

## Examination of the lived experiences of the female spouse in child marriages in northern Ghana: Implications for psychological well-being

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### Abstract

Marriage is ordinarily complex and challenging exerting an invariable effect on the psychological well-being of married individuals. When the spouse is a child, the effects may be much more complicated. This study explored the subjective experiences of marriage and the related psychological implications for married adolescent girls. Using purposeful, convenient and snowball sampling techniques, 21 married adolescent girls were recruited and interviewed. Using a generic inductive qualitative analysis method, two main themes on the subjective experience of marriage and two themes on the implications of those experiences on the psychological well-being of married girls emerged. Positive experiences in marriage were related to the availability of financial support and resources, social recognition, and the presence of spousal support whereas challenges experienced included themes of financial difficulties, restrictiveness, relational conflict and abuse and stressful chores. The positive experiences of marriage had implications for female spouses' satisfaction with life and increased quality of life while the negative experiences of marriage were associated with negative psychological implications. These findings underscore the need for the development and implementation that seeks to alleviate the negative psychological implications of early marriage and strategies and measures that challenge the reinforcing cultural and religious traditions of child marriage.

**Article History:** Received 30 July 2023

Accepted 9 November 2023

**Keywords:** child marriage, adolescents, subjective experiences, psychological well-being, Ghana

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## Introduction

While marriage is reported to be associated with happiness and satisfaction in life (Botha & Booysen, 2013), this may not be the case for children in child marriages. Child marriage, defined as a marriage where one or both individuals are below the age of eighteen (Jain, Bisen, Singh, & Jain, 2011), has become a prevalent global problem particularly in developing countries (UNICEF, 2015). Globally, it is estimated that every year, 640 million girls are married before their 18th birthday and most of the girls are forced into such arrangements by their social, economic, and cultural circumstances (UNICEF, 2023). In Africa, it is estimated that one in three girls is married by age 18 and one in ten by age 15, with the western Africa recording the highest rates of child marriage before 15 (UNICEF, 2023). The Ghana Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS, 2018) reports the current prevalence of child marriage to be 5% and 19.3% for women married under age 15 and before age 18 respectively. This trend compared to the 2014 Ghana Demographic Health Survey (DHS) shows a 7.9% decrease in the practice of child marriage in Ghana between 2014 and 2018 (DHS, 2014; MICS, 2018). Although there appears to be a decline in the prevalence of child marriage in Ghana, the practice still persists which may be due to a complexity of multifaceted etiological factors that are sometimes intertwined.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as any individual below 18 years unless the law of a particular country states that maturity is attained at an earlier age. In Ghana, a child is by law considered an individual who is below 18 years (The Children's Act, 1998). Among some ethnicities, cultures and communities in Ghana, the traditional marker of childhood is limited to when an individual commences the onset of puberty (Boakye-Boaten, 2010). When they begin to exhibit the physical signs of puberty, some of these children within such communities are either encouraged, coerced, or forced into marriage by their immediate family or guardian.

The experience of marriage has been positively linked to subjective well-being (Botha & Booysen, 2013) where married individuals are more likely to be happier and more satisfied compared to their single counterparts (Addai, Opoku-Agyeman, & Amanfu, 2015). Marriage affords the couple the opportunity to share with each other emotional, instrumental, and recreational resources thereby promoting positive subjective well-being (Diener et al., 2000). Despite the positive impact of marriage, a negative association has been found to exist between being married and subjective well-being among Ghanaians (Addai et al., 2015). The researchers further indicated that that marital stress and an unsupportive marital social environment may undermine the well-being of the individual (Addai et al., 2015). It has also been reported that an unsupportive social environment such as poor quality of marriage may cause depression and emotional instability which, in turn, negatively affects the couple's well-being (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newman, 2001).

