

Early marriage in northern Ghana: Views from parents of married adolescent girls

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Abstract

This study presents parents' (n=8) reasons for marrying off their daughters early, and their reactions to and perceptions of the implications of their daughters' marriage. Using a generic inductive qualitative method to analyse the data collected, findings revealed parents' reasons for marrying off their daughters were grounded on an interplay between cultural norms, parents' diminished authority over their daughters and early pregnancy. The influence of modernity and oppositional behaviour of their daughters in addition to economic, cultural and religious factors were also identified as reasons for the early marriage of daughters. The benefits and negative implications of early marriage for both parents and their daughters are also discussed. Findings provide insight into understanding parents' motivations and perceptions that impact the practice of child marriage in Ghana.

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Introduction

The role of parents in the lives of their children is very important for the well-being and development of the child (Casas et al., 2008). Parents provide countless economic and emotional resources which help in the physical, cognitive and psychological development of the child (Ogg, & Anthony, 2019). As children mature, it becomes the responsibility of parents to train and socialize them on the skills necessary for their adult life and their integration into society (Barni et al., 2011). Literature indicates that parenting practices and the extent of parental involvement are defined by the socio-cultural norms and values of a society (Renzaho et al., 2011).

In Ghana and elsewhere in Africa, the perception is that it takes a community to raise a child and not only the parents. Parents along with extended family and community members help nurture a child into adulthood. Although the community helps in raising a child, parents are important in making decisions on issues that promote the child's well-being and ensure the initiation of the child into the various rites of passage recognized by the community. Since marriage is perceived as one of those important rites of passage that every individual is expected to experience, parental involvement in the marital processes of their children is very important (Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2007; Nukunya, 2003). Although the literature on African marriages indicates a decline in parental influence in the selection of a marriage partner due to modernity, there is an acknowledgement of parental influence on the marital process of their children in some cultures (Takyi et al., 2003). Parental influence, however, becomes more crucial in examining the phenomenon of child or early marriages.

Child marriage is the union of individuals in which one or both spouses are below 18 years (John et al., 2019). Due to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR], 1948) any marriage of an individual below age 18 is considered illegal globally. Despite its illegality, child marriage is practiced in Ghana where the incidence rate is 27.2% which increases to 39.6% in northern parts of Ghana. The influence of parents in the practice of child marriage has been reported to be very prominent as without their approval the marriage of their child cannot take place (Tsekpo et al., 2016; WiLDAF Ghana, 2014).

In attempting to understand the extent of parental involvement in the practice of early marriage, this study explores parents' reasons for marrying off their adolescent daughters early, their emotional reactions to their daughters' marriage and their perceptions of the possible implications of the marriage. Focusing on parental involvement in the practice of child marriage in Ghana helps identify the extent to which parents are involved in the marriage of their daughters as such information will help identify the mechanism and issues that influence the practice of early marriage in Ghana. This information will aid interventionists with the necessary knowledge and understanding in developing interventions that are tailored to engage with extant parental needs and motives that may reinforce them to marry off their daughters early.

Parental role in child marriage

The role parents play in the early marriage of their children is affected by a confluence of social, cultural, religious and economic factors (African Union, 2015; Greene et al., 2015). In societies where norms on chastity, virginity, premarital sex and marriage are upheld, parents wish to safeguard their daughters from premarital sexual relations that may bring shame and dishonor to the family (Awusabo-Asare et al., 2004). In such context, parents may pre-emptively marry off their daughters early (Awusabo-Asare et al., 2004). In Ghana, for instance, sex is still bound by religious and cultural value systems that prohibit premarital sex while upholding chastity before marriage (Anarfi & Owusu, 2011). As premarital sex remains an increasing concern, most Ghanaian parents especially those from conservative religious communities seek to protect the honour of their adolescent daughters and the family when they approach sexual maturity or are suspected to be sexually active (Osafo et al., 2014).

Poverty is considered to be a seminal factor compelling some parents to marry off their daughters early (Alhassan, 2013; Amoo, 2017). Studies indicate that a lack of economic stability in the family and their own impoverished context forces parents to marry off their daughters early to avoid expenses related to education and to relieve parents of the financial burden of caring for a girl which is deemed expensive (Paul, 2019). Additionally, studies suggest that in communities where payment of bride wealth is practiced, parents tend to see the opportunity of marrying off their daughters as a way of acquiring wealth (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection [MoGCSP], 2016; UG-CSPS & WVG, 2017). Hence, they encourage their daughters to marry early or pledge them to men for marriage (Alhassan, 2013).

