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# Faith Effect and Voice on Early Marriage in a Nigerian State

**Jimoh Amzat**[1]

**Abstract**

The rate of early marriage is 87% in northwest Nigeria, although it is 56% in Kaduna. One major issue is that early marriage is often rationalized as a religious norm. This study explores the role of faith leaders in advancing the cause of adolescent girls regarding the timing of marriage in Kaduna state. This qualitative study took place in three local government areas: Chikun (Mixed Christians and Muslims), Makarfi (majority Muslims), and Zangon-Kataf (majority Christians) were purposively selected to have a variety of mixed religious contexts. Using purposive sampling methods, the researcher conducted 24 focus group discussions with adolescent girls, 24 in-depth interviews with faith leaders, and 12 key informant interviews with other stakeholders. The study used a framework method for analyzing qualitative data. The study found that faith leaders play essential roles in rationalizing or discouraging early marriage through preaching and other activities. The study identifies three categories of faith leaders concerning early marriage. Some are proactive, discoursing about it. The second category is the passive faith leaders, somehow indifferent but has never preached against or in favor of early marriage. The last set consists of faith leaders promoting early marriage—who think early marriage is still beneficial. The study recommends that considering the social position of faith leaders and critical role in sanctioning marital unions, they could be considered as a vital link in efforts to curtail early marriage.

**Keywords**

early marriage, faith leaders, adolescent girls, religion, Nigeria

## Introduction

Despite religious rationalization of early marriage, there is very scanty literature on the roles of faith leaders (FLs) on early marriage. Hence, this study examines faith effect and voice on early marriage in Kaduna, Nigeria. In general, Africa is a very religious continent, and Nigeria, in particular, is a very religious country. As people are religious, FLs enjoy a high level of respect in Nigerian communities. FLs are second to God and could exact considerable influences in the community they serve. More importantly, they constitute part of the most critical voice in marital solemnization (see Box 1). The most common religions in Nigeria include Christianity, Islam, and traditional religions. The emphasis in this study is on Christianity and Islam, which are the dominant religions in Nigeria.

Marriage is often viewed as a religious duty. In Christianity and Islam, marriage is highly recommended for all able-bodied. For instance, religion helps in regulating sexuality. The major denominations of Islam and Christianity forbid pre-marital sex and extra-marital relationship, and therefore often sermonize about marriage as a prescribed way of sexual gratification. Therefore, marriage and related practices are often rationalized with some religious reasons in African countries and Nigeria in particular (Amzat & Razum, 2018). It is essential to understand that in religious societies, every person is connected to one religious leader or more. The FLs are major stakeholders in household decision-making. Amzat and Razum (2018) observed,

> . . . religion is a major institution that shapes every aspect of human life. It is a force dominating individuals in Africa. Congregations are usually full of people praying for protection (i.e., against calamities) and prosperity (to escape poverty and related socio-economic calamities). (p. 73)

According to Christian Aid (2016), Faith Actors refer to "those involved in spreading and teaching of religious instructions," such as Pastors, Catechists, Sunday School teachers, Itinerant preachers, and Evangelists for the Christian faith, as well as Mallams, Sheikh, Alfas, and Imams for the Islamic faith. However, faith actors may be viewed as transcending these human actors, to include sociopolitical

[1]Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria

**Corresponding Author:**
Jimoh Amzat, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Sokoto 840001, Nigeria.
Email: greatjoa@gmail.com

*CORRECTION (April 2021): The citation of Amos 20:20 on page 4 was corrected to Amos 3:3.

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**Box 1.** Why Faith Leaders in Efforts to End Early Marriage in Africa.

- Africa is a religious continent (faith matters to people)
- Religion is often used in rationalizing early marriage
- People use divine law as an excuse to disobey the laws of the land
- Faith leaders conduct marriages
- Faith leaders teach about the virtues of marriage
- Faith leaders counsel couples on expectations within marriage
- Faith leaders host and officiate marriage ceremonies
- Faith leaders have congregations (mass of religious adherents)
- Faith leaders are moral and role leaders
- Faith leaders have power for grassroots mobilization.

organizations and/or institutions that have "faith" as a mandate, for example, media houses, charities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that are faith owned. More than the FLs who are more concerned with issues of administration, these actors (human and non-human) usually exist in, live among, and operate within the communities where early marriage takes place.