In addition to its being a violation of the human rights of the child, child marriage poses serious implications for the mental and physical health of its victim (Ahonsi et al.,

2019). It hinders the educational attainment of girls who are married as reports indicate that married girls are less likely to go back to school after they have married (Lloyd & Mensch, 2008). Married girls, therefore, have lower educational levels compared to their unmarried counterparts (Psaki, 2014). Lower educational attainment leads to economic hardship due to the loss of skills and opportunities affected girls might have been able to acquire in school (Tenkorang, 2019). Child marriage also poses serious reproductive health risks for girls including the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases, painful sexual intercourse, early pregnancy, and pregnancy complications which may lead to maternal and child mortality (Nour, 2009). Psychologically, available evidence shows child marriage has severe implications for their mental well-being (Gage, 2013; John, Edmeades, & Murithi, 2019); as the majority of married adolescents suffer from social isolation, depression, and drug dependency (LeStrat et al., 2011) and suicidal ideations (Gage, 2013). These implications may be due to the victims' loss of their adolescence as they are plunged into adulthood without the development of physical, psychological, and cognitive skills for the adult role of being a wife and mother (Ahonsi et al., 2019). Furthermore, they are forced into sexual activities by their husbands, which may be accompanied by emotional, sexual, and physical abuse. The likelihood of married girls suffering violence and abuse in their marriage is higher compared to married women (Das Gupta et al., 2014).

Research on the mental health implications of child marriage in Ghana has been reported to be scant (Baba, 2018; Tenkorang, 2019). Tenkorang's (2019) study reported that women who married early were more likely to suffer intimate partner violence, endorse cultural norms on gender and patriarchy and have limited autonomy. Baba (2018) also reported that, although some married girls reported positive experiences of marriage related to being young wives and mothers, overall, they experienced high levels of depression, anxiety and stress and low levels of resilience. Literature on the experiences of married girls has reported many negative experiences of marriage. Female spouse accounts of the experiences of early marriage include feelings of regret, depression, and isolation due to the experience of limited autonomy and possibilities associated with being married, social and financial restrictions, disruption of education, and the performance of stressful domestic chores among others (Callaghan, Gambo, & Fellin, 2015; Maharjan, Rishal, & Svanemyr, 2019). A Nigerian study found that most married girl reported experiencing difficult relationships with co-wives and mothers-in-law; the experience of motherhood, pregnancy and childbirth were described as fearful, confusing, and traumatic (Erulkar & Bello, 2007).

Studies on the subjective experience of marriage by girls in Ghana are very limited. Most studies focused on the incidence, causes and impact of child marriage through retrospective experiential accounts of women married as girls (Tsekpo et al., 2016; University of Ghana Centre for Social Policy Studies & World Vision Ghana [UGCSPS & WVG], 2017). Baba, Salifu Yendork and Atindanbila (2020) reported on the experience of subjective well-being related to perception of the time of marriage and motherhood

among married girls in the Northern region of Ghana. Their findings indicated that girls who perceived their marriage as early experienced positive well-being (Baba et al., 2020). Their findings on challenges are related to poor socio-economic status, inadequate parenting skills, pregnancy, and childbirth related distresses some (Baba et al., 2020) of which have been reported in this paper. The study conducted by Baba and colleagues (2020) focused on the experiences of marriage and motherhood among married girls without thoroughly examining the reported psychological implications by married girls as a result of their experiences. Although child marriage has dire psychological effects on its victims, little is known about the Ghanaian setting. Hence this paper seeks to understand the subjective experiences of marriage of adolescent girls and ascertain the implications of those experiences for their psychological health.

## Methods

### *Research design*

This study adopted an explorative qualitative research design to gather data on the lived experiences of married girls. Specifically, a generic inductive qualitative approach (GQIA) was selected for examining the experiences of married adolescent girls. This was deemed useful because it is flexible and descriptive and allows the researcher to examine and understand the lived experiences of a phenomenon (child marriage) from the perspectives and worldviews of the individuals experiencing the phenomenon (Cooper & Endacott, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Flick, 2007). In-depth individual interviews were conducted with the participants using a semi-structured interview guide to guide the interview process.