The MoGCSP report (2016) attributes parents' inability to control the behaviors of their children as a cause of child marriage in Ghana. Due to the influence of modernity, changing family patterns and exposure through the media and other social activities, adolescents who may feel the need to explore activities being portrayed in the media may become difficult to manage (Kenny et al., 2019). The engagement of adolescent girls in romantic and sexual activities despite cautions from parents and increasing teenage pregnancy rates may compel some parents to marry off their daughters before they become pregnant. In cases where the daughter does become pregnant, the daughter is married off to the man responsible for the pregnancy (Tsekpo et al., 2016). This makes teenage pregnancy one of the main drivers of child marriage in most parts of Ghana (MoGCSP, 2016).

Parents' religious beliefs are also reported as an important factor influencing the practice of child marriage. Alhassan's (2013) study conducted in the Northern region of Ghana reports that the religious affiliation and beliefs of parents affected the decision to marry off their daughters early. Muslims and African traditional religion adherents were more likely to marry off their daughters early compared to Christian parents. The reasons

for the early marriage of their daughters were due to perceived religious teachings about formal education and chastity before marriage (Alhassan, 2013).

Cultural norms surrounding the benefits and importance of marriage and childbearing are purported to influence parents' and the extended family's decision to marry off their daughters early. In a country like Ghana where marriage and childbirth are believed to confer on the individual and her family respect and honor and associated with economic and social benefits (Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2007; Takyi et al., 2003) marrying off a daughter becomes an easy decision for parents and guardians.

Literature examining the views and experiences of parents on the early marriage of their daughters is scant in Ghana. Although several studies (Alhassan, 2013; de Groot et al., 2018; Tsekpo et al., 2016) exploring the causal factors and possible effects of early marriage on the child and the society have alluded to the influence of parents in the practice of child marriage, there is scant attention given to parental experiences on the causes and implications of child marriage in Ghana. Furthermore, the implications of the early marriage of adolescents on parents are scant since most parents are usually presented as perpetrators of the practice. This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by answering questions such as 1) What were the parents' reasons for the early marriage of their daughter(s)? 2) What was their reaction to the marriage of their daughter? 3) What are the consequences or outcomes of the early marriage of their daughter(s)?

Methods

Research design

In order to answer the questions raised above, the social constructionist paradigm proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1991) was adopted to understand parents' views on the early marriage of their adolescent daughter(s). The social constructionist paradigm was selected because it aims to explain and describe the processes by which individuals understand the world in which they live based on their own experiences of the world and their social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Using the social constructionist lens therefore helped authors understand how parents experienced the early marriage of their daughters within their context. Specifically, an exploratory qualitative research design was chosen since it provides the researchers with the opportunity to examine the views and experiences of participants about phenomenon that has not been studied in depth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Research setting and participants

The research setting was the Northern region of Ghana (Tamale metropolis, Mion and Tolon districts) where the rates of child marriage is reported to be highest in the country (Ghana Demographic Health Survey, 2014). Using snowballing, purposeful

and convenient sampling, eight parents whose daughter(s) have been married for at least one year and have lived in the research setting were selected to partake in the study. Demographic variables indicated that all participants had no formal education and were Dagomba and Muslim which is reflective of the dominant ethnic group (Dagomba) and religion in the region (Islam, Ghana Statistical Service, 2010). Participants were self-employed or engaged in farming as their main occupation. Half of the participants did not remember their age or were unsure of it. Out of the eight participants, there was only one male due to fathers' unavailability during data collection in the daytime. All participants had one daughter who had married early, with the youngest daughter marrying at 11 years and the oldest marrying at 16 years.

Procedure and ethical considerations

The first author's institution's research and ethics committee granted ethical approval for this study. In addition, permission was obtained from the Department of Social Welfare in the Northern region of Ghana given their constitutional mandate to handle all affairs involving vulnerable children (married girls) in the region. After obtaining the necessary permissions and approval, a research assistant (HB) who is a native of the research setting and was a graduate student of psychology was recruited to assist the first author (EAS) with translation, data collection and transcription. Participant recruitment followed the aforementioned procedures.

