatively Rite of Passage should be emphasized and advocated for by all stakeholders of education. Structural adjustments should be undertaken on the integration programme so that the outcomes are satisfactory. For example, replacement of the regular classroom teachers who show negative attitude towards inclusion should be done.
2. The study discovered some cases of child marriage and forced marriages in Obio/Akpor. Since the world and Nigeria has recognized it as a problem, it is therefore important that the legislature should enact law that would criminalize marriages that are below the age of 18. The enactment of the law should be accompanied by political and judicial will to enforce the law. Also, the school curriculum should be improved to handle the education of girls to understand the importance of marrying at the ripe age of 18 years and above.
3. Though this did not assess the determinants factors of child marriage, but there is every tendency that large family also contributes to the number of child marriages. Therefore, the researcher recommends that the government should the people on the effect of large in an unstable economy like Nigeria. Government should enact a law to prevent people from having too many children and ensure the enforcement of the laws.

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