### *Research setting and participants.*

Twenty-one married girls from three districts (Tamale n=7, Tolon n=5 and Mion n=9) in the Northern region of Ghana were recruited through purposeful, convenient, and snow-balling sampling techniques. At the time of data collection, Ghana was divided into ten administrative regions, then in 2019 six additional regions were added to the ten regions; the old demarcations are retained in this study. The Northern region is reported to be one of the regions with the highest rates of child marriage in Ghana (MICS, 2018). The number of districts in the Northern region of Ghana as at the last census (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010) was thirty-two out of which three were selected for the study representing 0.96% of the districts in the region. These districts were selected for various reasons. Tolon and Mion were selected because they are reported to have the highest rates of child marriage in the Northern region (Naatogmah, 2016). Tamale was selected for its diversity as it is the metropolitan capital of the district and region. It is inhabited by individuals from diverse ethnic groups and was believed to provide access to key

informants from diverse backgrounds. The district analytical reports of the 2010 national census for Mion, Tamale and Tolon identify the Mole Dagomba ethnic group, who speak Dagbani, as the major ethnic group in the three districts selected for this study while the dominant religion is Islam (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). All participants were Muslim, adolescents from poor economic backgrounds and had been married for at least one year (see Table 1 for demographic information of the participants). The mean age of participants at the time of data collection was 15.56 (SD=1.15) while their mean age at the time of marriage was 14.89 (SD=1.63). Seventeen of the twenty-one participants recruited had at least basic education while four had no education.

### *Ethical considerations and procedure*

All data were collected through individual in-depth interviews that were conducted by the first author (EAS) and her research assistant (HB) after ethical approval and permissions had been obtained. Given the particular vulnerability of the participants in the study, ethical approval was sought from the Research Ethics Committee at Stellenbosch University (Reference number: SU-HSD-004745) and permission was sought from the Department of Social Welfare in the Northern region of Ghana which is the statutory agency responsible for the protection of vulnerable children (including married adolescents) in the research setting. Due to the cultural and linguistic differences between the first author (EAS) and the majority of the participants, a research assistant (HB) was employed to assist with the collection and transcription of data. The consent forms and semi-structured interview guide were translated into Dagbani for the convenience of the participants.

Gatekeepers were employed in participating communities to assist EAS and HB in gaining access into communities. These gatekeepers identified potential participants in their communities whom they introduced to HB and EAS for possible recruitment. The aims, objectives and nature of the study were explained to these potential participants who were then invited to participate if they consented and met the inclusion criteria (being a child [under 18 years] and married, being a native of the Northern region of Ghana, and had been married for at least one year). Use was made of snowball sampling with participants and the gatekeeper helping to recruit further participants for the study.

Before the commencement of data collection, the aims, objectives, and nature of the study was explained to each participant. The individual interview only commenced when full consent was given by the participant. Adolescent girls recruited for this study were treated as adults since they were married with some being parents (Mensch et al., 1999). A token of ₵20.00 (equivalent to \$4.81 at the time of the study) was given to each participant at the end of the interview to compensate for their travel expenses and time. All interviews were audio-taped and lasted an average of 40 minutes.

## Data Analyses

Data were analysed using the Generic Inductive Qualitative approach described by Thomas (2006). First, the audiotaped interviews were transcribed by EAS and HB after which transcriptions were translated into Dagbani and back translated into English by an independent linguist to check for accurate and consistent presentation of participants' views and experiences. The transcriptions were then formatted and uploaded in ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software (v. 8) (Friese, 2018; Muhr, 1991) for coding by the first author.

Using Thomas' (2006) five-step approach for analyzing the data, the author (EAS) first read through the transcripts to familiarize herself with the text and gain an understanding of the developing themes. In the second step, in-vivo and line-by-line coding was conducted to develop codes that stayed close to the data. The third step is the labelling of segments of information to create subthemes and themes. Here those segments of data that were similar were connected, coded and named using Charmaz's (2006) strategy to aid coding- themes that were not similar but were very important were also coded. The fourth phase of the coding process involved rereading and recoding all subthemes and themes that were developed in the third step of analysis in order to reduce redundancy among the different themes and subthemes of coded data. Axial coding techniques were adopted to aid in the creation of themes (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, after careful reading of the generated themes and their quotations, four major themes (positive subjective experiences and challenges of marriage and their psychological implications) were created. The subthemes and themes created by the first author were examined and reviewed by the co-authors to help with the accurate presentation and interpretation of data thereby validating the findings. The themes, subthemes and psychological implications of those experiences are discussed below.