Parents of married girls were selected with the help of married girls (who were interviewed for a broader study on the practice of child marriage in Ghana) and gatekeepers (individuals who facilitated our entry into the communities). Before recruiting parents, married girls were engaged in a discussion to ascertain the possible consequences they felt the recruitment of their parents could incur. Only married girls (two) who felt recruiting their parents was inconsequential recruited their parents for the study. Gatekeepers also assisted by identifying parents in the communities who conformed to the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study and introduced EAS and HB to the identified parents. Identified parents were approached and briefed on the nature and purpose of the study after which their verbal consent was sought. All interviews were audiotaped (average duration of 40 minutes) with participants' permission and conducted in their homes.

The main ethical issue of concern in this study was the maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity, and this was ensured by removing all personal information that participants could be identified by and replacing them with pseudonyms. Participants were assured they could withdraw their participation at any stage in the research. A token amount of ₵20.00 (equivalent to \$4.81 at the time of data collection) was given to participants to compensate for their time.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim into Dagbani and were back-translated into English by an independent linguist to ensure accurate and consistent presentations of the data. After data transcription, all the data were analyzed using the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software (v.8.3, Friese, 2018; Muhr, 1991, 1997). The steps for the Generic Inductive Qualitative Analysis (GIQA) approach proposed by Thomas (2006) were followed to analyze the data collected. The GIQA method allows the inductive extraction of categories and interpretations from the data from the perspectives of participants.

The first step of the analysis is the familiarization with and preparation of the transcripts for analysis. This was achieved by reading the transcripts to determine the main views presented by participants. The second phase involved the line-by-line coding of the data which helped in the generation of codes that are close views presented by participants instead of the imposition of researchers' ideas on the data (Charmaz, 2006). Subsequently, the third step, which is the identification, connection and naming of similar codes and placing them into categories was pursued. The fourth step, which involves the recoding and regrouping of codes into categories was conducted. Axial coding techniques proposed by Charmaz (2006) were used at this point to aid in the analysis of the data. Axial coding was done by sorting and linking categories into subthemes and themes. The second and third authors checked categories and interpretations of the data developed by the first author for inconsistencies and accurate presentation of participants' narratives.

After conducting the data analysis, five core categories were identified based on parents' reasons for the early marriage of their daughters and two categories for their perceptions of the impact of early marriage on the well-being of their daughters. Their emotional reactions to the early marriage of their daughters are also discussed.

Findings

Findings from parents' experiences with the early marriage of their daughters have been categorized into three main themes: reasons for early marriage, emotional response to marriage and perceived impact of early marriage on the well-being of their daughters. These categories are discussed in detail below.

Reasons for early marriage

Findings indicated that most parents appeared to blame their daughters for their early marriage. Parents' accounts of the reasons for the early marriage of their daughters have been differentiated under the following subthemes: daughter's choice, early pregnancy, the influence of modernity and oppositional behavior of the youth, socio-cultural and religious factors, and economic limitations. All participants' names are pseudonyms utilized by authors to conceal their identities.

Daughter's choice-Who has the power/authority?

Analysis of findings revealed that some parents blamed their daughters for their early marriage mentioning that the children themselves wanted to get married. Their child's choice to marry early sometimes made parents feel powerless since a daughter who had made the choice to marry was likely to get pregnant to compel her parents to marry her off. Other reasons reflecting power dynamics and decision-making between a mother and father regarding the child's future and welfare seemed to play an important role in the marriage of an adolescent girl. Abiba, whose daughter married at 12 years old, said she could not prevent her daughter's marriage for two reasons. Firstly, she emphasized that she is a woman and culturally "does not own a child" and therefore left the decision for her daughter's marriage to her husband and her child. Her inability to exert her power as a parent on the decision/choice of her daughter was enabled by her perceptions of the cultural values on child ownership and inheritance practiced among the patrilineal society she belongs. Secondly, she indicated that her daughter, though very young, refused her remonstrations and advice for her to complete her education and insisted on marrying the man she loved. She therefore felt compelled to allow her to marry, which is evident in her conversation with HB.

Abiba: "Yes. So, I told her she was young, but she refused and said she loved him, so I allowed her get married (laughs)."

HB: "She refused?"

