

Article

Assessing the impact of early marriage on teenage girls in Kenema city, Nongowa Chiefdom, Sierra Leone

Sulaiman H. Lamin¹, Brima Musa¹, Patrick Mohamed Lansana¹

¹ Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone, Department of Social Work, Kenema, Sierra Leone

Abstract

This study explores the changing social dynamics surrounding early marriage in the rural communities of Nongowa chiefdoms in Sierra Leone. Initially focused on understanding knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) related to child marriage, our data collection revealed that this issue remains deeply concerning, particularly for young females. Child marriage has long been a significant problem in Sierra Leone, with detrimental effects on female education, increased maternal mortality rates, and the perpetuation of poverty. This research findings highlight the urgent need to address this issue, as many families facing financial difficulties often view early marriage as a viable option. Economic pressures can lead families to prioritize marriage as a means of securing a future for their daughters, despite the associated risks. Adolescents, especially females, face societal pressures and limited life opportunities that drive them toward early marriage. Peer influence and a desire for social status further compel young females to marry early, often without fully understanding the long-term implications. The lack of awareness and enforcement of legal protections for minors against early marriage has allowed these practices to persist. In conclusion, this study advocates for targeted interventions addressing the root causes of teenage pregnancy on girl child education, such as poverty and lack of opportunities, while raising awareness about children's rights. Effective policy measures and social behavior change initiatives are crucial for reversing these trends and promoting healthy adolescent development in rural Sierra Leone. For this study sixty (60) respondents were randomly selected as sample size in the community of the research.

Article History

Received 08.04.2025

Accepted 20.08.2025

Keywords

Marriage; poverty; economic; legal; change

Introduction

Early marriage is a human rights violation and a harmful practice that unreasonably affects girls globally, preventing them from living their lives free from all forms of violence. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, early marriage is defined as any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age (Kisa et al, 2018). Early marriage violates several human rights, including the human right to education and employment, freedom from violence, freedom of movement, the right to consensual marriage, reproductive rights, and the right to reproductive sexual health. Early marriage also makes girls more vulnerable to violence, discrimination, and abuse, and prevents them from fully participating in the economic, political, and social spheres. In many settings, child

Corresponding Author Patrick Mohamed Lansana ✉ Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone, Department of Social Work, Kenema, Sierra Leone

marriage marks the beginning of frequent and unprotected sexual intercourse, leading to a greater risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), HIV, early pregnancy, and a higher risk of children with limited spacing.

Research indicates that worldwide, (80%) of the teenage pregnancies take place with marriage, and the complications related to these pregnancies and childbirth are among the leading causes of death among young girls aged 15 -19 in low- and middle-income countries (Williamson, 2012). Studies from Kenya and Zambia show that married young women have a 50% higher rate of HIV prevalence compared to unmarried sexually active girls. This was due to more frequent sexual intercourse, lower condom use, and older partners who were more likely to be HIV+ (Clerk, 2004). Besides these Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) related experiences, young brides and their children experience poor overall health and nutrition, compared to women who marry later. Young brides often have less access to information education and health services such as Immunization is directly linked to decreased investment in education and health for their children (Williamson, 2012). Study on child marriage highlights that young women often terminates, which prevents them from acquiring knowledge and skills that determine their prospects for employment opportunities (Williamson, 2012). Schools not only provide education but also enable young women to develop social skills and network, and offer them support systems that allow them to be mobile and participate in community activities (Williams, 2012). Various consequences of child marriage and school drop-out have been pointed out, less chances of participation in decision making (within households and the broader society), greater risks of being subjected to violence, isolation from school, friends and workplace and therefore lack social support which is critical for their emotional wellbeing and economic opportunities, and also less ability to negotiate safe sex, birth spacing, contraceptive use and to protect themselves from gender-based violence (Parson et al., 2015).

The causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy have been the topic of many studies and debates (Onsomu et al, 2014). Generally, all studies acknowledge that teenage pregnancy is associated with poor social and economic circumstances. Poverty, low level of education, being from an ethnic minority, lack of access to SRH information and services, all increase the likelihood for young women to become pregnant (Williamson, 2012). Studies have shown that young people from families with a low socioeconomic status have a higher chance of teenage pregnancy (Miller Benson et al, 2001). In addition, social and cultural norms and values at the family and society level play a role, for example, parent/child connectedness, parental supervision or regulation of children's activities, and parents' values against teen intercourse influence young people's risk for teenage pregnancy. Experience with violence also increases the risk for teenage pregnancy (Miller, Benson et al, 2012). When a teenage pregnancy occurs within marriage, it is mainly intended by the couple. However, at the same time, Unintended teenage pregnancy is one of the most common reasons for child marriage in many countries, showing the interrelatedness of these two problems. As with child marriage, teenage pregnancy can have immediate and lasting consequences for young women's health, education, and income-earning potential, which are often passed on to their children. As such, it alters the course of young women's entire lives. The health-related consequences of teenage pregnancies include the risk of maternal death. The risk of death associated with pregnancy is about a third higher among 15-18-year-olds than among 20-24-year-olds (Williamson, 2012). Besides higher morality, teenage pregnancy also contributes to illness and disability, fistula complications from unsafe abortion, STIs, and HIV (Williamson, 2012).

