

African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture (AJRPC)

ISSN 2634-7636 (Print) ISSN 2634-7644 (Online)

Indexed by SCOPUS, IBSS, EBSCO and SABINET

Volume 7, Number 1, March 2026

Pp 403-429

Influence of Social Interaction on Early Marriage among Hausa/Fulani Settlers in Southwest Nigeria

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-7644/2026/v7n1a20>

Omolola Silva Asagba

*Department of Political Science and International Relations
Covenant University, Nigeria*

omolola.asagbapgs@stu.cu.edu.ng

Moses Metumara Duruji

*Department of Political Science and International Relations
Covenant University, Nigeria*

moses.duruji@covenantuniversity.edu.ng

Felix C. Chidozie

*Department of Political Science and International Relations
Covenant University, Nigeria*

felix.chidozie@covenantuniversity.edu.ng



Goddy Uwa Osimen

*Department of Political Science and International Relations
Covenant University, Nigeria*

goddy.osimen@covenantuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines the influence of social interaction on early marriage practices among Hausa/Fulani migrant communities in Lagos and Oyo states, Nigeria. Despite the Child Rights Act's prohibition on child marriage in southwestern Nigeria, the practice persists among northern migrants. Drawing on ten focus group discussions and seven interviews with Hausa/Fulani parents, adolescent girls, and community leaders, the study reveals contrasting effects of social interaction on early marriage. Across both sites, increased social interaction and exposure to alternative lifestyles contribute to shifting attitudes towards early marriage. In Lagos, fears that exposure to certain host-community behaviours may compromise girls' reputations emerged as a subtle countervailing influence that, in some cases, reinforces the practice as a protective strategy. The findings show that social interaction can either reinforce or reshape cultural norms, depending on the nature and quality of integration. The study contributes an intra-national, urban comparative perspective on migration and norm change and recommends culturally sensitive educational initiatives that engage community and religious leaders and highlight local success stories that link girls' education to better life outcomes.

Keywords: *Early marriage, Social interaction, Cultural norms, Hausa/Fulani, Lagos, Oyo*

Introduction

Early marriage, as defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is a union where one or both individuals are under 18 years of age, and this remains a significant challenge in Nigeria (Elnakib, Hussein, Hafez, Elsallab, Hunersen, Metzler, & Robinson, 2022). In Nigeria, the prevalence rate of early marriage is especially concerning: 43% of girls are married off before their 18th birthday, with 16% being married off before they turn 15 (Adeyemi, Gidado, Adeyemi, & Lukman, 2023). Nigeria exhibits the world's tenth-highest prevalence rate of child marriage; furthermore, it hosts the third-largest cohort of women who entered a marital union before their eighteenth birthday, trailing only India and Bangladesh in total volume (Adeyemi, Gidado, Adeyemi, & Lukman, 2023). This widespread practice severely limits girls' education and health, in violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Although child marriage occurs across the country, the prevalence rate varies: in the largely Muslim North, the practice is embedded in the social structure and norms, with prevalence rates at 76%, compared to 8% in the southwestern states (Josephine & Goodluck, 2022). These disparities reflect entrenched

cultural beliefs; several studies have documented that, in many Hausa-Fulani communities, a girl's value is closely tied to her roles and responsibilities as a wife and mother from birth, and her chastity is closely tied to family honour, which continues to shape attitudes towards early marriage (Adeyemi et al., 2023; Onojah et al., 2024; Raji & Adeniyi, 2025). In addition, financial factors play a vital role, as daughters may be perceived as economic burdens, and early marriage is viewed as a strategy to alleviate poverty (Adeyemi et al., 2023). These norms persist despite national laws such as the Child Rights Act (CRA) explicitly prohibiting this practice.

Migration may disrupt these norms. Studies on migration and child marriage suggest that migration can either amplify or erode prevalent norms, exerting both upward and downward pressures on child marriage rates (Sieverding et al., 2020). Mechanisms differ: in cases of forced displacement, families would turn to early marriage as a protective buffer to perceived insecurity and uncertainty (Emirie et al., 2021), whereas, in voluntary migration, due to exposure to host-community norms, disrupted social networks, and increased access to education, early marriage practices can be weakened. Prolonged migration increases the adoption of host community norms, influencing child marriage prevalence (Gausman et al., 2022; Sieverding et al., 2019). In Nigeria, Lagos and Oyo states have both domesticated the CRA and are major hubs for internal migration, driven by industrial, educational, and agricultural opportunities, conditions that may shape migrants' marriage norms due to everyday interaction with host communities.

This study examines early marriage among the Hausa/Fulani communities in Agege (Lagos State) and Sabo (Oyo State), two urban communities with a significant concentration of northern migrants. It investigates the core question: How does social interaction between Hausa/Fulani settlers and host-community residents of Lagos and Oyo states shape the perception and practice of early marriage? This research fills a significant gap in the existing body of knowledge by examining migration within the context of urban diversity; whereas previous studies have largely focused on rural or humanitarian displacement, this study highlights the unique dynamics of voluntary internal migration. The study's contribution lies in assessing whether everyday contact, exposure to alternative norms, and settlement patterns influence norm progression or erosion. Insights garnered, aim to inform culturally sensitive policies and interventions that support and protect girls' rights and promote gender-equitable social change within migrant communities.

Literature Review

Empirical Studies on Social Interaction and the Practice of Early Marriage

Social diffusion and normative learning

A consistent body of research shows that prolonged interactions through schooling and the workplace expose migrants and their children to alternative lifestyles. In Engebretsen, Gueye, Melnikas, Fofana, Fané, and Amin (2020) study on the influence of migration on adolescent girls' perceptions of early marriage in Mali, the findings revealed acceptance of alternative perspectives among girls through recently formed social ties, which in some cases led to a change in the timing and perception of early marriage. Similarly, in their study on child marriage within the social context of displacement, Gausman et al. (2022) highlight how peers, neighbours, and religious leaders function as channels of social diffusion, broadening the social actors who influence early marriage beyond the traditionally assumed immediate family. These studies illustrate how new social networks influence normative structures that shape marriage decisions. However, most of this evidence derives from displacement or rural settings, so the mechanisms may not operate in the same way in urban, intra-national contexts.