Religion is a significant factor for social control due to the high value placed on the doctrine and belief of organized religions by adherents (Giddens & Sutton, 2017; Macionis, 2000). FLs can positively harness religious teachings, beliefs, and doctrines to promoting behavior and practices that will be beneficial to adolescent girls as they are distinctively positioned as cultural leaders to initiate and lead a call to end violence against children (World Vision, 2008). The problems of misinterpretation of religious text by the faithfuls, about the "proper" time of marriage for girls, should be addressed using variously available forums and opportunities that exist in routine religious activities. There may be need for intervention projects on the age of marriage in adolescent girls to deepen dialogue with FLs and permit community conversation with focus on parents, religious leaders, traditional leaders, and representatives of adolescent girls, men, youths, and women to curtail risky norms, which usually put the girls and women at a disadvantage (Christian Aid, 2017).

The situation is that child early and forced marriage (CEFM) has been wildly reported as a significant problem responsible for vulnerability to violence, discrimination, and abuse, and preventing the victims from productive participation in economic, political, and social spheres (Amzat, 2019; Amzat & Razum, 2014). In sociology, religion is a fundamental aspect of culture and a major aspect of the social system with enormous influence on social life and events. The Durkheimian perspective, traced to Emile Durkheim (a classical French sociologist), is still a primary reference in explaining the place of religion in human society. Durkheim (1995), in *Elementary forms of religion* (first published in 1912), and, later, Thomas Luckmann (1967) provided more insights into sociology of religion. For Durkheim, the main argument is that religion exacts an enormous influence on the thinking and behavior of members of society. Religion mediates actions and provides conviction or justification for practices. The implication is that most community members adhere to religious injunctions and opinions to rationalize their actions. In religious communities of Africa, religion is still a significant factor in marriage, childbirth, and, in general, everyday life. Religion remains central to marital life: spouse selection, solemnization, and dissolution of marriage (see also Box 1). Thus, marriage is one of the religious rites and rituals in both Christianity and Islam. For Thomas Luckmann, unlike in developing societies, religion is gradually becoming invisible in modern societies (Goldstein, 2012). Such invisibility of religion is why religion might not be a significant factor in everyday life for most people in developed societies.

Social norms (including religious norms) have also been implicated in CEFM. In most religious settings, especially in developing nations, the mere commencement of puberty (signified by menstruation) translates to maturity, which consequently, in many instances, leads to (early) marriage and entry into sexual life (Montazeri et al., 2016; Santhya & Jejeebhoy, 2015). The religious pressure against premarital sex and childbirth out of marriage is often a strong justification for early marriage, without due consideration of the grievous consequences of such an option (i.e., early marriage). Therefore, religious beliefs significantly influence the timing of marriage of adolescent girls (Amzat, 2019; DeJong et al., 2005; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001). The use of religion as a rationalization for CEFM makes it widespread in most religious communities. Such practice is seen as a form of adherence to faith and, by extension, to God. Despite its gradual invisibility, religion is sometimes a correlate of early marriage in developed societies (see Eggebeen & Dew, 2009; Uecker, 2014), though not forced marriage in such context as the law against marriage before the age of consent is relatively stronger compared with developing nations. In the United States, religious contexts are also associated with early marriage, as conservative Protestants are still more likely to marry earlier than mainline Protestants and Catholics (Uecker, 2014).

## Method

This is a qualitative study with data sourced from adolescent girls, FLs, and community stakeholders.

**Table 1.** Study Areas and Study Population Including Sample Size.

| Local government areas | Selected communities | FGD (adolescents) | KII (stakeholders) | IDI (religious leaders) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chikun | Ungwan Romi | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| | Juji | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| | Kujama | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| | Mararaba Rido | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | | 8 | 4 | 8 |
| Makarfi | Aba Malan | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| | Kwatakwore | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| | Soko | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| | Fadama | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | | 8 | 4 | 8 |
| Zangon-Kataf | Zango-Urban | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| | Kurmi Bi | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| | Sagwaza Gorah | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| | Zaku | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | | 8 | 4 | 8 |
| Overall total | | 24 | 12 | 24 |

*Note.* FGD = focus group discussion; KII = key informant interview; IDI = in-depth interview.