Other consequences of the teenage pregnancy are the interruption or termination of education, with regard to labor participation and status in the household, as well as at the community level. The trend of early marriage in Sierra Leone is high, according to UNICEF-Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone is one of the countries with the highest rate of early marriage in sub-Saharan Africa. Before the rebel war in Sierra Leone, a population of about 4 million people, 25% were married before their birthday. Meanwhile, about 8% women were married when they were younger than 17 years of age. Child marriage below 18 years constituted 3.6% and below 15 years was 1.1%. In sum, Sierra Leone has long been a concern to multiple parties due to its worrisome size and impacts. This situation even became worse during the rebel war, where young girls were abducted as "bush wives" regardless of their age. After the war, the government instituted robust steps to mitigate or reduce violence against women by collaborating with development partners globally to combat early marriage.

Nationally, the rate of early marriage stands at 25.5%. Meaning that of every 100 marriages, at least 25% involve minors (Numala, 2017). According to statistics, Sierra Leone's data shows that the rate of early marriage in 2018 increased from 14.2% to 16.2% over the previous years. The province with the highest rate is Northern and Eastern (Numala, 2017). In the Eastern province, child marriage primarily occurs in villages where social amenities are hard to come by. This is a result of the cultural barriers and perceptions of the inhabitants. Early marriage is the norm in the culture in the Kenema district, especially in all the chiefdoms, where marriage rates reach around 15-20% of all marriages that occur in Eastern province, where marrying at an early age, especially for girls, is considered legal by religion (Islam). Socio-culturally acceptable to prevent spinsterhood (Pohan, 2017). Parents fear for their daughters' future, which, in addition to economic reasons, is often used to justify marrying them off.

Early marriage is a concern and must be addressed to prevent girls from becoming victims of early marriage. Numerous studies have proved that the effect of early marriage is not only associated with girl's lack of emotional preparedness for the hardship of married life, but are also related to it blocking their career opportunities and restrictions of their ability to develop their future economic potential (Suyanto, 2013; Nguyen & Wodon, 2015), instead of developing their socioeconomic potential, marriage, pregnancy, child-rearing and domestic chores all forces girls who marry early to abandon their dreams (Williams, 2014). Child marriage not only wrenches girls from their basic rights to study, develop, and become children to the fullest, but it also potentially paves the way to various acts of violence (Boyce et al, 2018). As a result of emotional unpreparedness, many girls divorce during their first time of marriage (Foll, 2017). Girls who are married early often face barriers to school education and are much more likely to experience domestic violence, harassment, and even marital rape (Pearson, 2011). It is against this backdrop that the researcher tries to examine the causes and impact of early marriage on teenage girls in Kenema city in the Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema district, where early marriages are more common compared to other regions. This study corroborates previous findings regarding the ideas of early marriage in the district.

Statement of the Problem

Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult, or between two children. Despite a steady decline in this harmful practice over the past decade, child marriage remains wild spread, with approximately one in five girls married in childhood across the globe. Today, multiple crises-including conflict, climate

shocks, and the ongoing fallout from covid-10 are threatening to reverse progress towards eliminating this human rights violation. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals [SDG's] call for global action to end child marriage by 2030. Child marriage is often the result of entrenched gender inequality, making girls disproportionately affected by the practice. Globally, the prevalence of child marriage among boys is just one-sixth that of among girls.

Child marriage robs girls of their childhood and threatens their well-being. Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence and less likely to remain in school. They have worse economic and health outcomes than their unmarried peers, which are eventually passed down to their own children, straining a country's capacity to provide quality health and education services. Child brides often become pregnant during adolescence, when the risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth increases. The practice can also isolate girls from family and friends, taking a heavy toll on their mental health.