## Findings

Following data analysis, the subjective experiences of child marriage by the participants were grouped into four broad themes: positive subjective experiences in marriage and challenges experienced in marriage and the positive and negative psychological implications of those experiences in marriage. Positive subjective experiences were differentiated into receiving support from their spouses with house chores and other activities, social recognition resulting from marriage and motherhood, and the availability of financial support and resources. The psychological implications of those positive experiences were associated with satisfaction with life. Challenges experienced were linked to the experience of financial difficulties, restrictiveness, relational conflicts and abuse and stressful chores. The impacts of these experiences on their psychological health were summarized as regret and disappointment, worry, end of personal development, unhappiness and anhedonia and finding happiness despite challenges. Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

### ***Positive subjective experiences in marriage***

Whereas the literature (Bruce & Bongaarts, 2009; Das Gupta et al., 2014; Glinski, Sexton and Meyers, 2015) dominantly reflects a negative impact of child marriage on the well-being of victims of child marriage, this study uncovered several positive experiences related by married adolescents. Some participants reported experiencing a positive change in their lives after getting married which had an eudemonic impact on their psychological well-being.

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***Availability of financial support and resources:*** One of the positive experiences reported by married girls is the access to and provision for their financial and basic needs which they may not have had prior to their marriage - most of the participants were from poor and economically unstable backgrounds. Accounts from some participants indicate that marriage has given them some form of independence and financial stability and access to their basic needs since their husbands are providing for these needs. For some, their previous worries about their livelihood when they were living with their parents and/or guardians had been dispelled. The narrative below from participant MM indicates that she is only happy for the provision of her daily needs but also for the unsolicited gifts provided by her husband.

“I am happy, any time he is going to work, he gives me chop money [money usually given to the wife by the husband for daily upkeep of the home], and when on his way home he finds a dress he thinks will look nice on me, he buys it for me, sometimes he would buy me yoghurt (sachet of yoghurt) or kalyppo (a box of drink) for me which makes me happy.” (MM, 16 years, 3 years of marriage)

***Social recognition:*** For some participants, marriage afforded them respect and status among their peers, families and in their community. There was a sense of pride for achieving a significant milestone in their lives. They wore their veils, which signified being married in their communities, with pride and getting the needed respect within ones community. These are illustrated in the narratives below:

“Now when I am walking, I wear a veil that makes people respect me. If you are walking, you have [more] respect than one who is not married.” (RH, 17 years, 1 year of marriage)

“Nhm̄n ... for a child, you can go and sit somewhere and also boast of having a child” (LF, 17years, 4 years of marriage)

The narratives from these participants an indication that besides marriage, childbirth and motherhood was seen as a badge of respect and pride for participants.

**Presence of spousal support:** In recounting some of the positive experiences, some participants mentioned spousal support as an essential part of their experience. Spousal support could be in the form of tangible assistance with house chores or just being available when comfort and affection were needed. The willingness of their husbands to help with their chores came as a relief from the stress of being a young wife and a mother. This had the positive impact of increasing their satisfaction with their lives besides eliciting positive emotions such as happiness and heightened self-worth.

“Yes, sometimes he helps me when I’m overwhelmed with work in the house. Sometimes, he tells me to attend to some of my duties whilst he does the cooking.” (AA, no age, 2 years of marriage)

Assisting with household chores was considered important for most married girls whose husbands provided such assistance. As a result, some girls may find the willingness of their husbands to assist them with domestic chores a sign of love and caring since men are not expected to engage in such activities. Aside from helping with house chores, some girls valued their husband supporting them by standing up to parents or relatives during altercations or misunderstanding between the married girl and her in-laws and comforting them when they were sad or distressed. Most girls found spousal support in the form of being defended, provision of comfort in stressful situations as very salient in their marital relationship which boosted their confidence and helped with their emotional well-being.

“...any time I get sad, or his parents insult me and I’m crying, he will go and insult his parents that they should stop insulting me and he will come and say I should stop crying.” (HD, 16 years, 1 year of marriage)

Accounts given by some participants above indicate that receiving spousal support was beneficial to their psychological well-being since it helped them cope with stresses and other difficulties. This is in contrast to the experience of many participants that most husbands tend to support their families when there is an altercation between their wives and their families - (see Challenges: *relational conflicts and abuse*).