Abiba: "She refused, and I told her fine that is left onto her, and her father to make that decision because a woman doesn't own a child... Because it was school that I rather wanted her to attend and she refused and wanted to get married, definitely I had to let her marry." (Abiba, female, trader)

Abiba's account demonstrates the lack of women's authority or power in decision-making in the life of their children, which may reflect the cultural concept of the child belonging to and in some cases being owned by her/his father and his patriline. Her daughter's refusal to adhere to her mother's advice and objections also presents an issue with the authority of parents in the lives of their children. Although children are viewed as individuals without power in the communities where the data for this study was collected, Abiba's account depicts the changing social position of the child in the family with the child asserting more in control of decisions regarding her future and well-being. In line with the changing power dynamics between the child and her parents, Abu echoes Abiba's lack of authority or power over his 11-year-old daughter's decision to marry early when he reflects on how his daughter's marriage came about. According to him, his daughter wanted to marry, and he could not object to her marriage.

“No. it is not like that. She was the one that wanted to be with the man, so she brought him to ask for her hand in marriage. So, there is no way we could have said no.” (Abu, male, security guard)

Early pregnancy

In relation to the above assertion, early pregnancy was presented as a powerful tool for adolescent girls to compel their parents to allow them to marry when they felt they were ready to enter marriage. More than half of the parents interviewed in this study mentioned that they married off their daughter because they had gotten pregnant and perceived marriage as the only alternative solution to early pregnancy. This perception was grounded on several cultural and religious reasons which are explained below.

One reason for the early marriage of adolescent girls is the cultural and religious norms surrounding marriage, pregnancy and child ownership. Participant accounts revealed a social perception that when a man impregnates a woman she automatically becomes his wife even when the man has not performed the customary and religious rites that are culturally believed to signify the marriage contract. Mariama (female, Potter/Rice refiner) who after finding out that her daughter had been impregnated opted to send her daughter to the man responsible for the pregnancy. She explains that should a parents' daughter get pregnant “you tell her [daughter] to take the pregnancy to her husband's house. What else can you do?” Her question at the end of her statement indicates that for her, the only choice was to send the pregnancy (unborn child) to the man who impregnated her daughter.

Perceiving the man responsible for the pregnancy as the husband also portrays another dimension of power. As indicated in the preceding section, children were believed to belong to their fathers and their patriline. A man who impregnates a girl is believed to own the unborn child since he fathered the child. Although parents may have authority over their pregnant daughter, they may not have authority over their unborn child. As portrayed by Mariama, parents although may choose to send the pregnancy to the perceived owner more often than not send the pregnant girl to the man responsible. The choice to send the pregnancy to the ‘owner’ (responsible for the pregnancy) is complicated by the fact that because the girl carries the pregnancy, she can't take ‘the man's property/unborn child to him’ without going along with it.

“Since it happens that she has identified the owner [man responsible for her pregnancy], I have nothing to do about it, so I told her to give the owner what belongs to him. In this case, I asked her to learn what would be useful to her life tomorrow and she refused. Now that she has refused, I have told her to take her thing [the pregnancy] home and give the man's thing to him. That was what I told her.” (Jamila, female, shea butter processor)

For Jamila, deciding to send her daughter to the house of the man who impregnated her was borne out of frustrations with and lack of control over her daughter's pregnancy and unborn child. Her decision may also be fueled by the perceived shame of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and religious and economic challenges among other reasons which are discussed in the ensuing sections of this article.

Amina's experience also supports Jamila and Mariama's views. She indicates that although they (Amina and her husband) had initially sent their daughter to the man responsible for her pregnancy for marriage they could only go back for her to complete her education before marrying when the grandchild died after delivery. The death of their daughter's infant propelled them to go back for their daughter since her intended husband no longer had any claim over her infant:

"When he asked her who impregnated her and she told him, they took her to his house... Aaye! She gave birth and the baby died... Her father told them [intended husband and his family] that his daughter is not ready for marriage and so they should give her back to him to see her through school. Yes. She has gone back to school." (Amina, female, unemployed)

Influence of modernity and oppositional youth

Teenage pregnancy and the daughter's choice to marry were reported to be a result of the children being difficult, oppositional, refusing to listen to advice from parents and their exposure to modern influence. Parents appear to blame the behavior of the younger generation for early marriage. As indicated by Rashida (see quote below) the current adolescent generation does not 'fear men' and does not listen to advice from their parents and elderly in the society.

