

**EARLY MARRIAGE AND THE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT  
OF THE GIRL CHILD IN BEKWARRA LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT AREA OF CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*This study focused on influence of early marriage on the educational attainment of the girl child in Bekwarra Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Survey research design was used for the study. The population of this study consisted of 1,146 female Junior Secondary School students in Bekwarra Local Government Area of Cross River State. The sample of this study consisted of 116 female junior secondary school 2 and 3 students carefully selected from 16 junior secondary schools in Bekwarra Local Government Area of Cross River State. The sampling technique adopted for the study was simple random sampling. The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled: Early Marriage and Girl-Child Educational Attainment Questionnaire (EMGEAQ). The data obtained analyzed using linear regression. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. Major findings of the study indicated that there is significant influence of low self-esteem and stigmatization due to early marriage on the educational attainment of the girl-child in Bekwarra Local Government Area of Cross River State. In line with the findings of the study, it was recommended that gender-based NGOs should organize seminars and counseling sessions for parents in order to discourage them from giving out their daughters early in marriage.*

**Key words:** *Girl-Child, Early Marriage and Educational Attainment*

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**Introduction**

Education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental human right and a critical tool for socio-economic development, particularly for girls and women. The education of the girl child has far-reaching benefits, not only for the individual but also for families, communities, and nations at large. Educated girls are more likely to delay marriage and childbirth, earn higher incomes, participate in decision-making, and contribute meaningfully to national development. In the same vein, Okafor (2021) and Niyi et al (2024) maintained that educating girls improves growth rates, encourages independence of the girl-child and reduces social disparities. Women with higher educational qualifications are more likely to be in formal wage employment than those at the level of primary school education. Girls who stay in school tend to marry later, have fewer children, and participate more fully in economic and civic life. Afrose (2019) and Ihekoronye et al (2020) observed that improving girls' educational levels has been demonstrated to have clear impacts on the health and economic future of young women, which in turn improves the prospects of their entire community.

The infant mortality rate of babies whose mothers have received some level of education is half that of children whose mothers are illiterate. Despite these known benefits, Usua et al (2023) and Patrick et al (2024) posited that various socio-cultural and economic factors continue to hinder girls' access to and completion of formal education in many parts of Nigeria. One of the most persistent and detrimental of these factors is early marriage.

Early marriage according to World Health Organization (2021) refers to any marriage where at least one party is under the age of 18. Early marriage is a widespread practice in several states in Nigeria especially in the north. It disproportionately affects girls, often forcing them to abandon their education prematurely to assume adult responsibilities such as childbearing, domestic duties, and caregiving. Ibrahim (2018) asserted that the consequences of early marriage on the educational attainment of the girl child are profound, including reduced school attendance, poor academic performance, increased dropout rates, and limited opportunities for personal and professional development. In Cross River State, particularly in areas like Bekwarra Local Government Area, early marriage remains a prevalent practice. Bekwarra is located in the northern part of the state and is predominantly agrarian, with a significant portion of the population engaged in subsistence farming and petty trading. The area is characterized by socio-economic challenges, limited educational infrastructure, and deeply rooted cultural practices, many of which perpetuate gender inequality and support early marriage as a norm.

According to Okafor (2021) preliminary observations and anecdotal reports suggest that many girls in Bekwarra are married off at a young age, often with the justification of reducing the economic burden on the family or preserving family honor. In such contexts, girls' education is often deprioritized or viewed as unnecessary beyond the basic primary level. Consequently, the cycle of poverty, gender disparity, and limited social mobility is sustained across generations. This study, therefore, sought to investigate the influence of early marriage on the educational attainment of the girl-child in Bekwarra Local Government Area.