The Sierra Leone government introduced girls' education in late 1985 as a means of encouraging parents and their children to prioritize the education of girls. Fees were paid for all girls attending primary and junior secondary school in North and Eastern provinces by the government. This was as a result of research conducted to find out the dropout rate of girls as a result of early marriage. Despite the efforts of the past government, the dropout rate remains highly alarming in the country, particularly in Kenema city. Recently, the government has enacted a series of laws protecting young girls, including the Child Rights Act 2007, the Three Gender Acts 2007, and the GEWE Acts 2021, to support organizations such as the "Hands-Off our girls' campaign", the 50/50 group, and "He 4 She", among others. With all these efforts, early marriage is still growing at an alarming rate. Alternatively, social institutions such as traditional practices, like the Bondo society, had been a vehicle propelling early marriage with the notion that going through the practice is a sign of maturity, hence the practice of early marriage.

Besides, early pregnancy or a teenage pregnancy sometimes leads to the death of the mother and the child. Sometimes pregnant mothers may undergo major surgical operations that may be dangerous to their health. The health of young mothers is still regarded as important in Kenema City; therefore, it is an issue that warrants urgent investigation, which is the focus of this research. Through the use of triangulation with quantitative and qualitative data, this study contributes to existing research and presents a more comprehensive and nuanced account of the phenomenon of early marriage in Kenema city. It also formulated contextual recommendations to rescue and protect girls from becoming victims of early marriage.

Review of Related Literature

Theoretical Framework

According to Adamson, the Social feminist, recognized that the exploitation and oppression of women are rooted in the structure of patriarchal capitalism. They believed that sexualism is so deeply ingrained in the social relationships of patriarchal Capitalism that a fundamental transformation is necessary to bring about social change. Thus, in this study, early marriage eradication may be hindered by the system whereby policies, traditions, and beliefs still oppress young girls to be married. The study intends to adopt feminist Sociological Theory by Chafetz. The theory was introduced in 1997 and structured on a stable pattern, leading to how

social interaction was carried out. The theory used to understand respondents' behavior regarding young girls' engagement in early marriage. Social structure determines how young girls are defined and treated based on their position and interaction in society. Hence, the implication of the theory involves gender inequality, legislature, traditional and religious practices that contribute to the community to act against young girls and may finally enhance early marriage among them.

In the mid-1960s, the theory of reasoned action was introduced by Fishbein and Ajzen to explain assumptions that human beings are usually quite rational and make systematic use of the information available to them. Child sexual abuse involves a combination of activities towards early marriage, including knowledge, risk perception, sexual practices due to traditional and religious values, and reproductive health services. The theory of reasoned action was used in this study as a framework and predictive mechanism for early marriage, especially among young and adolescent girls. Based on the objectives of the study, the theory used to understand and predict engagement in early marriage.

Assess the Causes of Early Marriage among Teenage Girls in Kenema City

Early marriage among teenage girls remains a pressing social issue in Kenema City, Sierra Leone. Defined as a marital union in which at least one spouse is under the age of 18 (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2022), the practice has severe consequences for girls' health, education, and socio-economic opportunities. Despite the legal framework established under the Child Rights Act of 2007, which sets the minimum legal age of marriage at 18, early marriage persists in Kenema due to a combination of poverty, entrenched cultural traditions, weak legal enforcement, and historical legacies of conflict (Girls Not Brides, 2023; Save the Children, 2021). Economic deprivation is one of the most frequently cited causes of early marriage in Sierra Leone. Families living in poverty may view marriage as a means to alleviate the financial burden of supporting a daughter or as a means to access bridewealth (Save the Children, 2021; World Vision, 2020). In some cases, early marriage is perceived as a protective strategy that ensures economic security for the girl, even though it often perpetuates cycles of poverty and dependence (UNFPA, 2022).

Adolescent pregnancy is both a driver and an outcome of early marriage. Pregnant girls often face significant social stigma, with family and community members pressuring them into marriage with the child's father to preserve family honor (Girls Not Brides, 2023). This norm persists even when pregnancies result from coercion, reflecting the prioritization of social reputation over girls' autonomy and rights. Education has a protective effect against early marriage; however, in Kenema, many girls leave school due to financial constraints, pregnancy, or lack of parental support (Brookings Institution, 2019). Once girls drop out, they become more vulnerable to early marriage, and returning to school after marriage is extremely rare. This interruption in education limits their future employment prospects and decision-making power (World Vision, 2020).