"...today's children do not fear men, we used to fear men a lot. But today, if you sit a child down to advise her concerning that, she will not listen because these things that are there today were not there during our time. You and her will just be sitting and her phone will ring and she will get up and leave without returning." (Rashida, female, trader)

This current generation's refusal to listen to parental and elderly advice seemed to be linked to their non-compliance with existing social norms on premarital sex - their lack of 'fear of men' is believed to have led adolescent girls into livelihoods and activities that cause them to get pregnant and eventually get married early.

"No. I put her in school, while she was in school I warned her with every bit of advice because I told her that honestly I don't have and your father too doesn't have... It was left with 2 years... no, that year that they were going to write in JHS

and she got pregnant ... Yes. She took the pregnancy to her husband's house and gave birth and brought the child back home." (Nafisa, female, farmer)

Nafisa (see quote above) shared her experience with her daughter and recounted that despite her repeated advice and warning for her daughter to focus on her education, she became pregnant. When she realized that her daughter had gotten pregnant, she felt helpless and sent her daughter away to marry the man responsible for the pregnancy.

Sociocultural and religious factors

The influence of extended family members in the marriage of a girl is also reported to be one of the reasons influencing the early marriage of adolescent girls. Azara (see quote below) explains that though she initially did not agree to the marriage of her adolescent daughter, she had to consent to her early marriage due to the advice she received from her extended family and her personal need for belonging (not ostracized) to a family.

"Yes. So, because she was going to school, I said I won't agree and it caused some misunderstandings. Then my father's [elders of the family] said now, I should remove myself from the matter and allow her marry, that if that is her destined place to be, it will be a blessing to the family. So that I should be patient and also give my approval and be happy for her and that man. She got married to him and stayed with him... You know that everyone wants to feel belonged and part of a family, so because my people said that I listened to them." (Azara, female, farmer)

Embedded in Azara's statement are beliefs in destiny and marriage being a blessing from God to the family. These beliefs seem to play an important role in the decision of the family to allow the early marriage of their adolescent daughter. Participants perceived marriage brings benefit to the entire family of the married individual and may be one of the enabling factors for the early marriage of some adolescent girls. Additionally, the process of getting pregnant by a particular man is explained as the expression of destiny by the family. When such a situation happens, inhibiting the marriage may mean preventing the blessings of the adolescent girl. Preventing an adolescent girl from marrying the man who impregnated her was also believed to be a sin on the part of parents against God as recounted in Nafisa's account.

"For someone, it is by the grace of God, she can be interested in a man but if she is not lucky with men, she will find it difficult to get a man. One can also be there and is very young and God will bless her with luck concerning men, and she will be very young but is able to get married." (Nafisa, female, farmer)

Nafisa's statement may reflect cultural and religious values and norms that place the man as the owner of an unborn child whose property when taken from him is perceived

as a sin. Moreover, early marriage was perceived as a blessing from God since the ability of a child to find a man was perceived as luck on her part to find a suitable man for marriage early. Finding a suitable man at an early age meant suitability for marriage as expressed by Nafisa.

“... So, we left it (pregnancy) until it came out and I told her father and they took her to her husband’s house. Because the young man is an orphan ... his uncle is an Imam and he told us that...it (preventing the marriage) will be sinning against God. So, we allowed her to go to her husband’s house and gave birth...” (Nafisa, female, farmer)

Another reason given by parents for the early marriage of adolescent girls was idleness. There was the perception that when a girl is perceived to be mature enough to marry and not engaged in an activity (education or skills training) she is likely to engage in immoral acts. Marrying her off early is regarded as the best option for parents to prevent their children from engaging in immoral activities.

“but she has no work doing and knows that now she is ready for marriage, and she doesn’t marry, definitely she will be sitting like that and eventually end up in engaging in immoral acts.” (Azara, female, farmer)

Economic limitations

Economic difficulties were reported to be one of the prominent reasons that influenced some participants to marry off their daughters. Accounts indicated that when the parents are not able to provide for the basic needs of their children, marrying off their daughters at a young age becomes a viable option as it reduces the burden of catering for those daughters especially if they had been impregnated.

Nafisa: “Because she had a child and I didn’t have, and when the fees came it was ₵700 (\$130) which I couldn’t afford so I made her stop [schooling] because I don’t have and her father, too, doesn’t have and we don’t also have anyone to pay that amount for us. I then asked her to stop the school because I cannot afford...”

Researcher: “So because of that you allowed her to get married?”