Disruption (or weakening) of traditional social control

Migration can weaken extended-family oversight and community norms that traditionally regulate marriage timing. This disruption has mixed effects: reduced monitoring may create space to postpone marriage, while diminished social support can also increase girls' vulnerability. Du (2024) offers a useful illustration of this complexity. In a study on the timing of marriage among migrants and non-migrants in China, Du found that migrants were not necessarily prioritising or delaying marriage compared to the host communities. Instead, a lack of social connection and economic challenges were significant determinants in marriage timing for migrants.

Protective or defensive marriage as a response to insecurity

Furthermore, studies have shown that in forced displacement settings, families may turn to early marriage as a protective measure from perceived threats for adolescent girls or to secure social support in unfamiliar environments (Emirie et al., 2021; Mourtada et al., 2017). Mourtada et al.'s (2017) study of displaced Syrians in Lebanon illustrates this dynamic vividly: adolescents who engaged with new social networks and were exposed to Lebanese social norms championed for later marriage timing, while mothers and fathers, who remained anchored in their traditional views and increased anxieties regarding daughters' safety in an unfamiliar environment, preferred much earlier marriages, often in the mid-teen years. Such generational variance highlights how cross-cultural engagement acts as a catalyst for normative change, with the younger cohort's integration into host networks producing ideological shifts that remain largely absent in the older generation. However, the conditions driving child marriage in this context of conflict and displacement, where social network disruption is abrupt and security concerns are acute, appear to diverge significantly from, or are more exacerbated than, those in stable settings.

Economic drivers and opportunity structures

Economic conditions influence marriage timing in different ways: migration may delay marriage with increased education or work opportunities but can also hasten it when households face financial strain or view early marriage as economically advantageous. (Sieverding et al., 2019; Sieverding et al., 2020). Illustrating this, Antu, Parvin, Sujan, Mamun, and Naved's (2022) study on rural-to-urban migration of girls aged between 15 and 24 years in Bangladesh revealed that the migrant adolescent girls married later in comparison to the girls from the host community in rural areas. The delay in marriage observed with the former is attributed to the expanding social networks and economic prospects accessible to the migrant girls, which play a role in the age at marriage and the prevalence of early marriage. In contrast, the rural communities whose tight-knit social networks and rigid control over girls' physical integrity are defining characteristics provide minimal opportunity to negotiate and delay early marriage. These findings demonstrate that interaction with urban settings widens the girls' perspectives, influencing how they view marriage.

Bidirectionality and unexpected diffusion effects

Not all norm diffusion flows from host to migrant; evidence from several contexts shows that migrants themselves can reshape host-community attitudes in unexpected ways. For instance, in Shaheen et al. (2021) study, the shifting perspectives of Jordanian and Syrian adolescents on early marriage within the context of displacement were explored, and findings revealed that there was an upsurge of early marriage prevalence, with a target of grooms from wealthier nations. This choice was driven by the desire to expand their family's support network and access the social, institutional, and financial resources that these marriages offered. Paradoxically, the findings revealed the presence of an unintended consequence as Jordanian families began to embrace child marriage through the influence of Syrian migrants. Essentially, Syrian migrants' presence influenced the Jordanians to accept and practice early marriage to a higher degree than previously.

Despite the valuable perspectives provided by existing research on migration dynamics, there is a notable dearth of geographical and contextual coverage, particularly regarding specific sub-populations. Much of the existing literature centres on displaced populations in rural or culturally homogeneous settings (Emirie et al., 2021; Mourtada et al., 2017; Gausman et al., 2022) or on country cases outside West Africa (e.g., China: Du, 2023). In Nigeria, existing studies on early marriage provide sufficient descriptive benchmarks (e.g., Adeyemi et al., 2023; Bolarinwa et al., 2022), but they rarely examine how voluntary rural-urban migration and social interaction shape early marriage norms.

This leaves a key gap: limited evidence on how internal rural-urban migration, particularly into a multi-ethnic, low-prevalence setting, shapes early marriage norms among migrants from high-prevalence regions. This study addresses that gap by examining Hausa/Fulani migrants in Lagos and Oyo States, where exposure to education and sustained interaction with host communities may reshape traditional perceptions and practices surrounding early marriage.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the social norms theory (SNT) propounded by Wesley Perkins and Alan Berkowitz in 1986. According to social norms theory, individual conduct is shaped by perceptions of collective expectations—specifically, what is deemed permissible or standard within a given social

context. In essence, people tend to conform to what they believe is the norm, even if it differs from their personal beliefs or preferences. Social norms theory distinguishes between descriptive norms (the perception of what is commonly done) and injunctive norms (the perception of what most people think should be done) (Bicchieri, 2014). SNT is well-suited to this research because interaction with host communities introduces new people whom migrants perceive as relevant audiences for behaviour, thereby reshaping both reference groups and information sources that shape both descriptive and injunctive norms. The study applies SNT to (a) examine how adolescents, parents, and community leaders differ in their perceptions of what is commonly practised and socially approved; (b) determine whether reported behavioural shifts stem from changes in descriptive norms, injunctive norms, or both; and (c) explore how settlement patterns, schooling, and socio-economic opportunities shape these normative processes. Where relevant, the study considers how power relations and economic constraints influence the enforcement of norms.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a comparative case study design to examine how everyday social interaction influences early-marriage norms among Hausa/Fulani settlers in two urban sites: Agege (Lagos State) and Sabo (Oyo State). Investigating each site as a case enables the exploration of similarities, differences, patterns, or relationships, while preserving attention to lived realities (Yin, 2017). The design favours analytical over statistical generalisation, enabling examination of how interaction shapes normative expectations.

Population and Sampling

The study's population comprises Hausa and Fulani residents of Agege and Sabo who migrated from northern Nigeria. Participants were purposively selected to capture variation in age, gender, and parental status; eligibility required at least three years of residence (to ensure participants had adequate familiarity with the social and cultural dynamics of the settlement) and, for parents, having an adolescent daughter aged 12-21. Purposive sampling and snowball referral were combined to reach

multiple networks. The development of these tools was grounded in specialist consultations within the fields of gender and migration, ensuring alignment with current theoretical frameworks and empirical literature (Gausman et al., 2022; Shaheen et al., 2022). As detailed in Table 1, the study engaged a total of 107 participants across 17 data collection sessions, comprising 10 focus group discussions (involving 100 participants) and 7 individual interviews with community leaders. FGDs were structured around four demographic strata (adolescent girls, adolescent boys, mothers, and fathers), with at least two groups per stratum to meet minimum saturation guidelines (Anis & Olisa, 2024; Gandy, 2024). Accordingly, 10 sessions were held. 4 sessions with adolescent girls and 2 sessions each with adolescent boys, fathers, and mothers.