### **Statement of the problem**

Despite global and national efforts to promote the education of the girl-child, early marriage continues to pose a serious challenge to girls' educational attainment in many parts of Nigeria, particularly in rural communities. While education is universally recognized as a fundamental right and a critical driver of socio-economic development, the persistence of early marriage in areas such as Bekwarra Local Government Area significantly undermines this right. Early marriage often forces young girls to abandon formal education prematurely. In many cases, girls who marry early are unable to return to school due to stigma, lack of childcare, financial constraints, or community norms that discourage the education of married girls. This has long-term consequences not only for the individual girl but also for her family, her community, and society at large. Many families in Bekwarra Local Government Area may perceive marriage as a form of economic security or to protect girls from perceived social risks such as premarital pregnancy. As a result, girls are often withdrawn from school at the primary or junior secondary level to be married off, truncating their educational journey, and reducing their chances of acquiring employable skills, higher income, and personal agency. Although policies such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act and the Child Rights Act aim to ensure free and compulsory education and protect children from early marriage, their implementation at the grassroots level remains weak or inconsistent. In areas like Bekwarra, traditional norms and local attitudes often override statutory laws, and there is a limited presence of monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to protect the rights of the girl-child. Given these realities, this study sought to address the influence of early

marriage on the educational attainment of the girl-child in Bekwarra LGA, Cross River State, Nigeria.

### **Purpose of the study**

Generally, this study examined the influence of early marriage on the educational attainment of the girl child in Bekwarra Local Government Area of Cross River State. Specifically, the study sought to;

- i. ascertain the influence of low self-esteem due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment.
- ii. assess the influence of stigmatization due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment.

### **Research questions**

The following research questions were posed to guide the study.

- i. How does low self-esteem due to early marriage influence the girl-child educational attainment?
- ii. What is the influence of stigmatization due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment?

### **Statement of Hypotheses**

- i. Low self-esteem due to early marriage does not have significant influence on the girl-child educational attainment.
- ii. There is no significant influence of stigmatization due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment.

### **Literature review**

#### **Low self-esteem due to early marriage and girl-child educational attainment**

Low self-esteem according to Bhandari (2022) refers to when people lack confidence about who they are and what they can do. In the view of Ebele, and Olofu (2020), students with low self-esteem often feel incompetent, unloved, or inadequate. People who struggle with low self-esteem are consistently afraid about making mistakes or letting other people down. Having self-esteem issues can be detrimental to one's health and negatively affect a person's personal and professional relationships (Niyi et al, 2023; Oyita et al. 2018; Patrick, 2022; Omong, et al, 2023; Ubana, et al, 2024). Low self-esteem comes from one's mental state, one's inner voice, or the thoughts in one's head. Negative thinking in general is linked to low self-worth and low self-esteem. There are several signs that show that one is having low self-esteem. These include sensitivity to criticism, social withdrawal, fear, anxiety among others (Okri et. al, 2020; Ibu et. al., 2019).

Low self-esteem is highly associated with a greater risk of adolescent pregnancy. Ugoji (2023) maintained that every teen mother can be associated with low self-esteem, and it is extremely critical of themselves. Beyond low self-esteem affecting the educational attainment of teen mothers, it makes them to downplay or ignore their positive qualities, judge themselves to be inferior to their peers and often make them use negative words to describe themselves such as stupid, fat, ugly or unlovable. Low self-esteem in young girls arising from early marriage can lead to mental and physical health issues like depression, anxiety, and anorexia (Ibu et. al., 2019; Inyang et. al, 2020)

Elkes and Crocitto (2018) posited that low self-esteem goes a long way affecting early marriage victims because it makes them lack confidence about who they are and what they can do. They even become demoralized and uncertain about their future (education inclusive). They often feel incompetent, unloved or inadequate. Mothers given out in early

marriage struggle with low self-esteem tend to be consistently afraid about making mistakes or letting other people down. It can also lead to unhealthy habits like smoking tobacco, alcohol abuse or drug use. It is also characterized by feeling hopelessness or worthlessness, blaming oneself unfairly, hating oneself and worrying about being unable to do things.