Nafisa: “Yes.” (Nafisa, female, farmer)

When children, especially daughters are perceived as burdens, parents appear to encourage them to marry early or find a job which then converts them into a means to support the livelihood of parents and the entire family. Findings further indicate that in encouraging their children into marriage parents are usually not sure of the outcome

and only hope that the marriage will be beneficial to their daughters and them. Jamila explains this assertion when she says

“... when you are still looking at the mother and father, it is a source of worry to them. But if you look for livelihood, it is a source of happiness to them. If you go there (matrimonial home) and it turns out to be where you belong, God will place a stone on your heart and you will remain there and give birth...” (Jamila, female, shea butter processor)

Parents' emotional response to marriage

Parents' emotional reactions to the early marriage of their daughters were mixed and were dependent on the circumstances surrounding the marriage as well as parents' plans for the future of their daughters. Some parents reported feeling happy about the marriage of their child because their child had found love, a life partner and fulfilling her purpose in life.

“... We were happy because you cannot be unhappy. ... You give birth to a child to also get married, isn't it? And both of them loved each other so when she was leaving, we were happy about it. There is no way we could say we are not happy about it.” (Abu, male, security guard)

Others reported having mixed feelings about the marriage of their daughters as explained in Abiba's case.

“Okay, I was happy because even if I am not happy, I have to be. Because it was school that I rather wanted her to attend and she refused and wanted to get married; definitely, I had to let her marry. I then made up my mind to be happy and let her get married.” (Abiba, female, trader)

Experiencing mixed feelings about a daughter's marriage appears to emanate from parents' preferred life course choices for their daughters. When children chose to marry despite their parents' plans for them to complete their education, they decided to accept and be content with their children since marriage was a life they had chosen. Some parents also expressed feeling hurt, sad, anxious and depressed by the pregnancy of their daughters which strongly influenced them to marry them off even though they had hoped for them to complete their education.

“As for the child (my daughter), she has really hurt me badly. Your mother has never cried and cried till her tears stops. My child, as if you knew! It is the distress that has made me... the girl makes me anxious and depressed...I thought I was blessed till she got pregnant.... This alone troubles the mother...” (Rashida, female, trader)

Other parents reported feeling angry about their daughter's pregnancy and subsequent marriage. As a result, some parents beat up their daughters before sending them off to their matrimonial homes.

“Yes. She wasn't getting married at that time; it was because of it (the pregnancy) and her father beat her up and took her to her husband's house.” (Amina, female, unemployed)

Punishment was usually meted out to show their disapproval of their daughters' actions and, in some cases, their sense of helplessness.

Perceived implications of early marriage

Following the reasons given by parents for the marriage of their daughters, their views on the possible implications of their daughters' marriage were explored to determine whether they felt their daughter's marriage had any implications for their daughters and themselves. Findings reflected parents' perceived benefits and concerns of their daughter's marrying at an early age.

Perceived benefits

The benefits of early marriage were viewed as either socially or economically defined. The acquisition of children and respect are perceived to be benefits of early marriage and are linked to the sociocultural expectations of the society. Economic benefits are linked to relief from economic responsibilities and receiving financial support from married daughters.

Social benefits. Respect was a perceived benefit of early marriage based on the accounts of parents of married girls. Marriage is perceived to elevate the status of the family besides conferring respect and honor on the married girl since marriage is an important and prestigious institution in the society.

“If you are ready for marriage but still in your father's house, your respect decreases... am I lying? Because every child who doesn't respect you, when you are married they tend to respect you.” (Abiba, no age. Trader)

The birth of children was also reported to be a major benefit of the early marriage of adolescent girls. Being grandparents was a source of pride for most parents of adolescent girls who had married and given birth according to Mariama. This is expressed in her statement

“... now she too has married and has given birth, in that case the benefit is coming from the children. Yes, and I also get grandchildren. Yes.” (Mariama, female, Potter/Rice refiner)

In addition to being grandparents, their grandchildren were also a source of pride for their daughters since they (grandchildren) were perceived to be economically valuable and were expected to grow into adults and take care of their parents as presented by Nafisa.