Table 1
Sample Size (Focus Group and Interview Sample Distribution)

Category	Number of FGDs	Agege, Lagos (N)	Sabo, Ibadan (N)	Total Participants (N)
Adolescent Girls	4	21	16	37
Adolescent Boys	2	9	10	19
Mothers	2	10	10	20
Fathers	2	169	8	24
Total FGDs	10	56	44	100
Interviewees (Community Leaders)	—	—	—	7
Grand Total	—	—	—	107

Source: Fieldwork (2024).

Data Collection

Primary data was obtained through ten focus group discussions (FGDs) and seven semi-structured interviews conducted between July and October 2024. FGDs were stratified by participant type (four sessions with adolescent girls, two sessions each with adolescent boys, mothers, and fathers) and held in Hausa; interviews were conducted with community leaders. Interview guides were semi-structured, developed from the literature, and piloted to ensure cultural appropriateness. A Hausa-speaking research assistant facilitated the interviews in private locations to

ensure confidentiality. Sessions typically spanned 60–90 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' explicit consent.

Method of Data Analysis

The recordings were transcribed verbatim in Hausa and subsequently translated into English. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Social Norms Theory (SNT) informed the analytic framework. NVivo software version 14 was employed for data organisation, coding, and pattern identification to facilitate this process. NVivo enabled systematic data management, efficient retrieval of coded segments, and visualisation of connections between themes, enhancing the rigour of the analysis.

Ethics Approval and Consent

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Covenant University Health Research Ethics Committee at Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria (Approval No. CHREC/466/2024, 26 April 2024). The CHREC is accredited by the National Health Research Ethics Committee of Nigeria. All procedures were conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki and the Nigerian National Code of Health Research Ethics. Given varying literacy levels, the study adopted flexible consent procedures. To ensure linguistic accessibility, the study details were communicated in Hausa; participants were encouraged to seek clarification before formally agreeing to take part. Adult participants provided informed consent through either written or verbal confirmation, recorded in a secure project log. For adolescents under 18, parental consent was obtained first, followed by the adolescent's verbal assent after a simplified explanation of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, confidentiality was assured through pseudonyms and restricted data access, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Description of Study Area

a. Agege

As shown in Figure 1, Agege is a suburban area located in the south of Lagos, Nigeria. Characterised by high population density and economic activity, this area falls under the jurisdiction of the Agege Local Government Area in Lagos State. The Agege Local Government is home to a diverse group of people, with many different ethnicities represented. While there is a mix of cultures, the Awori people are recognised as the original inhabitants of the area (Ujorha, 2012). In Agege, the establishment of the Hausa community and its relationship with the Yoruba hosts have an intriguing history.

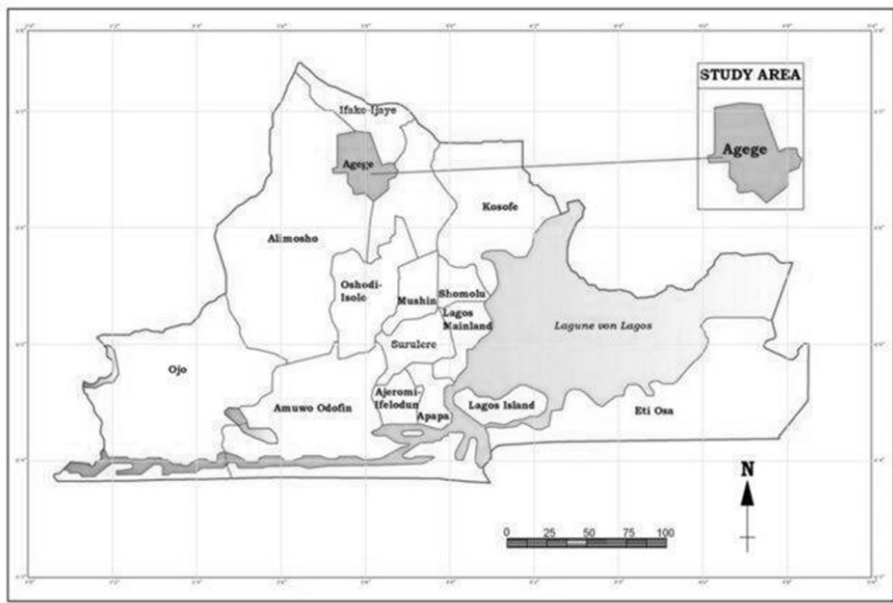


Figure 1: Map of Lagos State Showing Agege

Source: Omole, Eke, Olorunfemi, and Bako (2013)

Sabo

Sabo is a Hausa community in Mokola, Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria, as shown in Figure 2. Sabo is predominantly a home for small, medium, and large-scale commercial activities carried out by Hausas. It also serves as the centre of some commercial organisations'

headquarters, such as the Bureau de Change. The Colonial Authority established Sabo in 1911 to provide a settlement for the Hausa trader community from the northern region. Sabo, once a prominent ward in the early 20th century, has since fallen into decline (Jelili et al., 2022).