## Study Design

The study is a cross-sectional qualitative study about the roles of FLs in advancing the cause of adolescent girls regarding the timing of marriage. The qualitative study involved non-numerical collection and representation of data. Qualitative research continually builds a comprehensive holistic picture, analyzes words, and reports detailed views and experience of informants within a natural setting (Creswell, 2013). Understanding the choice of early marriage as well as related religious contexts is imperative as formative ground for the implementation research or policy formulation/implementation.

## Study Area and Population

Three local government areas, Chikun (mixed Christians and Muslims), Makarfi (majorly Muslims), and Zangon-Kataf (majorly Christians), were purposively selected for this study. The sampled areas are representative of Nigeria as a multi-religious society. The total population figure for the three areas is 837,837. The population figures by area are as follows: Chikun: 372,272; Makarfi: 146,574, and Zangon-Kataf: 318,991 (2006 census), making a total of 837,837.

## Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The sampling design for the study was based on a purposive selection of respondents and discussants. While the areas, in general, have some common features, there were some little variations. Therefore, the sampling considered the variations in the selection of the respondents. The variables considered in selecting respondents included age, level of education (both literates and non-literates) and religion. Through the help of the contact persons, community members, recruitment of participants was made through house–house visits to select households with adolescent girls.

In each of the local government areas, the team also conducted eight focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescent girls, four key informant interviews (KIIs) for other stakeholders, and eight in-depth interviews (IDIs) for religious leaders (see Table 1 for sample size and selected communities). FLs are religious clerics or preachers with some congregation; the stakeholders are mainly community leaders, and adolescent girls are those between the ages of 12 and 18.

## Data Collection

The primary data collection involved a within-method triangulation of qualitative methods—specifically regarding the instruments, KIIs, IDIs, and FGDs were used (see Table 1). Before the commencement of the study, verbal informed consent of the respondents was obtained, and they were equally accorded the right to opt out when they desired. Confidentiality was assured, and anonymity ensured. Parents granted permission for their daughters to be included in the study. The study also ensured the traditional norms of legitimate community entry.

The FDGs were conducted for adolescent girls, with six to eight girls per session. Some variables (such as religion, education, and marital status) were considered in the selection of the girls to ensure the homogeneity of each group, and to ensure that various groups were included in the sample. Invariably, literate and non-literate girls, and married and unmarried, were sampled. The ring form of sitting arrangement was maintained as the assigned Research Assistants facilitated the discussions: Six sessions for Muslim girls and two sessions for Christian girls were conducted in Makarfi,

then four for each of the two religious groups in Chikun, and, finally, six sessions for Christian girls and two sessions for Muslim girls in Zangon-Kataf.

In-depth interviews were conducted for faith or religious leaders who have some congregation. The idea was to understand their conception of early marriage and what they have been doing to curtain it in their communities. Based on variation in the proportion of Muslims and Christians in the local government areas, six Islamic FLs and two Christian FLs were sampled in Makarfi, then four for each of the two religious groups in Chikun, and, finally, six Christians and two Islamic FLs in Zangon-Kataf. The FGDs were distributed the same way (in numbers) with the IDIs, while the KIIs were evenly distributed. A total of 24 IDIs were conducted (see Table 1).

Also, 12 KIIs were conducted for stakeholders: four in each of the local government areas. The targets were other community leaders apart from FLs in the communities, including community association leaders, traditional leaders, women leaders, government officials in relevant departments, and other relevant stakeholders. KIIs served as a counterbalance/reality check to FLs' submissions.

In all, 18 data collectors were hired for the data collection. They were mostly postgraduate students from Usmanu Danfodiyo University and Kaduna State University who were residing in Kaduna (about 70% of them are from Kaduna State). The Research Assistants consisted of both Christians and Muslims in equal numbers, and only those who speak Hausa language (the local language) fluently were selected. Each team had six data collectors (three males and three females), with one designated collector as the team leader or supervisor. Subgroups of two data collectors were formed: one for FGDs and one for IDIs and KIIs. The data collectors also simultaneously transcribed and translated the qualitative sessions after the data collection exercise. The author developed the research instruments, trained the data collectors, supervised the entire data collection exercise, analyzed the data, and wrote the report.