### **Psychological implications of positive experiences of marriage**

**Satisfaction with life and increased quality of life:** Having a good experience of marriage led to reports of a satisfied life especially when participants found marriage as relief from previous mistreatment in the parental home. Some married girls revealed that they found



their marital homes as less psychologically distressing which brought a feeling of safety and relief. ZB explains her reason for perceiving her matrimonial home as better than her parents’:

“Hmm... the reason I said it is better is that when you are in your house. You will be going through pain and hearing some disheartening things..., but if you come to stay in your matrimonial home, such unkind words and painful treatment, you won’t hear them anymore. That is why I am saying it has been better.” (ZB, 16 years, one year of marriage).

Reports such as the one illustrated above led to feelings of satisfaction with life, happiness and an increase in their quality of life. According to AA, “... life is simply good for us (herself and her husband)” (no age, married 2 years; Tolon) which indicates satisfaction with life thereby boosting her mental well-being. These implications, although evident among some participants, were not reported by some of the respondents as depicted in the statements of ZB and AA. Their experience of a positive psychological wellbeing may be due to availability of financial support and resources.

### *Challenges experienced in marriage*

Several participants reported having negative experiences as married girls. The negative experiences of participants have been grouped into the following themes: financial difficulties, restrictiveness, relational conflict and abuse and the performance of stressful chores.

**Financial difficulties:** The lack of financial resources and support was reported as a pervasive challenge experienced by most participants. It was a major source of stress and the underlying cause of other problems faced by most participants. For instance, some participants reported the neglect of financial responsibilities by their spouses as a major source of stress since they had to step in to provide or augment these financial needs. Some spouses of married girls were not willing to cater to their basic needs and that of their children. Although it is considered the duty of the man as the head of the household to cater for the financial and daily needs of his spouse and children in the Ghanaian culture (Ankomah, 1996), some husbands were derelict of these responsibilities and neglected them:

“Even me, he hasn’t even thought of giving me one cedi (\$0.19) much less my parents.” (JM, 16 years, 5 years of marriage)

The neglect of those financial responsibilities by spouses led to many participants feeling burdened since they had to cater for the family on their own. This, for some participants, was an abrupt shift from childhood into adulthood as they were expected to perform their duties as married women, cater for the home and children and act as the sole provider for the family which they considered stressful and difficult.

“As I am in my marriage right now, it disturbs me a lot. Because I have nothing doing and I have children now, there is a lot of suffering. Every day, if I do not go and fetch water to sell to someone or help someone with their work for them to give me something for me to prepare food for them [my children], I and them [my children] will starve. Their father, too, he won’t give me because he is not doing anything.” (JM, 16 years, 5 years of marriage)

**Restrictiveness:** Marriage is accompanied by limitations and restrictions for several participants. For some of the girls, marriage brought limitations which were not present before they married. Some felt restricted in the kinds of social activities they could attend while others reported feeling isolated from friends and family. Their autonomy to decide on where to go and whom to interact with was usurped as they now needed the permission of their in-laws or husband to engage with others in the community and in social events.

“... Now, if I want to go somewhere and tell my mother-in-law if she says I shouldn’t go, I cannot go. Or, if I tell my husband and he says I can’t go, then I won’t go. But when I was in my own house, I went wherever I felt like going.” (GD, 15 years, 1 year of marriage)

Another kind of restriction reported by married girls in this study was their inability to pursue their dreams and aspirations due to their marriage. Most girls shared their wish to either complete their education, learn a trade or craft that they believed would give them financial independence. These dreams were, however, not fulfilled due to their husbands’ unwillingness to allow them to pursue their dreams. The conversation between EAS and HD (16 years, 1 year of marriage) below illustrates this assertion:

HD: “Yes, the problem is I have not yet given birth. If I give birth early, he will let me complete school.”

EAS: “Ah, if you had given birth, he would have allowed you to complete school?”

HD: “Allowed me to complete, yes... because he said if I don’t give birth and I complete school I will leave him.”

Aside from preventing her from pursuing her educational ambitions, HD’s husband also employs the use of subterfuge to convince her not to pursue her educational dreams. Being a child herself, she is not able to recognize that the birth of a child will mean added responsibilities and stress which will rather increase her burden and prevent her from going back to school.