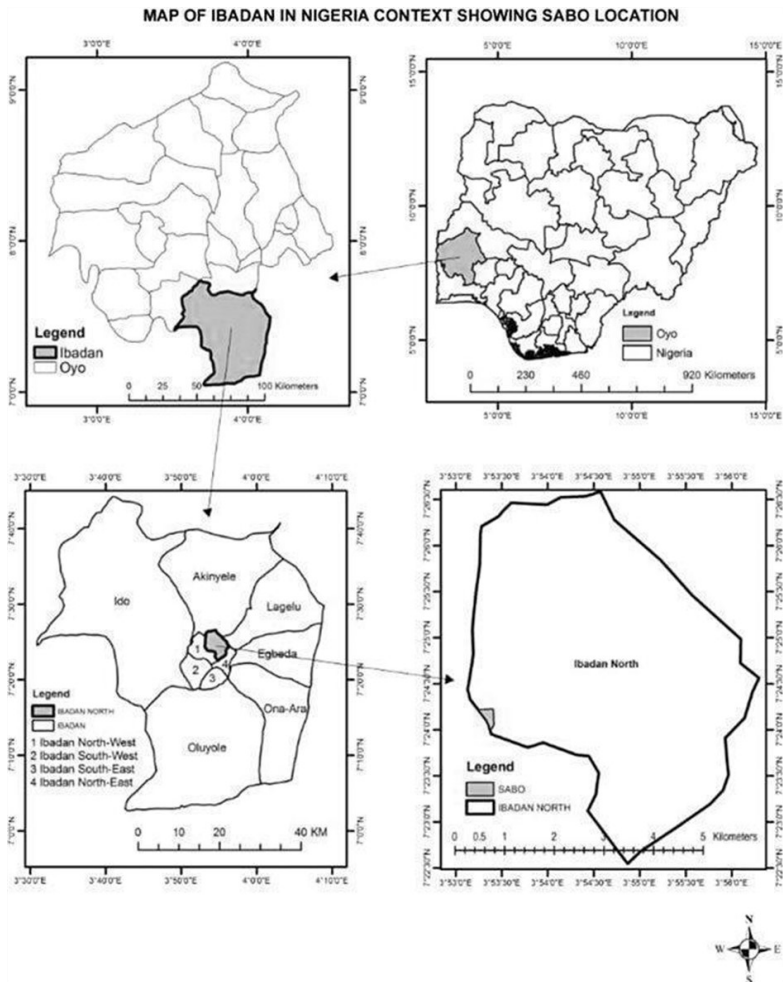


Figure 2: Location of Sabo within Ibadan North Local Government Area in Oyo State, Nigeria.

Source: Jelili, Ajibade, & Alabi (2022).

Findings

Background Characteristics of the Qualitative Sample

Participant Demographics

The study involved a total of 100 participants for the FGDs, comprising 56 adolescents and 44 parents (mothers and fathers), as well as 7 community leaders from Lagos and Oyo States. The participants were universally Muslim and of Northern Nigerian descent, comprising 82 Hausa, 17 Fulani, and 1 Kanuri respondent. Comprehensive demographic characteristics for all sub-groups are detailed in Appendix A and B (Tables A.1–B.1).

The Adolescents (n=56)

The adolescent sample consisted of 30 participants from Lagos (21 girls, 9 boys) and 26 from Oyo (16 girls, 10 boys), with ages ranging from 14 to 24 years (mean age: 17–19 years). Despite their Northern ethnic origins (primarily Kano and Sokoto), a defining characteristic of this cohort was their birth status; the vast majority (over 80% across groups) were born and raised in the Southwest (Lagos or Oyo), representing a second-generation diaspora demographic. The vast majority of adolescents were unmarried, and most participants had either completed or were currently enrolled in senior secondary school. Family structures were characteristically large, with most adolescents reporting families of four or more siblings.

The Parents (n=44)

The adult sample consisted of 20 mothers (11 Lagos, 9 Oyo) and 24 fathers (16 Lagos, 8 Oyo). The mothers were predominantly traders (90% in Lagos, 67% in Oyo) with limited formal education; over half across both states had dropped out of school. Much like the younger generation, a significant majority of mothers were born in the Southwest; this suggests a degree of intergenerational stability and permanent residency within the area. The profile of fathers showed distinct regional variations. While Oyo fathers were mostly born in the Southwest, the Lagos fathers were predominantly migrants, with 68.8% born outside the region.

Occupational engagement for fathers was heavily concentrated in business and trade.

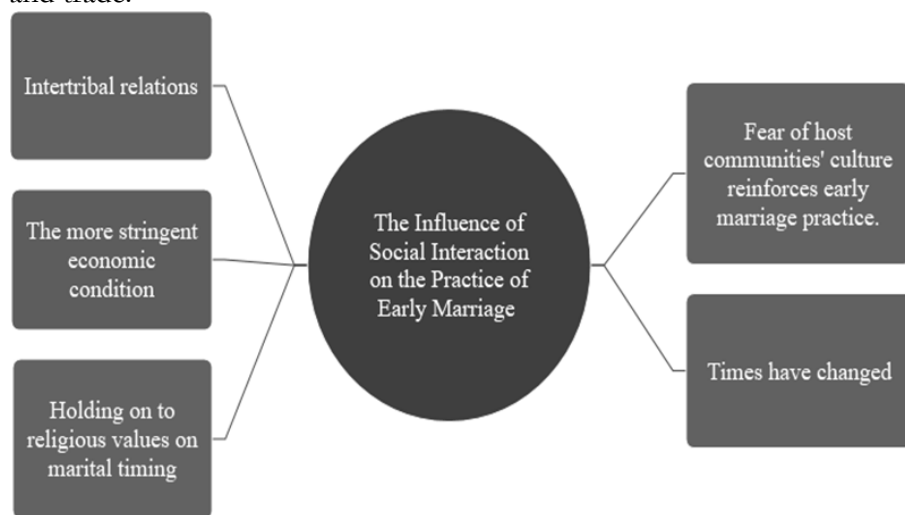


Figure 3: Mind Map Showing the Influence of Social Interaction on the Practice of Early Marriage in Lagos and Oyo

Source: *Fieldwork* (2024)

Figure 3 illustrates the thematic pathways by which social interaction affects early marriage among Hausa/Fulani settlers in Lagos and Oyo states. Participants identified five key factors: inter-tribal relations, isolation driven by fears of cultural “corruption,” economic pressures, religious convictions, and shifting social norms. In Lagos, strong religious beliefs and anxieties about host-community influences serve to reinforce early marriage as a protective measure, whereas in Oyo, enhanced inter-ethnic engagement, evolving economic circumstances, and exposure to more “civilised” ideals through media and peers work to discourage the practice and promote delayed marriage.

Intertribal Relations

The erosion of norms through interaction (Lagos)

Intertribal relations were frequently referenced as an influential factor in changing early marriage practices, especially among Lagos participants. Discussants indicated that sustained interaction with the Yoruba population has acted as a transformative agent, delaying the age of

marriage and gradually altering the social constructs that underpin traditional marital practices within the migrant community. A male adolescent from Lagos (FGD2) highlighted the shift in norms:

In the past, people married early, but now they are even changing. It's not everyone who marries early anymore. But here, it's because of the social interaction with other tribes that early marriage isn't as common.

Similarly, a female adolescent (FGD7) recounted that her father changed his perspective on marital timing upon observing that early marriage was not a common practice in Lagos; consequently, he permitted his younger daughters to marry at a later age compared to their older sister, who married at 17, when they lived in Kano, a state in northern Nigeria. TCorroborating these findings, a community leader in Agege noted that intercultural engagement with host populations has served as a catalyst for change, demonstrating how inter-ethnic social networks can effectively dismantle the foundations of early marriage.