## Data Analysis

Qualitative data display includes prose style and flowchart. The qualitative data generated through FGDs, IDIs, and KIIs were analyzed with the use of content analysis and ethnography following steps in framework analysis (see Lacey & Luff, 2001).

## Findings

The finding generally shows that faith and FLs play significant roles in marital solemnization in general and early marriage in particular. During the in-depth interviews, the Christian FLs disclosed that they often serve as marriage counselors to know the state of mind of the girl if she is ready for marriage and sometimes organize marriage seminars. A number of them submitted that they do not encourage early marriage. In a mixed community (both Christians and Muslims) in Makarfi, the Christian girls considered the age range from 18 to 20 as ideal, while the Muslim girls considered 16 to 18 as ideal. In a Muslim community in Makarfi, the participants were unanimous in their agreement that it was their tradition to marry from 14 (sometimes below) and so the community members often put pressure to ensure that girls are married off as early as possible. The pressure was further entrenched, such that if a prospective suitor could not afford a bride price, the father of either of the prospective spouse could pay the bride price, which is a primary requisite for marital solemnization. For most of the Muslim FLs interviewed, they were not aware of a particular age of marriage in Islam as there is no Quranic quotation to support their stance; however, they seem to think that 14 years is the appropriate age. An Islamic FL observed,

> There is no specific age of marriage in the Quran and tradition of the Prophet. The main criterium is that a girl should be mature, then marriage. Most times, we think that a girl that is up to 14 years old is mature enough for marriage.

Many of the adolescent girl discussants reported that it did not matter what age they wanted to marry; it was the timing of their parents that matter. A substantial majority of married adolescents wished they had not married early. Unfortunately, they recounted that they had to follow parental wish. In one FGD in the Muslim majority area of Markarfi, all of the participants had married between the ages of 12 and 14 (see Box 2). Most of the respondents were of the view that they would not have married before the age of 20 to 21 and would also have wanted to have Islamic or Western education, while some would have wanted to attend vocational training. The main opinion of the respondents was that they married at a time that was culturally and personally acceptable to their parents. In what was a general submission, one FGD married discussant in Makarfi reported,

> Although many of us wish to marry later, we have to obey our parents to marry when we did. Sometimes, the faith leaders also put pressure on our parents that a girl should be married when they (faith leaders) perceive that the girl is mature.

The implication is that many Islamic FLs promote early marriage. On the other side, data from the FGDs in Christian communities revealed that most of the girls marry much later than their Muslim counterparts. In a general submission, a Christian discussant noted that "it is not common to find any girl married between the age of 12 and 15 here." For most of the Christian FLs, early marriage is a forced marriage. A majority of them also realized their potential to change the course of action, by preaching against under-age marriage. As it relates to the notion in the Bible, Amos 3:3, two people can only walk or work together if it is willful. Early marriage is recognized as an old tradition, which is inimical to the

**Box 2.** Early Marriage Practices.

**Case Extracted from FGD, Soko Community, Muslim majority Makarfi, Non-Literate Unmarried girls**

It was discovered that four of the girls aged 12 to 14 were to be married in 6 weeks, and the youngest (12 years old) was to be married as a second wife. One of the respondents had finished 6 years of schooling and wanted to continue. However, her father wanted her to marry because some men in the community were alluding to the notion that his wife is in control of the home for insisting that her children should attend schools. The physical maturity of the girls was what determined their eligibility for marriage regardless of actual age. The norm in the community was that the man that can pay the sum of 40–50,000 naira (i.e., $100–150) to the father of the girl would be the husband, regardless of the age gap between the prospective couple. Among the girls was a lady that had been divorced thrice and was aged 18 years. She had been married at 10, and in all the marriages, she was always an additional wife. She also said that as the norm of the village, once a suitor has money to pay, her father would still marry her off. The girls also corroborated the perspective that they were not allowed to access any form of schooling because they had to help their mothers in home chores. Another common factor with the other FGDs (in the Muslim areas) was the fact that the girls felt that Islamic religious leaders would never discourage early marriage. They insisted that the village did not want any form of learning for the girls. They also purported that the religious and traditional leaders were also a part of the problem because they marry their daughters off early too.