“God will bless you with prosperous children, and you can also look at him one day and be proud. And he too will look after you tomorrow and be pleased. That is the benefits of it.” (Nafisa, female, farmer)

Economic benefits. This benefit reflected the economic reasons for marrying daughters in addition to the perceived benefits of children as offspring. There was confirmation that parents married off their daughters because they were perceived to be an economic burden on the family and were therefore sent off into early marriage or converted into a source of livelihood for the upkeep of parents and the family. Converting their daughters into a means of livelihood meant marrying them to a man who then assumes the responsibility of catering for her thereby relieving parents of their responsibilities. Nafisa explains this in the following statement:

“She, too, when she gets married into a home and sits at one place, it is beneficial. If she has no work and is married, it has benefits. Now she has someone who owns her in addition to her parents owning her but if she is married, you are no longer responsible for her. It is now the man who will take responsibility of her. Those ones that you are also responsible for, when it comes to them, you can also take them. That is also beneficial and what she too will go and produce, and it will also take care of her tomorrow. (Nafisa, female, farmer)

Other benefits highlighted by Nafisa in the statement above is the fact that marriage controls an adolescent girl’s interaction with men and prevents engaging in amorous behaviors as “sitting at one place” signifies the inability of the adolescent girls to engage with other men. Parents benefitted from their daughter’s marriage by receiving monies for their upkeep from their married adolescent daughters.

“...Just recently, I was sitting when she called me and said, ‘Mma, I am going to send you money for your upkeep’ and I told her ‘God will bless you with more of this’ and I went to retrieve the money.” (Rashida, 50 years, Trader)

Perceived disadvantages

The disadvantages of the early marriage of adolescent girls reported by their parents include a change in their relationship with their daughters, the impeding of education and skills acquisition of the married girls and negative psychological implications.

Change in relationship. Some parents reported that the marriage of their daughters has brought a change in their relationship due to either their daughters living far from them or have become busy due to marital responsibilities.

“Now that she has two more children in addition to these ones, they have become many (laughs). The children have made her so busy that she doesn’t get time to come and pay me visits anymore.” (Abiba, female, trader)

Impeding of education and skills acquisition. Early marriage, according to some parents, halts the education and the possibility of their daughters acquiring skills that may have been beneficial for their future wellbeing. Reports indicate that they become solely dependent on their husband who may not be providing the help and basic needs of their daughters and grandchildren.

“What I would say is that they should look after and monitor their children very well, because early marriage cuts away their opportunity to find work and earn a living.” (Abu, male, security guard)

Psychological implications. Although most parents did not experience any form of distress due to the early marriage of their daughters, some parents’ perspectives on the impact of early marriage indicated that their daughters were experiencing some form of psychological distress.

“... if you are not ready for marriage and you go into it, it will be a problem for you. That is the problem she was facing because she isn’t ready for marriage... eihin ... and the boy too cannot take care of her.” (Amina, female, unemployed)

Accounts of psychological distress were as a result of daughters’ immaturity for marriage, expected responsibilities in marriage, catering for children, and daughters’ unmet marriage expectations are reported by parents.

Discussion

The main themes that emerged from the parents’ views and experiences on the early marriage of their daughters focused on their reasons for marrying off their daughters early, their reactions to and perceived implications of the marriage of early marriage of their adolescent girls.

Literature on the reasons for the practice of child marriage in Ghana corresponds with parents’ motives for the early marriage of their daughters in this study. One of the primary reasons presented by parents was displaced to the child (i.e., it was the choice of the adolescent girl to marry, marriage due to early pregnancy and oppositional behavior of a generation). A review of studies conducted on child marriage in Ghana revealed similar child-driven causes of early marriage (MoGCSP, 2016; Tsekpo et al., 2016). These

child-driven causes were reported to depict parental neglect due to perceived parental inability to provide the basic needs of the children which then caused the children to enter into marriages to satisfy those basic needs (UG-CSPS & WVG, 2017). Parents were blamed for the early marriage of their daughters with most studies reporting that some children were forced into those marriages (African Union, 2015; Alhassan, 2013). Findings in this study, however, seem to present an interplay of power dynamics between parents, their children and the cultural norms in the communities where the study was conducted. Although children in communities where child marriage is practiced have been portrayed as powerless in deciding who and whether or not to marry (Alhassan, 2013), findings reveal parents' lack of control over their daughters' decision to marry in some instances. Some children were depicted as having more control over their early marriage as they were reported to use pregnancy as a tool to force their parents into marrying them off. Cultural norms on patrilineal inheritance and the child belonging to the patriclan were reported to leave mothers powerless regarding making important decisions about the well-being of their children. Those same cultural norms also forced parents to marry off their daughters to the men who impregnated them since the unborn child was perceived to belong to the man who impregnated the adolescent girl.