Low self-esteem implies self-rejection, self-dissatisfaction and self-contempt. Low self-esteem is a state where someone devalues his/herself depending on the circumstance (s). Therefore, low self-esteem due to early marriage may likely have negative influence on the educational attainment of a girl-child (Effiong & Olofu, 2016; Niyi & Olofu, 2023; Paul et al., 2019, Essang et al, 2025). Kovess-Masfety, Leray, Denis, Husky, Pitrou and Bodeau-Livinec (2019) observed that low self-esteem because of early marriage discourages the victims from furthering their education which eventually increases the rate of illiteracy among young mothers in the society.

Ugoji (2023) examined self-esteem, depression, and stigmatization as determinants of educational attainment of pregnant adolescents in Delta State, Nigeria. The purpose of was to determine the effect of self-esteem, depression, and stigmatization on the educational attainment of pregnant adolescents in Delta State, Nigeria. Correlation research design was used for the study. The sample of the study comprised 240 pregnant adolescents in Delta State, Nigeria. Questionnaire was the major instrument used for data collection. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and Multiple Regression were used to analyze and test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The result indicated that self-esteem, depression, and stigmatization were effectively associates and related with the educational attainment of pregnant adolescent. Due to the psychological subjection early marriage girls go through, they are often the preservation of low self-esteem. Experts such as Robbins, Kaplan and Martin (2022) have established a relationship between low self-esteem and early marriage girls' victims' educational attainment.

Cherotich, Kiptiony and Kay (2022) examined the influence of low self-esteem due to early marriage girls on educational performance among secondary school students in Narok County. The study adopted Ex post Facto research design. The target population of the study comprised 156 early marriage girls in 78 public secondary schools in Narok County of which 132 early marriage girls and 66 guidance counseling teachers were drawn through stratified and random sampling techniques. Data were collected through questionnaire and interview. Data collected were analyzed with frequency count and percentage using SPSS25. The findings of the study showed that low self-esteem due to early marriage has statistically insignificant negative influence on educational performance among early marriage girls in secondary schools in Narok County.

### **Stigmatization due to early marriage and girl-child educational attainment**

The concept of stigmatization occurs in a social, cultural, political and or economic context in which a particular behavior or condition of individuals or groups is targeted through public discourses as immoral and dangerous. According to Cunningham, Tschann and Gurvey (2021), Stigmatization may include overt and/or covert actions against these groups and individuals. Self-stigmatization is the internalized acceptance of these discourses and resulting feelings of shame and inadequacy (Olowonefa & Olofu, 2023; Edoho, et al, 2024; Bessong, et al, 2024; Ubana, et al, 2025). Stigmatization is the act of treating or regarding someone unfairly by publicly disapproving him/her. According to Lynn, Mendoza, Del-Colle and Benard (2020), stigmatization is the disapproval of or discrimination against an individual or group based on perceived characteristics that serve to distinguish them from other members of a society. Bessong et al (2024) maintained that some stigmas may be obvious while others are known as concealable stigmas that must be revealed through disclosure. Stigmatization can also be against oneself, stemming from negatively viewed

personal attributes in a way that can result in a spoiled identity. Stigmatization may also be described as a label that associates a person to a set of unwanted characteristics that form a stereotype.

Young girls who are given out in early marriage are often stigmatized by stereotypes that they have irresponsible and incompetent parents. Despite the pervasiveness of these stereotypes, stigma is rarely described as a contributing factor to early marriage mothers' difficulties and their health and social disparities (Effiong & Olofu, 2018; Niyi, et al (2024)). Stigmatization of early marriage mothers impedes their effective thinking, contribute to early marriage mothers' many challenges, and violates their respect and dignity. Stigmatization of early marriage mothers is pervasive and has damaging effects such as causing stress, psychological trauma, loss of concentration, stoppage or dropping out of school (Opara et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Patrick & Obibessong, 2021).

Stigmatization of early marriage mothers also reduces their access to the public, schools, parks, healthcare access, housing, shops etc. are all better in better neighborhoods. In the view of Okafor (2021) as well as Patrick and Omang (2022), the stigmatization of the girl child as a result of early marriage can lead to marginalization and in some cases, dehumanization. Afrose (2019) reported that in many communities, early marriage carries a social stigma because most of their pregnancies with complications. Many early marriage mothers live in marginalized communities and are victims of discrimination. Stigma is manifested through interpersonal interactions in shops, on public transit, in healthcare offices and in schools. It acts systemically and is embedded in policy.