**Box 3.** A Priest Intervened in a Forced (Underage) Marriage as a Result of an Unplanned Pregnancy.

A girl got pregnant, and her parents sent her packing that she should go and meet her boyfriend, she narrated her ordeal to me. So being a priest, I went to the parents and told them the implications of sending this little girl to get married. The girl is young; she is not old enough to be a mother; she may not be accepted; she will suffer there. So, they might end up losing the girl and the unborn baby. She is not welcome there and might not get appropriate care. So, the parents listened to me and gave it a second thought. I pleaded with the parent to bring their daughter back, and they did.

Christian way of life. Early marriage sometimes occurs within the traditional Christian communities, due to some exemptions, including unplanned pregnancy and the need to give birth in a partner's house (see Box 3), but the church does not endorse or encourage early marriage. There is age differential in the timing of marriage between the Muslims and Christians in the study. In general, the Muslim girls marry much earlier than the Christian girls. The significant observable reason in this study is that most of the Islamic FLs in the Muslim communities are promoting early marriage.

In the FGDs, most of the respondents had heard about the adverse effects of early marriage ranging from Vesico Vaginal Fistula disease (an abnormal space between the bladder and the vagina, enabling the discharge of urine into the vaginal vault) to difficulty in pregnancy and labor. They also elaborated that early marriage also leads to divorce, unhappiness for the girl, dissatisfaction with marriage, and the girl absconding the marriage to become a sex-worker. For married respondents, early marriage leads to complications; some of them had experienced some of the complications themselves or knew someone who had. Some of these complications included Vesico Vaginal Fistula, and maternal and infant morbidity and mortality.

According to adolescent girls in the FGDs, most Muslim religious leaders did not preach about the negative aspects of early marriage, other than how a woman should live with in-laws and husbands, while Christian leaders did discuss some negative consequences. In Muslim majority Makarfi, almost all of the ladies claimed not to have heard any preaching against early marriage. Only a few of the ladies acknowledged to have heard about it, and according to them, most of the Islamic preachers thought that it was beneficial for girls to marry early. For Muslim majority Makarfi, many of the adolescent girls noted that there was no support from any quarters because even the religious and traditional leaders also marry out their girl child at age 14 or less. It was the custom. In essence, there are no organized programs in the rural area of Makarfi about early marriage.

The girls interviewed in Zangon-Kataf suggested that the religious leaders do not really speak of a specific age of marriage for the girl child and that as long as the parents of any girl think that it is time for the girl to get married, the FL will solemnize the union. Therefore, the timing of marriage in the community is the prerogative of the parents. For another discussion group of girls in Zangon-Kataf, the teachings of the religious leaders were different based on their interpretation of the holy books and denominations. For some of the respondents, the preachers were against early marriage, while some were for early marriage, so it depends on the FL.

In a Christian community of Makarfi, FLs often discussed the timing of marriage in their congregational meeting, and early marriage was not encouraged. These groups of girls said some religious leaders preach to them that girls should not be encouraged to marry early. According to these participants, just a few years ago, girls were married off as young as 10. However, it was probably because of the preaching of religious leaders; girls are not married off that much early anymore. Some of the respondents (mostly the Christians) had attended religious gatherings where the age of marriage for the girl child was discussed. In those gatherings, the parents were encouraged not to force their girl children into early marriage.