Other major reasons for early marriage mentioned by parents were grounded in the cultural and religious beliefs surrounding marriage and sexuality in their communities. Cultural and religious beliefs surrounding marriage have been reported to be a major cause for the practice of child marriage. Social rules on virginity, chastity and honor as well as perceptions on the importance of marriage and childbearing to the individual and their families are some causal factors for the practice of child marriage (African Union, 2015; Greene et al., 2015).

Perceived implications of early marriage reported by participants revealed that early marriage had benefits for the married girl and her parents. The benefits mentioned by parents were procreation, respect and the economic benefits the parents and the married adolescent girl attained. Literature on the perceived benefits that drive parents to marry off their adolescent girls have listed procreation and the continuity of the family, respect and economic gains among other perceived benefits (African Union, 2015; Alhassan, 2013; WiLDAF Ghana, 2014).

Although parents were able to report benefits of early marriage, some acknowledged that there were negative implications for the adolescent girl as well. Some negative implications of the practice included the truncation of the education of adolescent girls prevents the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed for personal development, management of the home and the generation of income (Nguyen & Wodon, 2012; Psaki, 2014). Possible psychological effects on the adolescent girls identified by parents included sadness, depression and stress which were consistent with existing literature (Gage, 2013; John et al., 2019). Also, parents reported experiencing negative emotions

such as sadness, hopelessness, frustrations, and feelings of hurt by the actions of their children among others. These negative emotions may likely have negative consequences for their psychological health. Consistent with previous research (Gyesaw & Ankomah, 2013) even though some parents did not accept their daughter's decision to marry early, they were compelled to accept the child's decision especially when pregnancy was involved. Accepting the marriage may be the parents' way to cope with hurt and disappointment of the early pregnancy and the consequent marriage of their daughters.

Recommendations and limitations

Following the findings of the study, we suggest that interventions that focus on providing parents with the relevant skills, within their cultural context, that are needed to manage their adolescent children would be beneficial for parents and their children. Furthermore, government organizations and interventionists can organize skills training workshops, especially for parents who are unemployed and are facing economic difficulties in the utilization of raw materials and resources within their immediate environment to generate income. By doing this, parents will be equipped with skills which may help them engage in some form of income-generating activity to cater for the needs of their children. Further, although religion is reported as a contributing influence on early marriage, it could also be harnessed as a means to eliminate the practice. The findings in this study indicated strong religious beliefs surrounding the practice. Religious leaders can be recruited by the government and organizations working to prevent early marriage to educate the population against the practice of early marriage. By encouraging discussions about early marriage in religious spaces, religious leaders can also educate parents on ways to mentor their children and encourage them to pursue education instead of marriage. The reduction of poverty is also important for the prevention of child marriage. Government programs such as Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) program in poor communities can serve as a viable alternative to prevent parents from marrying off their daughters at an early age.

An inherent limitation of the study is the small sample size selected for the study with all participants being Dagomba and Muslims and seven out of eight being females. Limited time, resources and access did not allow for the recruitment of a more diverse and gender balanced sample. A study that recruits parents from diverse backgrounds and either gender-specific or gender-balanced participants will likely present a much broader and nuanced picture of the perspectives and experience of child marriage from the perspective of the parents of married girls.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex interplay of cultural, religious, economic, and family-related factors that shape parents' decisions to marry off their daughters early in Ghana. The findings suggest that child marriage is not driven by a single motivation but emerges from parents' attempts to navigate cultural expectations, early pregnancy, perceived loss of parental authority, daughters' oppositional behaviour, and changing social norms associated with modernity. Parents' accounts also reveal that early marriage may be perceived as offering certain social or economic benefits, despite its potentially significant implications for their daughters' lives and well-being. These findings underscore the need for child marriage interventions that move beyond individual-level awareness raising to engage parents, families, communities, religious and traditional leaders, and other key stakeholders in addressing the social and structural conditions that sustain the practice. Strengthening parent–daughter communication, supporting parents to navigate changing norms and adolescent development, and creating alternative pathways that promote girls' education, autonomy, and well-being may be critical to preventing early marriage. By centering parents' perspectives, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how child marriage is rationalised and sustained within families and offers important insights for developing culturally responsive strategies to prevent the practice and protect the rights and well-being of girls in Ghana.

Disclosure statement

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

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