Persistence of tradition despite interaction (Oyo)

In contrast to Lagos, the intertribal interaction has limited influence in Ibadan. While participants from Ibadan highlighted that residing among the Yoruba has influenced perceptions on early marriage, male parents in FGD3 noted that in the Northern community in Ibadan, the prevalence of the practice remains substantial, despite intertribal relations. Quantifying this prevalence, a female adolescent in Ibadan (FGD6) stated, “I think it’s 70/30. Seventy per cent marry, while 30 per cent go to school.” This “70/30” implies that in Northern communities in Ibadan, the norm of early marriage is dominant, compared to the northern communities in Lagos.

Education for a Better Future

Maternal Aspirations and Social Comparison

Most participants emphasised the importance of education in navigating the modern world, noting that the desire for education has delayed early marriage from the traditional 12-13 years to 15-16 years. Despite representing a significant progression driven by maternal regret and social benchmarking, these changing norms still fall short of the legal requirements mandated by the Child Rights Act, which establishes eighteen as the minimum age for marriage. Mothers in both study sites

expressed desires for their daughters to go to school and do better than they did. In FGD 10 (Lagos), a mother stated, "Yes, I want all my children to study and achieve great things in the future". Similarly, this was elaborated by a mother in FGD 4 (Ibadan), who attributed her view of early marriage and education to being influenced by living and interacting with the host community. She noted:

Yes, it is because we stay with different tribes, so when you mix up, you tend to pick things from them. When a girl goes to school, she is respected in the eyes of her husband. Seeing this with the other tribes makes us want our girls to be educated ... So that's the difference, we have mingled with other tribes.

Here, the value of education is not just abstract; it is learned through "mixing up." The respect accorded to educated women in the host community serves as a benchmark, prompting mothers to desire a "better future" where their daughters command similar respect, rather than repeating their own cycle of early marriage and lack of schooling.

Adolescent agency and economic independence

For the adolescents, the desire for education was linked less to social status and more to better economic opportunities and civilisation, noting that parents are aware of the hardships they face due to a lack of Western education. A female adolescent from Ibadan (FGD 6) articulated this, clearly rejecting the dependency she observes among the older generation (women):

Let me just say, I want to further my education. Times have changed; let me just say that. Because now, even if you get married, there is a high chance, because we see our parents, some are enjoying it, while for others, it's hard because they don't have the resources. And I don't want to depend on my husband; I want to be an independent woman so I can take care of myself and my family. So that's why I don't want to get married now.

This narrative highlights a generational shift in reasoning. While mothers tend to perceive education primarily as a conduit for social prestige, their daughters view it through a more pragmatic lens—as a critical safety net against future economic instability and poverty. The participant's refusal to "depend on my husband" signals a departure from traditional marital norms, framing education as a tool for autonomy rather than just a delay tactic for marriage.

Fear of Host Communities' Culture Reinforces Early Marriage Practice

The practice of early marriage is significantly reinforced by a fear of "cultural contamination." Parents expressed fear that the host culture, which they perceive as tolerant of premarital sexual relations, poses a threat to their daughters' chastity, which family honour is tied to. As a result, the school, a major acculturation point, is seen as a gateway to moral erosion. This leads to social isolation, where parents refrain from sponsoring their daughter's education and decide to marry them off early. A female parent from Lagos (FGD 10) articulated this, stating:

There are certain norms that we have seen in Lagos that don't resonate with our culture, such as pregnancy before marriage. This is against our religion.

This perception of the host culture as permissive of premarital sexual relations creates a restriction on social interaction and educational attainment, the latter of which is a major protective strategy against early marriage. This notion is reinforced by a parent in Ibadan (FGD 4), stating that when she was younger, there were concerns that school-based intertribal relations led to the erosion of values. In this context, early marriage serves as a protective strategy for the girl child against the perceived promiscuity of the host community.

The More Stringent Economic Condition

In contrast to Northern Nigeria, the Southwest is viewed as a place with a harsh economic climate and limited financial support. Participants highlighted that the "welfare system" of the North, where extended family members supported young couples with housing and basic needs, is largely absent in the migration setting. These serve as a deterrent to the immediate practice of early marriage, as the union is increasingly postponed until the male suitor demonstrates the financial capacity to fulfil both the marital rites and subsequent household responsibilities.

A male adolescent from Ibadan (FGD1) vividly described this transition from communal support to individual burden:

The reason why people rush into marriages is that they don't do it by themselves. They get assistance in getting married, such as being provided with houses and help to feed the family. But here, it's different. You have to earn money and meet certain conditions before getting married. You must reach a certain age and have your own house... They don't require money upfront, unlike here, where you need to pay bride price and have a stable job to support the family.

This signifies a transition from communal support for adolescent couples post-marriage to a requirement for male suitors to be financially self-sufficient; however, this creates a paradoxical shift, as the resulting delay in marriage is driven by economic criteria rather than a primary concern for the girl's protection. As revealed by male adolescents in Lagos (FGD 2), prioritisation is on the financial readiness of the suitor. This implies that the decline in early marriage is circumstantial rather than a moral stand against early marriage; in the presence of a suitor with sufficient resources, the practice remains. Thus, while the economic constraints of the Southwest hinder early marriage for the poor, it gives access to the wealthy rather than eroding the norm.

Times Have Changed

A lot of the participants were irked by the opinion that the Yoruba and other tribes influenced their opinions or practices on early marriage. They credited the decline to early marriage as a consequence of civilisation and temporal progression. This narrative serves to assert agency, suggesting that progress is a byproduct of modernisation trends rather than acculturation. In Lagos, this perception was absolute; interviews with community leaders (IDI 4) and male adolescents (FGD 2) claimed that the prevalence of early marriage is low. A female adolescent from Lagos (FGD 7) captured this sentiment, attributing the shift entirely to the era rather than the location: "What I can say is that earlier, child marriage was more common, but now, with modernisation, it is less prevalent"

However, the reach of this "modernisation" appeared uneven. While Lagos participants viewed the practice as a relic of the past, a female adolescent in Ibadan (FGD 6) noted that "it is not very common, but some people still do it." This geographic disparity suggests that what participants characterise as 'civilisation' may, in fact, serve as a proxy for the intensity of urbanisation and its attendant socio-cultural shifts. The hyper-urban environment of Lagos, characterised by higher living costs and stricter legal enforcement, appears to accelerate this "modernisation" more effectively than the environment in Ibadan.