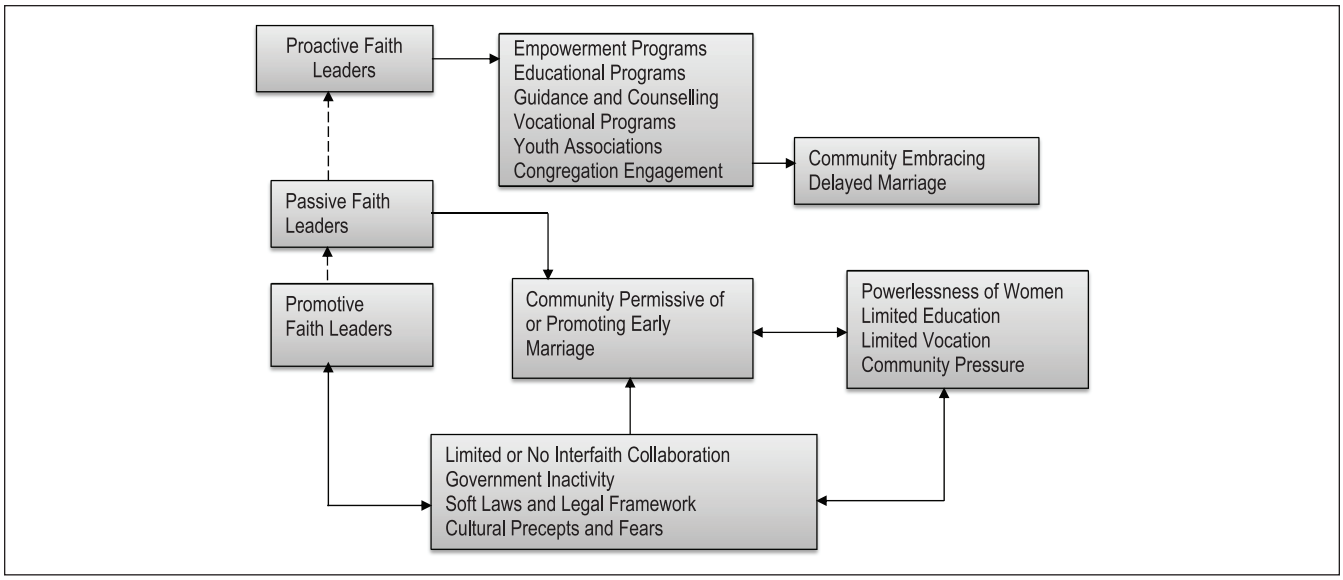



**Figure 1.** Faith leaders, community issues, and early marriage (compiled by the author).

From the preceding, the two local government areas of Zagon-Kataf and Chikun present the opposite of the situation in Markafi. The faith institutions seem more proactive. Many of the Christian FLs reported they were doing a lot to empower girls and discourage CEFM. The empowerment programs also included vocational training like tailoring, knitting, and so on. A community leader and another Christian FL (in Chikun) observed,

> Faith leaders, in conjunction with non-governmental organizations, are giving the young girls the chance to come and discuss their problems and pray for their problems. Whenever they are in any problem, they seek support from the faith leaders and community leaders. There are many programs the Church designed for the adolescent girls and boys to prepare for life in marriage. We are discouraging early marriage in Churches. I have observed the consequences of early marriage from some that did it. They came and complained. When somebody made a mistake, you should use that experience to correct others.

It was the same pattern in Zangon-Kataf: The church is proactive and making efforts to curtain early marriage and empower girls. A Christian FL (in Zangon-Kataf) submitted,

> We play some roles in the church; that is why we do conduct marriage interviews. There are also marriage classes where boys and girls are trained on likely sweets and challenges of marriage—feeding them with the words of God. Because the word of God in Matthew 24:24 says when you go into the world, teach them. So, the stage [marital life] they want to enter, we need to teach them.

The general submission in the rural Muslim community of Markafi is that community members were gatekeepers in ensuring that girls get married early. The young men, to the older folks, relatives, and so on, continuously talk about the fact that a girl is matured at 12 and above and should be married. The fear is that if the girls are not married off, they may become pregnant and bring shame to their families. For these respondents, the pressure is usually from the community itself; the community members will put pressure on the parents through gossips about how the girls are becoming "too" mature and may start to have unsanctioned sexual affairs with men.

In general, there were three categories of FLs regarding early marriage (see Figure 1). Some FLs are proactive, discoursing about CEFM. Such FLs have realized the harmful effects of early marriage and are preaching against it in their communities. This category is mostly found in Christian majority Zango-Kataf and mixed religions Chikun areas. They are more Christian FLs than Muslim ones among them. As shown in Figure 1, the community where the proactive FLs live, the community members are fast embracing delayed marriage. What is also observable is that girl child education is prioritized in communities embracing delayed marriage. There are also other programs, including youth forums, and vocational and empowerment programs for adolescent girls. Even where there is a norm of forceful marriage upon pregnancy, the FLs have been intervening, and some parents are reversing the cultural trend (see Box 3). The proactive FLs are confident that they should be included in the efforts to curb early marriage in their communities.

Some FLs also made some recommendations on how to ensure intervention on the timing of marriage of adolescent girls. A Christian FL from the mixed religions Chikun area observed,

> I will encourage every church to organize a youth forum for the married and singles so that the married can educate the singles

> on marriage. The elders of the community should also organize forums where issues of early marriage are discouraged. Spiritual leaders should also teach youths in churches on the issue of early marriage. Also, parents should teach their children sex education because parents shy away from that. Especially in my community, discussing sex between parents and their children is seen as an abomination.