**Relational conflict and abuse:** Another common negative experience for married girls was the experience of relational conflicts and abuse. Participants reported encountering a lot of relational conflict with their in-laws in their matrimonial home since most of them had to live with their husband and his extended family. The main complaint girls

cited was of their mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law sometimes provoking them to fight or verbally and physically abusing them. These altercations resulted from girls' inability or refusal to perform chores, considered disrespectful and refusing to be submissive.

“As for married life, even if you do not go to fetch water for the house, they will insult you. So, you must know that when you get there [married], the suffering is bound to happen until you become very old.” (NS, no age, 1 year of marriage)

Refusing to obey the directives of the parents and in-laws is perceived as a form of disrespect. LF explains her husband's inability to support her due to his fear of being perceived as taking sides with her when her mother-in-law asked her to move out of her marital home after an altercation.

“So, when I was there [in my matrimonial home] she [sister-in-law] and I quarrelled, and she told her mother [my mother-in-law] to tell me to go back to my father's house and she did... He [my husband] said I shouldn't go home but his mother said I should leave. Since it was his mother that said it, it would be like he is taking sides with me so he said I should go.” (LF, 17years, 4 years of marriage)

**Stressful chores:** Findings indicated that after moving into their matrimonial homes most married girls had to perform stressful household chores. Accounts given by participants indicate that when a girl is married into a family, she is expected to perform most of the chores in the household to prove her womanhood and herself as a good wife. Although she may be helped by other wives if there are, she is most likely to perform the most stressful ones alone.

“When a man marries, the wife will have to do all the house chores. She washes the clothes of her parents-in-law, her husband's clothes, everything, the clothes of the very young siblings of the man she will wash it, every day your parents-in-law expects that you will wash the clothes of your husband's siblings. You are expected to do everything!” (MM, 16 years, 3 years of marriage)

The above statement is one of many accounts about the stressful chores that most girls must undertake in their matrimonial homes. The negative experiences of early marriage are described as experiencing problems every day in one's life when AA (no age, 2 years of marriage) states “When day breaks, it's just petty problems you encounter.”

### ***Psychological implications of challenges experienced***

The experience of challenges in marriage was accompanied by detrimental psychological effects with some married adolescent girls reporting unhappiness and depression, regret, worry, lack of personal development, and hopelessness. These effects were influenced by married girls' expectations of marriage. Some of those expectations of marriage included the expectation of a better life due to the provision of basic needs by spouse,

the experience of love and companionship, and the ability to have children among others. Some married girls were expecting marriage to be difficult and full of misery and were somewhat not surprised when they experienced challenges in their marriages notwithstanding being psychologically affected by these experiences in their marriages. These effects are discussed with supporting quotes from participants below.

**Regrets and disappointment:** These were salient emotions that were inferred from participants' account of their experiences. Based on their expectations of marriage, some participants reported regretting marrying early or were disappointed in their marriages. Girls who had considered marriage as an only means to come out of difficult family situations and poverty reported regretting the decision when those expectations were not realized. Others seemed to regret the decision to marry as it prevented them from completing their education or learning a trade. They believed that they would have had better prospects, been able to care for their children and themselves and support their husbands if they had completed school or learned a craft/trade before marrying.

“I can just be thinking that if I had waited and searched [for a job] before I married, maybe a lot of things wouldn't have been disturbing me. Even if they were to disturb me, it won't disturb me so much.” (SH, no age, 4 years of marriage)

**Worry:** Aside from regret, most girls reported worrying about the future and livelihood of themselves and their children. Evidence of this can be garnered from GD who shared that she is sometimes found herself lost in thoughts.

“Sometimes I can just be thinking a lot, but I don't even understand what the thoughts are all about. I think a lot.” (GD, 16 years, 5 years of marriage)

**End of personal development:** Furthermore, some girls found that being married brought an abrupt end to their dreams of completing their education and/or learning a trade or skill. The lack of economic independence and personal development was another source of worry for them since they felt that their inability to get employed and earn an income meant they are forced to be solely dependent on their husbands who sometimes are either not employed or are not willing to care for them.