Children Are More Resistant to Forced Marriage

Another feature of changing times is the resistance to forced marriage. Discussants in 9 FGDs and 4 IDIs with community leaders spoke about how the fact that resistance to forced marriage at this age has reduced the

incidence of early marriage. In FGD 10 with women from Lagos, one of the discussants stated that:

We don't force our children because, in the past, forced marriages led to problems like prostitution. That's why we don't force them. If they find someone they want to marry, then they marry. That's the progress we've made.

Similarly, discussants in FGD 2 with male adolescents from Lagos said there is a significant decline in forced marriage. The reasons given are referenced below:

Nowadays, it doesn't work like that. Once she says she doesn't want it, they won't force her. That's an old pattern. Maybe 80% don't force marriages now. Even that small percentage has its conditions. It's very rare.

In FGD 3 with male parents from Ibadan, one of the discussants lamented children's resistance to early marriage, claiming that early marriage was the best practice. In the participants' words:

Our parents had better judgment than we do. It is said that anyone who is ahead of you knows what is best for you. That's why our parents made us marry early, so we could understand the future. Not like now, when everything is scattered. For instance, when you advise your son to do something in a certain way, he will tell you, "No, this is how I want to do it."

In alignment with this perspective, another discussant identified social media as a disruptive force; they argued that such exposure has compromised traditional customs and fostered a burgeoning defiance among the youth regarding early marriage. In FGD 4, female parents from Ibadan also spoke about this resistance to forced marriage being instigated by social media, as the children resist early marriage, claiming to be civilised. In FGD 5 with male adolescents from Ibadan, the injunction of the Quran was emphasised by the participants. However, they claimed this injunction is hardly followed because children even resist after the marriage has been conducted.

In FGD 7 with female adolescents from Lagos, girls going missing after forced marriage is another way children show resistance. Similarly, in FGD 8 with female adolescents from Lagos, the discussants spoke about some girls going as far as killing themselves to show displeasure against forced marriages.

And there are even some who are not the first wife, maybe the second or third. They get married to an old man, like their father's age mate. That's so bad. Some of these girls even kill themselves.

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that the influence of social interaction on early marriage is not linear but rather exposes a unique relationship between cultural preservation and changing practices. Addressing the research question: “How has the social interaction between the Hausa/Fulani settlers and residents of Lagos and Oyo states influenced the practice of early marriage?” This study provides an intra-national comparison in Nigeria, demonstrating that interaction with the host community can both entrench and erode early marriage norms, contingent upon the specific socio-economic context. The findings highlight a paradox, particularly in Lagos. While high levels of interactions between Hausa and Fulani settlers and the broader host community show signs of upholding the traditional custom of early marriage as a protective factor, due to concerns about perceived promiscuity in the broader Lagos area, the actual prevalence of early marriage remains lower than in Oyo. This suggests that while social interaction can entrench the desire for early marriage as a protector of morality, the urban host community simultaneously imposes structural constraints that limit its practice. The following sections explore how peer influence, media influence, and exposure to alternative lifestyles shape both the perception and practice of early marriage.

The Paradox of Exposure in Lagos

In Lagos, engagement between Hausa/Fulani settlers and the broader community surprisingly reveals a dissonance between norm preference and actual practice. The exposure to the urban and diverse lifestyle of the host community has fuelled a reactive reinforcement of traditional values, rather than their weakening. Parents frequently stated that increased interactions could expose their daughters to perceived moral dangers, such as promiscuity, which could lead to undesirable consequences, including unwanted pregnancies and damage to family honour. As one respondent noted, the fear of “daughters having children out of wedlock...parents may feel compelled to marry her off early.” This finding is consistent with Sanni et al. (2024), who identify the management of perceived undesirable behaviour as a significant factor driving child marriage practices in Northern Nigeria, making the current observation admissible. Consequently, this fear regarding promiscuity among young women, influenced by perceptions of the broader community, leads to a paradoxical effect. While this "moral panic" theoretically reinforces the

desire for early marriage, the actual occurrence of the practice remains lower in Lagos compared to Ibadan (Oyo).

This stresses how prevailing social norms can be fortified when they intersect with adverse preconceptions or social marginalisation within the host community. This unintended consequence observed among the Lagos respondents diverges from the findings of Gausman et al. (2022), which highlight social diffusion's role in reshaping early marriage norms within migrant populations, emphasising that broader peer and community networks can drive normative change, while findings in Lagos reveal how the exposure to or awareness of the apparent risks associated with social interaction, which in this case is promiscuity, can instead entrench and sustain the traditional practice of early marriage.

Evolving Norms and Media Exposure in Oyo

In contrast to the paradox observed in Lagos, the data from Oyo suggest a process of slow adaptation. Here, fathers engaged in a form of negotiation: they reiterated the significance of deeply ingrained cultural and religious norms while simultaneously exhibiting perspectives shaped by social interactions. Expressions such as “observing the practices of other tribes has influenced our decisions” and “times have changed; early marriage in the past differs significantly from today. Knowledge has evolved.” This highlights a mechanism of observational learning, catalysed by increased exposure to alternative lifestyles and diverse perspectives through expanding social networks and digital media. For instance, respondents noted that “television has also influenced us.”

This finding corroborates the assumption of the Social Norms Theory as propounded by Beniamino Cislighi and Lori Heise. The theory posits that the expansion of knowledge obtained either through traditional or social media, combined with exposure to alternative lifestyles and practices, sets the groundwork for social norm change. Cislighi, Mackie, Nkwi, and Shakya's (2019) study further supports this, demonstrating how social norms evolved within four Cameroonian communities through exposure to diverse cultural influences. In the Oyo context, this mechanism appears to be active: the "knowledge" gained from observing the host community is gradually altering the perceived feasibility of traditional marriage practices.