The second category is the passive FLs, somehow indifferent but has never preached against or in favor of early marriage. Most of them have not realized the negative implications of early marriage. This group can be conveniently combined with the next category, those who are promoting early marriage. For them, early marriage is even beneficial. They have subscribed to community fears about the shame of unplanned pregnancy and pre-marital sex, which are grievous sins within a religious community. The argument (of the promotive FLs) is that a girl should be married at an early age than to allow her to stay single and probably have premarital sexual intercourse or become pregnant. These categories (the passive and promotive FLs) are mostly found in the Muslim majority of Makarfi communities.

As observed during the study visits, the communities with passive FLs are marked by poor girl child education and a lack of empowerment programs (see Figure 1). Community members take active roles in recommending early marriage, that is, ensuring that girls are married off as early as possible. Powerlessness is observed among girls, as most of the girls submitted that they did not have any say in their marriage. Forced marriage is highly pronounced in Makarfi. Some other underlying factors of early marriage are limited or no interfaith collaboration, government inactivity, and soft laws and weak legal framework. The legal age of marriage is 18, but some FLs still officiate in underage marriages. This is possible because of a lack of enforcement of the Child Rights Act and other legal frameworks in Nigeria. The only hope as represented with the dotted arrows is that with some interventions, the promotive and passive FLs have the potential also to become proactive.

As previously observed, even in Muslim communities, some key persons still believe that FLs have many roles to play in reversing the trends of early marriage. Like many others, the government official from the Muslim majority Makarfi area also noted the influence of FLs but confirmed that there is no active program in the community involving the FLs. Others, including a Muslim woman leader from Makarfi, noted,

> What I think should be done to strengthen the policies/programs on the timing of marriage for adolescent girls is that the Imams and the village heads should cooperate and mobilize the people of the community on the negative consequences of the early marriage. The government also should work effectively on empowering the parents to enrol and keep their children in school. Also, preaching and sermons will contribute immensely to the issue of the timing of marriage. We lack orientation on education, so the government should create awareness on the importance of education in the rural areas, which will help to reduce the cases of early marriage.

In Christian majority Zangon-Kataf, a Christian FL noted that solutions could be found:

> By ensuring faith leaders give sermons on early marriage in their place of worship. Religious leaders should endeavor to introduce programs in their places of worship where such issues will be discussed with both the adolescent boys and girls.

Also in Kataf, a Christian FL added,

> Yes, as I said, here in the Catholic Church, we organize these programs with the youths and the parents, where we talk to them, where we advise them, where we encourage them, to know what they are doing as not to destroy their future. Apart from that, we go to the next level where you have more than one church coming together for the same programs: we have more than 20 churches coming together. Different tribes meet at the youth level, and then we talk to them . . .

Respondents from mixed Chikun and majority Christian Zangon-Kataf areas believed that FLs could significantly influence parents on the timing of marriage. In general, in rural Muslim communities, FLs are tolerant of early marriage, although there are a few exceptions. For instance, in Makarfi, a religious FL narrated how he was able to convince a parent from giving out a 12-year-old for marriage. In Zangon-Kataf, a majority of the respondents observed that many FLs would not agree to administer a wedding for under-age. From the preceding, it is evident that the FLs hold many potentials in addressing the timing of marriage for adolescent girls in their communities. The main issue is how to harness these potentials so that they will proactively serve as change agents in their respective communities.

## Discussion of Findings

In the communities surveyed, religion still plays essential roles in daily life. Therefore, the Durkheimian perspective is still relevant in explaining some crucial behavior and practices, including CEFM, because the practice, mostly in Muslim communities, is rationalized with religion. Also, in Christian communities where CEFM is less prevalent, religion plays a significant role in discouraging it. Religious Clergies/Clerics are closer to the people, particularly their congregations, which usually include parents of the adolescent girls. They teach and interpret religious laws and principles based on their respective scriptures, which the people hold in very high esteem. By their ability to bring succor to the people through prayers and counseling, clerics also wield influence in the community and sometimes mediate in conflict situations that might emerge in the process of contracting the marriage. Equally important in this regard are the

Faith-Based Organizations, which given their humanitarian stance command some trust within the communities. Faith-owned media organizations are also actors that can make an inestimable contribution to addressing early marriage, using their platform to dissolve perennial ideological roots of the problem.