“...if I were not pregnant and had not married young ... it is possible that I would have been able to learn a trade or skill that would help me fend for myself and earn a living. It is because of this [the marriage], that I have not been able to develop myself and be a better person today.” (LF, 17years, 4 years of marriage)

**Finding happiness despite challenges:** Notwithstanding the negative psychological effects of child marriage, accounts of the experiences of some married girls revealed that some of them managed to find happiness in the little milestones and activities in their lives. Although some of these milestones was a source of challenge, they found joy in those challenges as well. EA shares her experience in the quote below.

“[Giggles] .... What do I enjoy most? [Laughs] ...Whaaah! For that, I cannot tell you. Maybe it is just this thing [baby] that I am carrying. ...every human being, as you grow up that is what you hope and pray for. It [a baby] is our source of joy and happiness and it is also our source of sorrow and sadness. That is what I love the most.” (EA, 17 years, 1 year of marriage)

The ability to find happiness in the face of challenges was quite evident in the accounts of some participants as seen in the EA's quote. Evident in EA's quote is her ability to draw meaning from her relationship with and the joy of having a child. By adopting this perspective of life, most married girls recruited for this study are able to find happiness and the courage to fight the challenges they experience in life.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to present the influence of the lived experiences of marriage on the psychological well-being of adolescent girls. Married girls reported both positive experiences (availability of financial support and resources, social recognition, and presence of spousal support) and challenging experiences (financial difficulties, restrictiveness, relational conflict and abuse, and stressful chores) in their marriage. Additionally, the findings of this study indicate that early marriage had both positive (satisfaction with life and increased quality of life) and negative (regrets and disappointment, worry, and end of personal development) implications for the psychological well-being of married girls recruited.

The report of positive subjective experiences in marriage, mainly, availability of financial support and resources, social recognition, and presence of spousal support, as married adolescent girls is inconsistent with literature on the psychological impact of child marriage. Most studies (e.g., Gage, 2013; LeStrat et al., 2011; John et al., 2019) have reported negative psychological implications of child marriage such as depression, anxiety, and positive wellbeing. The experiences of some of the married adolescent girls (see Positive subjective experiences in marriage) may provide a contextual explanation for some of the reasons (teen choices, peer pressure and search for better life and wealth) for the practice of early marriage in Ghana (MoGCSP, 2017; UG-CSPS & WVG, 2017). Having had positive experiences in their marriages, their peers who after seeing the positive outcomes of marriage in their lives may likely choose to marry early in their search for a living standard which is better than their poor economic backgrounds.

It appears from the accounts of married adolescent girls that the experience of satisfaction with life and increased quality of life was associated with fulfilment of their needs, spousal support, and social recognition they experienced as a result of their marriage. In light of this findings, most married girls could be encouraged to identify some of these positive experiences in their marriage which can serve as a buffer to reduce the negative psychological impact of other challenging instances (see Challenges experienced in marriage) in their marriages. For instance, giving birth to children

and/or getting married are milestones that are culturally perceived to confer prestige, honour, and respect on women as these are seen to be indicators of womanhood among the Dagomba (UGCSPS & WVG (2017)). These milestones were a source of pride for most married girls and provided a sense of self-worth and confidence. The availability of financial resources and spousal support reduced the burden of catering for the needs of most married girls and their children since these resources were available to them. The availability of these resources conferred a sense of belonging and love since their emotional and financial needs were being provided by their spouses. These instances in their marriages elicited a sense of relief and satisfaction with life. Married girls can, therefore, be encouraged to focus on these positive instances and emotions to help enhance their psychological well-being and quality of life as married girls.

Participants report regrets and disappointment due to unmet needs and shattered dreams. For example, in the current study, one participant named SH, upon reflecting on the implication of her marriage (see psychological implications of challenges experienced), appears to blame herself for her current situation which she finds disappointing and unfavourable due to her choice to marry early. She regrets not completing her education or acquiring an employment which would have made her more economically independent. One of the impacts of child marriage in the Ghanaian context has been the disruption of the education and chances of acquiring skills that may be necessary for the employment of the married girl (Tsekpo et al., 2016). The disruption of education and employment opportunities renders most married girls solely dependent on their husband and his relatives and robs them of their economic independence (Tenkorang, 2019). Some earlier researchers (e.g., van Dijk et al., 2000), on distinguishing between regret and disappointment, contend that the experience of regret involves the intense feeling blaming oneself for taking a particular decision, having an "I should have known better feeling" brooding about making a mistake and the possible outcomes should one have taken another. Being disappointed brings in feelings of powerlessness and the tendency not to find other solutions to the problem.