Wiemann, Rickert, Berenson and Volk (2022) carried a study on the relationship between early marriage and the educational attainment of the girl child in Tanzania. The study was guided by two objectives. Correlation research design was adopted for the study. The sample of the study comprised 121 young girls who had experienced early marriage. The instrument used for data collection was questionnaire. The statistical tool used for data collection was independent t-test. The findings revealed that stigmatization due to early marriage has significant relationship with the educational attainment of the girl child. The result also indicated that there was prevalent incident of early marriage among adolescents.

Nginya, Odundo, Amir, Ngaruiya, Kahiga and Muriithi (2021) examined effects of stigma and discrimination on the right to education of young girls given out in early marriage in Kikuyu Sub-County, Kenya. The study was guided by two objectives and one null hypothesis. The research design adopted for the study was survey design. The sample of the study comprised 168 early marriage victims with HIV/AIDS, 12 pre-school teachers, 4 administrators of civil society organizations and 24 caregivers who were randomly selected. Data were collected through questionnaires, interview and observation schedules. Descriptive statistics such as simple percentage, frequencies and t-test were used in the analysis of data. The finding of the study showed that stigmatization and description of early marriage victims has significant negative effect on the rights to education of girl-child.

Okafor (2021) carried out a study on influence of early marriage on the education of girl-child in Abia State, Nigeria. Two objectives and two research questions and one hypothesis were formulated to guide the study. The study employed descriptive survey research design. The sample of the study comprised 166 early marriage girls drawn from within the study area. Purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the sample of the study. The instrument used for data collection was questionnaire. Mean and chi-square were the statistical tools used for data analysis. Findings of the study indicated that stigmatization of early marriage girls leads to marginalization, dehumanization, depression and frustration.

## Methodology

Survey research design was used in this study. This design involves the collection of data to accurately and objectively describe existing phenomena. The population of this study consisted of 911 female junior secondary school students in Bekwarra Local Government Area of Cross River State. A manageable and sizeable sample size of 260 respondents was selected for the study using simple random sampling techniques'' The instrument used for data collection was the questionnaire titled: Early Marriage and Girl-Child Educational Attainment Questionnaire (EMGEAQ) designed by the researcher and validated by three experts. One in measurement and evaluation and two in department of Continuing Education and Development Studies, University of Calabar – Calabar. To determine the reliability of the instrument a trial testing was done using 50 respondents drawn from the study area with similar characteristics who were not included in the main study. A set of items was administered to the respondents after an interval of two weeks. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient was used to test the degree of consistency of the instrument. They were found to range from .72 to .87. This implies that the instrument was reliable enough to be used for this investigation. The procedure for data analysis was based on the already structured research hypothesis. Prior to the administration of the questionnaire to the respondents (Female junior secondary school students carefully selected from 13 secondary schools in Bekwarra Local Government Area of Cross River State), the researcher secured information on the time and date of their class meetings per ward of the sampled LGA. This the researcher attended with two other trained research assistants to other locations depending on the location of the schools. At the schools after the students had concluded their classes, deliberations, the researcher and the assistants respectively formally introduced themselves stating the aim of their visit, after which the questionnaire was administered to the respondents. Linear regression statistical technique was used to analyzed data for the study.

## Presentation of results

The two research hypotheses were stated and tested in order to provide solution to the problem of this study. Each hypothesis was tested at .05 significant level.

Hypothesis one: Low self-esteem due to early marriage does not have significant influence on the girl-child educational attainment.