Comparative Awareness and the Shift in Descriptive Norms

On an individual level, social interaction significantly shapes girls' perceptions of early marriage through social comparison. In Lagos and Oyo, findings revealed that Hausa/Fulani girls compared their lives to those of their peers from other communities who prioritise education and personal development. This comparison generates a sense of relative deprivation; as one respondent noted, *“some girls feel ashamed of early marriage and compare themselves to those who are not married young, as they observe them pursuing education and achieving their goals in life.”*

This theme is especially evident in Lagos, where the diversity of the social landscape has heightened girls' awareness of the emotional and psychological burdens inherent in forced marriage. One respondent highlights this reality by sharing that “a girl I know was compelled to marry her cousin, and she was deeply unhappy; she cried frequently.” This heightened awareness can be attributed to the diverse and inclusive social networks of adolescent girls with schoolmates, heavily characterised by a significant likelihood of interethnic and interreligious interactions. The basis of this comparison by the Hausa/Fulani girls is grounded in the fact that the Yoruba girls in the host community are not given out in early marriage. As Bolarinwa et al. (2022) confirm, girls from the Yoruba ethnic group, primarily located in the southwest of Nigeria, were less likely to marry before the age of 18 compared to their Hausa/Fulani counterparts.

Consequently, the exposure to progressive norms through social interactions between these two groups has influenced perceptions and practices regarding early marriage among Hausa/Fulani girls in the southwest, Nigeria. This mirrors the findings of Shaheen et al. (2022), who observed a shift in attitude among the adolescent Syrian refugees' integration into Jordanian society. By comparing themselves to peers who are prioritising education, the girls in this study are adopting a new descriptive norm, aligning their behaviour with their perception of common practice within their social networks, rather than the traditional norms of their origin community.

Gendered Differences in the Influence of Social Interaction

The findings also highlight a distinct normative pluralism shaped by gender. While fathers in Lagos and Oyo tended to frame marriage through the prism of religious and cultural traditions, their daughters' perspectives were more markedly shaped by peer associations and the socio-cultural

dynamics of the broader host communities. For instance, girls in Lagos explicitly link education to their future choices, suggesting a more optimistic perspective compared to those in Oyo, where economic challenges continue to overshadow educational aspirations. Statements like, “With school and education, at times you can tell your husband after school you would marry,” illustrate the increasing significance of education as an alternative pathway for girls, shaped by their exposure to broader social norms. This contrast between fathers and girls reflects normative pluralism, where there is the presence of coexisting injunctive norms that shape conflicting behaviours.

The Double-Edged Nature of Social Interaction

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the influence of social interaction on early marriage is not monolithic but shaped by the context’s prevailing cultural, economic, and individual factors. In Oyo, relative integration and interaction with Yoruba residents led to substantial shifts in perspective. Conversely, in Lagos, concerns regarding promiscuity impede the transformative potential of social engagement, leading to a reinforcement of traditional norms, even as the practice declined.

Thus, social interaction serves as a double-edged catalyst. Through peer influence, social media, and increased interactions with lifestyles from the newly formed social networks in the host community, it challenges traditional norms, particularly for girls, fostering new aspirations that extend beyond early marriage. However, as the Lagos case reveals, when intercultural interaction is perceived as a threat to communal identity, it can paradoxically trigger a retrenchment into traditional norms as a protective mechanism. This highlights that "modernisation" is not a guaranteed outcome of interaction; rather, the quality of integration determines whether social interaction acts as a bridge to new norms or a barrier that solidifies old ones.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Social interaction emerged as a subtle yet powerful tool for how norms evolve. Practical interventions should build on this by encouraging peer-led initiatives, intercultural dialogues, and community-led platforms where diverse perspectives on marriage, education, and adolescence can be safely explored. Policymakers and practitioners alike should consider migration-sensitive programming that recognises the dual pressures faced by settlers,

integrating host community norms into their own cultural norms. A coordinated response that weaves together legal education, social integration, and educational access offers the most promising pathway to reducing early marriage practices.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to Hausa-Fulani settlers in two of the six states in the southwest of Nigeria, with a total of 100 participants taking part in focus group discussions and 20 in the semi-structured interviews. While this approach yielded rich qualitative insights, it may not encompass the full breadth of experiences or the internal heterogeneity found within the broader Hausa-Fulani migrant community. As participation was voluntary, there is also a risk of self-selection bias. Also, given the qualitative nature of the study, the findings offer deep, contextualised perspectives but are not statistically generalisable. The reliance on semi-structured interviews means that responses were shaped by participants' willingness to share sensitive information, and social desirability bias may have influenced their narratives.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study examined perceptions and practices of early marriage among Hausa/Fulani migrant communities in Agege (Lagos) and Sabo (Oyo), Southwestern Nigeria, and advances social norms theorising by revealing how internal urban migration conditionally shapes norms change. Social interactions within the host communities (peers, neighbours, schools, and local institutions) emerged as significant yet underutilised channels for the diffusion of more egalitarian values and practices. However, these interactions are often limited by cultural insularity, gender disparities, and socioeconomic constraints, constraints that often blunt shifts towards delayed marriage. The study is limited to Hausa/Fulani settlers in the southwest of Nigeria, drawing data exclusively from Agege in Lagos and Sabo in Ibadan. It does not account for other locations within these states, other southwestern states, or the southeastern and south-southern regions in Nigeria, where child marriage rates are similarly low. Consequently, the findings do not capture regional variations in child marriage perceptions and practices across Nigeria and should not be generalised. Methodologically, the study relies on qualitative, self-reported accounts, which may reflect recall bias, social desirability pressures, and the

perspectives of those willing to participate. Future studies could undertake a comparative design involving non-migrant Hausa/Fulani communities, mixed-methods approaches that quantify normative shifts, and a longitudinal study to systematically examine the change in social norms affecting perceptions and practices surrounding child marriage within Hausa/Fulani migrant communities.

Given that social interactions significantly influence perceptions of early marriage, the introduction of bespoke educational programmes within Hausa/Fulani migrant communities is imperative for fostering social change. These initiatives should adopt culturally sensitive approaches that not only highlight the benefits of delaying marriage but also promote education and economic empowerment as viable alternatives to marriage. Engaging respected community leaders, religious figures, and women's groups in these efforts can foster trust and encourage acceptance. Furthermore, social and traditional media can serve as powerful tools for sharing success stories of girls who have pursued education and alternative career paths, providing relatable examples that challenge existing norms and inspire change.

Acknowledgement

The authors express their gratitude to Covenant University Centre for Research, Innovation, and Discovery (CUCRID) for providing the framework necessary for this study, as well as publication assistance in the form of paper processing fees.

Disclosure of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement

The study data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Funding

This study received funding from the Covenant University Centre for Research, Innovation, and Discovery (CUCRID).