The faith actors operate under the platform of churches and mosques, and their allied religious institutions which include groups and organizations such as Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC); the Catholic Women Organization (CWO) of the Catholic church; Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN);, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN); Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) Society; Jama'at Izalat al-Bid'a Wa Iqmat as Sunna (JIBWIS); Nasrul-Lahi-L-Fatih Society (NASFAT); and Dove Television and Lumen Christian Television owned by the Catholic church and Redeemed Christian Church of God. These groups are ultimately under the headship of FLs who hold great power and influence. FLs coordinate, define the mission and vision, and sometimes own these organizations. They can determine the content of the message that is eventually distilled down to their congregants. FLs need to know that religion has certain social teachings and social responsibilities, which it owes to the people beyond the core spiritual (Kukah, 2010).

Walker (2015) reported that Muslim scholars were unwilling to communicate knowledge about the Islamic position on a minimum age of marriage to the *ummah* (i.e., Muslim communities). The scholars themselves, it was reported, neither believed in prescribing a specific age for marriage nor did they agree to communicate messages with implications for delaying marriage, arguing that such a position will contradict the sociocultural value of chastity, which is emphasized in their home cultures. The Muslim FLs, however, agreed that maturity (of the girl) is necessary to reduce exposure to maternal health problems. Unfortunately, "maturity" has always been loosely defined in religious circles, therefore, subject to the personal interpretations of the people and FLs. The foregoing submission is consistent with the finding of this study in Muslim communities. The implication of this is that FLs themselves first need to be educated to view early marriage from the objective perspective of the dangers that it portends with examples all around them. Training and other forms of intervention also need to be committed to equipping FLs in engaging other faith actors through them and ultimately bringing all stakeholders into the conversation and action to improve and end child marriage.

## Conclusion

The general submission is that FLs are playing some roles regarding the timing of marriage for adolescent girls. In general, some FLs have been preaching about the age of marriage. Another recommendation from FLs, which the respondents mentioned, was that a girl should be mature before getting married. This simplifies that faith is a critical issue in the timing of marriage. Hence, the FLs can be employed to lend moral authority to campaign against early marriage while advocating for changes in policy and legislation to protect children as well as support families who are struggling in the face of adversity (Karam, 2015). United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2014) stressed that "faith matters to people, and matters to development" and that FLs "are influential in both the political and social spheres, and have a broad following in society." UNDP understands the multiplier influence that FLs do have on their communities. They observed that they have a significant presence in local communities and have the capacity to deliver critical messages and services. They can easily "mobilize grassroots support, earn the trust of vulnerable groups, and influence cultural norms—all of which makes them vital stakeholders in development" (UNDP, 2014, p. 3). In developing countries, where there are limited safety nets, FLs and faith organizations have been in the frontline of charity and other forms of community support. UNDP further buttressed that engaging FLs is "crucial in areas where governance structures are weak and fail to ensure human rights and administer basic services, including in relation to protection, justice, and education." While there are laws (including the Child Rights Act) against CEFM, it is never enforced, and after all, most marriages are not officially registered in Nigeria.

The study identified three categories of FLs, those proactive, passive, and promotive. The "proactive" FLs hold negative views about CEFM. This category constitutes potential change agents. Then, there are passive FLs who neither agree nor disagree with early marriage. Finally, there are those FLs who promote early marriage. Each group requires a different programmatic engagement. During the in-depth interviews, the Christian FLs disclosed that they often serve as marriage counselors to know the state of mind of the girl if she is ready for marriage and sometimes organize marriage seminars. A number of them submitted that they do not encourage early marriage. The primary efforts on early marriage have been viewed differently from the two dominant religions. Therefore, there has not been much interfaith collaboration in addressing early marriage in the communities sampled. In general, efforts of some FLs occasioned some changes observed in many of the surveyed communities. Therefore, based on the roles of FLs in marriage, interventions targeting them would yield positive results in curtailing CEFM in Nigeria and elsewhere.

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## ORCID iDs

Jimoh Amzat https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9564-1190


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