Table 1: Linear regression analysis of influence of low self-esteem due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment

Variable	Sum of square	df.	Mean square	F	P. Value
frustration due to early marriage and girl-child educational attainment	462.111	1	37.03	328.333	.004
Significant value=0.05, R=.775, R=.069		e = Error limit (0.05)			

Data in table 1 examined the influence of low self-esteem due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment. To test the hypothesis, linear regression was used. Data in table 6 indicated that the P-value is .004 while the significant value is 0.05. The decision rule states that if the P-value is less than the significant value, the null hypothesis should be rejected while the alternative hypothesis should be accepted. Thus, since the P-value of .004 is less than the significant value of 0.05, the null hypothesis which states that low self-esteem due to early marriage does not have significant influence on the girl-child educational attainment is rejected. By implication, the result is statistically significant. That is, low self-esteem due to early marriage has significant influence on the girl-child educational attainment.

Hypothesis two: There is no significant influence of stigmatization due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment.

Table 2: Linear regression analysis of influence of stigmatization due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment.

Variable	Sum of square	df.	Mean square	F	P. Value
Stigmatization due to early marriage and girl-child educational attainment	423.142	1	39.06	632.211	.000
Significant value=0.05, R=.957, R=.094		e = Error limit (0.05)			

Data in table 2 ascertained the influence of stigmatization due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment. To the hypothesis, linear regression was adopted. Result in table 7 revealed that the P-value is .000 while the significant value is 0.05. The decision rule states that if the P-value is less than the significant value, the null hypothesis should be rejected while accepting the alternative hypothesis. Thus, since the P-value of .000 is less than the significant value of 0.05, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant influence of stigmatization due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment is rejected. By implication, the result is statistically significant. That is, there is significant influence of stigmatization due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment.

## Discussion of findings

### Low self-esteem due to early marriage and the girl-child educational attainment

Data in table 1 examined the influence of low self-esteem due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment. The finding showed that there is significant influence of low self-esteem due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment. The above finding is in line with that of Cherotich, Kiptiony and Kay (2022) whose finding of the study showed that low self-esteem due to early marriage has statistically insignificant negative influence on educational performance among early marriage girls in secondary schools in Narok County.

Elkes and Crocitto (2018) posited that low self-esteem goes a long way affecting early marriage victims because it makes them lack confidence about who they are and what they can do. They even become demoralized and uncertain about their future (education inclusive). They often feel incompetent, unloved or inadequate. Mothers given out in early marriage struggle with low self-esteem tend to be consistently afraid about making mistakes or letting other people down. It can also lead to unhealthy habits like smoking tobacco, alcohol abuse or drug use. It is also characterized by feeling hopelessness or worthlessness, blaming oneself unfairly, hating oneself and worrying about being unable to do things.

### Stigmatization due to early marriage and the girl-child educational attainment

Data in table 2 ascertained the influence of stigmatization due to early marriage and the girl-child educational attainment. The result of the study indicated that there is significant influence of stigmatization due to early marriage on the girl-child educational attainment.

The finding of the study is in agreement with Lee (2020) who stated that young girls who are given out in early marriage are often stigmatized by stereotypes that they have irresponsible and incompetent parents. In spite of the pervasiveness of these stereotypes, stigma is rarely described as a contributing factor to early marriage mothers' difficulties and their health and social disparities. Stigmatization of early marriage mothers impedes their effective thinking, contribute to early marriage mothers' many challenges and violates their respect and dignity. Stigmatization of early marriage mothers is pervasive and has damaging

effects such as causing stress, psychological trauma, loss of concentration, stoppage or dropping out of school etc. Afrose (2019) reported that in many communities, early marriage carries a social stigma because most of their pregnancies with complications. Many early marriage mothers live in marginalized communities and are victims of discrimination. Stigma is manifested through interpersonal interactions in shops, on public transit, in healthcare offices and in schools. It acts systemically and is embedded in policy.

### Conclusion

Educating girls improves growth rates, encourages independence of the girl-child and reduces social disparities. Based on the result of the study, it was concluded that low self-esteem due to early marriage and stigmatization due to early marriage has a significant influence on the girl-child educational attainment in Bekwarra Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Gender-based NGOs should organize seminars and counseling sessions for parents in order to discourage them from giving out their daughters early in marriage.
- ii. Peers and the society at large should avoid the stigmatization of the girl-child on the basis of early marriage.

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