References

- Adeyemi, N., Gidado, T. O., Adeyemi, M. A., & Lukman, J. (2023). Causes and challenges of Girl-Child marriage in Northwest Nigeria. *African Anthropologist*, 21(1), 22–67.
- Antu, J. F., Parvin, K., Sujun, H. M., Mamun, M. A., & Naved, R. T. (2022). Effect of Rural-Urban migration on age at marriage among adolescent girls in Bangladesh. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10, Article 840145. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.840145>
- Bicchieri, C. (2014, January). A social norms perspective on child marriage: The general framework. Retrieved July 24, 2023, from <https://repository.upenn.edu/entities/publication/d3dc8424-b140-4bf0-8241-1db6134c9104>
- Bolarinwa, O. A., Ahinkorah, B. O., Okyere, J., Seidu, A., & Olagunju, O. S. (2022). A multilevel analysis of prevalence and factors associated with female child marriage in Nigeria using the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey data. *BMC Women's Health*, 22(1), 158–169. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-01733-x>
- Chidozie, F. C., Osimen, G. U., Bhadmus, J. & Newo, O. A. (2025). Sustainable development goals implementation in a post-colonial African State: Any future for the African Continental Free Trade Area? *Journal of Sustainable Development*, 33(1), 1479-1490. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.3183>
- Cislaghi, B., Mackie, G., Nkwi, P., & Shakya, H. B. (2019). Social norms and child marriage in Cameroon: An application of the theory of normative spectrum. *Global Public Health*, 14(10), 1479–1494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2019.1594331>
- Du, S. (2023). Timing and pathways: differences in marriage behaviour among migrants and local Shanghainese born in 1980–1989. *Chinese Sociological Review*, 55(4), 413–441. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21620555.2023.2243027>
- Elnakib, S., Hussein, S. A., Hafez, S., Elsallab, M., Hunersen, K., Metzler, J., & Robinson, W. C. (2021). Drivers and consequences of child marriage in a context of protracted displacement: A qualitative study among Syrian refugees in Egypt. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10718-8>
- Emirie, G., Jones, N., & Kebede, M. (2021). ‘The school was closed, so when they brought me a husband I couldn’t say no’: Exploring the gendered experiences of child marriage amongst adolescent girls and

- boys in Ethiopia. *European Journal of Development Research*, 33(5), 1252–1273. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-021-00418-9>
- Engebretsen, S., Gueye, M., Melnikas, A. J., Fofana, S., Fané, B., & Amin, S. (2020). Adolescent girls' migration and its impact on early marriage: Qualitative findings in Mali. *PLoS ONE*, 15(3), Article e0230370. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0230370>
- Gausman, J., Huda, F. A., Othman, A., Atoom, M. A., Shaheen, A., Hamad, I., . . . Langer, A. (2022). Girl child marriage and the social context of displacement: A qualitative comparative exploration of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. *BMC Public Health*, 22(1), 2417–2429. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14832-z>
- Jelili, M. O., Ajibade, A. A., & Alabi, A. T. (2022). Informal urban migrant settlements in Nigeria: environmental and socioeconomic dynamics of Sabo, Ibadan. *GeoJournal*, 88(2), 2045–2062. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-022-10736-y>
- Josephine, B. B., & Goodluck, A. (2022). The causes of early marriage in the different states of the Niger-Delta region. *Global Academic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(3), 109–108. <https://doi.org/10.36348/gajhss.2022.v04i03.003>
- Mourtada, R., Schlecht, J., & DeJong, J. (2017). A qualitative study exploring child marriage practices among Syrian conflict-affected populations in Lebanon. *Conflict and Health*, 11(1), 53–65. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-017-0131-z>
- Omole, F. K., Eke, E. E., Olorunfemi, S. O., & Bako, A. I. (2013). An examination of housing and environmental health of a heterogeneous community of Agege, Lagos. *Scottish Journal of Arts, Social Sciences and Scientific Studies*, 16(1), 56–74
- Onojah, D. M., Samson, O. J., Lamidi, T. O., Salaudeen, T. M., Kolade, A. O., & Adeleke, A. M. (2024). Assessment of early marriage for Girl-Child from Islamic perspectives in Makurdi Metropolis of Benue State. *African Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, 2(1), 127-140. <https://doi.org/10.62154/ajrts.2024.02.010435>
- Raji, B. R., & Adeniyi, I. A. (2025). Gender norms and socio-cultural practices in Nigeria. In A. O. Sulaiman (Ed.), *Women representation in governance in Nigeria* (pp. 15–46). University of Johannesburg.
- Sanni, F. O., Ajani, O. F., Sanni, E. A., Gwa, Z. T., Dada, M. O., Alabi, Y. B., . . . Kareem, J. A. (2024). Occurrences and characteristics of forced marriages among girls married before the age of 16 in a

- Northern Nigerian State. *MGM Journal of Medical Sciences*, 11(2), 311–317. https://doi.org/10.4103/mgmj.mgmj_161_23
- Shaheen, A. M., Othman, A., Hamdan, K. M., Atoom, M. A., Langer, A., & Gausman, J. (2022). Child marriage in relation to the Syrian conflict: Jordanian and Syrian adolescents' perspectives. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70(3), 57–63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.09.024>
- Sieverding, M., Berri, N., & Abdulrahim, S. (2019). Marriage and fertility patterns among Jordanians and Syrian refugees in Jordan. In C. Krafft & R. Assaad (Eds.), *The Jordanian Labour Market: Between Fragility and Resilience* (pp. 259–288). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198846079.003.0010>
- Sieverding, M., Krafft, C., Berri, N., & Keo, C. (2020). Persistence and change in marriage practices among Syrian refugees in Jordan. *Studies in Family Planning*, 51(3), 225–249. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sifp.12134>
- Silva, A. O., Duruji, M., Chidozie, F., & Osimen, G. (2024). Evaluating the influence of international conventions on child marriage in Nigeria: Progress towards achieving SDG target 5.3 by 2030. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences (PJLSS)*, 22(2), 11060–11072. <https://doi.org/10.57239/pjlss-2024-22.2.00837>
- Ujorha, T. (2012, September 16). A place called Zangon Agege. Daily Trust. Retrieved October 26, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org>
- UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). (2023, June). 2023 Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI): Breaking down gender biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality. New York, United States of America: United Nations Development Programme. Retrieved November 18, 2023, from <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-gender-social-norms-index-gsni#/indicies/GSNI>
- UNICEF. (2023, May). Child marriage. Retrieved June 16, 2023, from <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>