The married adolescent girl also reported experiencing stressful chores and end of personal development following their marriage. The toll of being married can be enormous on the married girls. Studies (Nuor, 2009; Roy & Sarker, 2016) indicate that most married girls are usually not cognitively, physically, and psychologically prepared to take on the role of being a wife and a mother. These roles can be very stressful since they lack the solution-oriented skills and knowledge they may need to manage their homes (Tenkorang, 2019) which then becomes a source of worry for them. Child marriage has been reported to bring an abrupt end to the development of a child victim since it leads to the termination of the education (Alhassan, 2013; MoGCSP, 2016). Due to the Ghanaian cultural expectation of being a wife and mother, girls who marry early drop out of school to take up such roles (MoGCSP, 2016). The magnitude of household chores may also not afford the opportunity and access to personal development resources and intervention that may be available to them (Alhassan, 2013). The lack of opportunity for

some girls results in the development of low self-worth, and the lack of self-confidence, and undermines the independence and autonomy they may need to navigate complex social and matrimonial roles (Tenkorang, 2019). This finding is similar to findings in the UGCSPS and WVG (2017) report which indicated that married girls reported being unhappy and depressed in their marriages due to social restrictions, the performance of stressful chores among other issues.

## Implications for interventions/policy

For girls who encountered negative experiences in their marriage, recommendations for possible psychological interventions would go a long way to help them cope with the stress as well as other implications of being married girls. Programs should be introduced in affected communities to provide married girls with resources and support groups where they can be able to discuss issues they face in their marriages and attain skills and ongoing education. These support groups may also empower girls and help them to develop possible solutions and coping strategies to some of the difficulties and problems they encounter in their daily lives. Furthermore, interventions that help married girls identify the positive and happy experiences and moments in their marriages which can help them develop positive psychological wellbeing should be implemented by psychologists, interventionists and organizations working with married girls. Studies have reported that the ability to find a balance within oneself and the ability to make meaning of one's personal and social context helps enhance the experience of positive emotions despite adversity (Albrecht, & Devlieger 1999; Myers, Mackintosh, & Goin-Kochel, 2009).

Additionally, the government and other non-governmental organizations can assist by providing resources, opportunities and programs that help married girls acquire the necessary employable skills and craftsmanship they may need to financially support themselves. Upstream intervention is also needed to direct government policy at implementing the advocacy to discourage or curtail early or child marriages.

## Limitations

While the study focused on the psychological implications of child marriage for a small non-random sample of married adolescent girls, there appears to be a gap in statistical evidence for the impact of child marriage on the psychological health of the research population. A study that focuses on testing the various psychological implications with a large sample size of married girls will give a broader picture of the extent of this rampant phenomenon. Because of the qualitative design of the study and the use of purposive, non-random sampling, the findings of the present study cannot be generalized; the sample was small and non-random and was restricted to three districts in the Northern region of Ghana. A study with a broader population and quantitative design will be helpful in presenting the impact of child marriage at the national level.

The language barrier between the first author (EAS) and the research participants presents interesting considerations of how to mediate this challenge in cross-cultural research. This was managed by the use of language experts to assist with translating the interview guide, the transcribed interviews, daily debriefing of interviews, reviewing of data with the research assistant, the second and third authors and the NGO working with married girls in the research setting. This served the purpose of member checks and reference groups to enhance the confirmability of the findings in a context where it was not possible to re-access the participants for this purpose (Anney, 2014). Furthermore, the translation and retranslation of the interview data served as a means to ensure the accurate presentation of the participants' views and experiences.

## Conclusion

The present study explored married adolescent girls' subjective experiences in their marriage and the related psychological implications. The findings show that for this sample, although early marriage was associated with some positive experiences such as financial support and resources, social recognition, and the presence of spousal support, nonetheless, early marriage appears to exert a major deleterious impact on their life and trajectory as young adolescent girls. These negative experiences significantly influenced their psychological well-being and development. Therefore, there is the need for intervention aimed to support married adolescent girls to improve on their mental health.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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