Kenema is home to traditional institutions such as the Bondo society, whose initiation rites often include female genital mutilation (FGM). These rites are widely perceived as marking a girl's readiness for marriage (Savane, 2021). Cultural expectations reinforced by elders and community leaders thus play a central role in sustaining the practice of early marriage. The residual effects of Sierra Leone's 11-year civil war (1991–2002) and the Ebola epidemic (2014–

2016) weakened institutions, disrupted education systems, and reduced protective community structures (UNFPA, 2017). In these contexts, early marriage sometimes functioned as a coping mechanism for families facing instability, insecurity, and loss of livelihoods (Jalloh, 2014). Lowenstein (2010) examines the legal contradictions between statutory and customary law in Sierra Leone. While the statutory framework prohibits marriage under 18, customary law in many communities—including parts of Kenema—allows marriage upon reaching puberty. This legal duality undermines enforcement because local leaders often prioritize traditional norms over national legislation. Lowenstein concludes that unless statutory and customary laws are harmonized and community attitudes are transformed, legal prohibitions will have limited practical effect. Jalloh (2014), in "The Legal Legacy of the Special Court for Sierra Leone," analyzes early and forced marriage through the lens of post-conflict justice. Drawing on the Special Court's prosecution of forced marriage as an international crime, he argues that wartime abductions and coerced unions normalized certain forms of marriage, leaving a lasting imprint on societal attitudes. Jalloh contends that post-war reconstruction efforts must address these historical legacies to shift community perceptions and reduce tolerance for early marriage.

The persistence of early marriage in Kenema is best understood as the result of both legal and socio-cultural factors. Lowenstein's (2010) analysis correctly highlights the urgent need to reconcile statutory and customary laws, while Jalloh's (2014) work reveals the deep historical and conflict-related roots of the practice. In my view, a holistic approach is required—one that includes: Aligning statutory and customary laws on marriage age, raising awareness about the harms of early marriage, expanding income-generating opportunities for families, and addressing trauma and dismantling harmful gender norms carried over from wartime.

Examine the Challenges of Early Marriage on Girls' Education in Kenema City

Sierra Leone holds one of the world's highest prevalence of child marriage, with about one-third of girls married before age 18 and many before 15. The 2007 Child Rights Act had set the marriage age at 18, but the 2024 Act substantially strengthened legal protections and penalties. Early marriage virtually guarantees the end of formal schooling. In Sierra Leone, fewer than 2% of girls aged 15–19 are both in school and married, while child marriage accounts for nearly two-thirds of early pregnancies. Each additional year of secondary education reduces the risk of child marriage by up to 10 percentage points and early childbearing by 4 points, highlighting education's protective value. Teen pregnancy often follows early marriage, with 28% of girls aged 15–19 already mothers or pregnant as of 2013. Once pregnant or married, continuing education becomes exceedingly difficult due to caregiving responsibilities, stigma, and lack of support. Teenage mothers often feel marginalized and isolated. One adolescent reflected on how seeing her peers at school was a "bitter pill to swallow" after dropping out due to pregnancy. Dropping out in adolescence reduces employment opportunities, lowers lifetime earnings, and perpetuates vulnerability to poverty and gender violence. In Burma, a community in Kenema District, 60% of girls become pregnant before age 15, leaving them isolated and unable to continue education or care for their children. Many turn to sex work to survive.

NGOs like the Future Focus Foundation, supported by Tools for Self-Reliance, offer vocational training (including tailoring, hairdressing, crafting, and embroidery) to girls who have dropped out due to early marriage or pregnancy. This provides them with economic

independence and a pathway to re-engage with learning. Organizations such as CARDO conduct child rights workshops, engaging both girls and community elders in Kenema to raise awareness of the negative impacts of early marriage and promote alternatives. The Girls Education Challenge (GEC) program targets Sierra Leone's most marginalized adolescent girls, including those who are married or young mothers, by offering vocational training, life skills, and support for transitioning into formal or informal education in Kenema and other districts. Caritas Sierra Leone's Life Skills Program has helped 85% of participating girls improve academically, and 80% report confidence in school attendance despite menstrual-related challenges. The GATES program places guidance counsellors in secondary schools to address teenage pregnancy, child marriage, and related stigma. It employs peer-led clubs, community outreach, and reintegration support to help girls resume schooling. Community-based paralegals defend girls' rights against forced early marriages, working to uphold statutory protections and challenge customary practices that undermine compulsory schooling.

Early marriage in Kenema City is a multifaceted threat to girls' education. It triggers school dropouts, early pregnancies, social exclusion, and limited future opportunities. Addressing this requires: Schools must be equipped and mandated to support young mothers and married students, vocational training tied with basic education can create pathways back to autonomy, awareness campaigns must shift beliefs about girls' roles and potential, the 2024 law is a critical tool, but teams of paralegals and local champions are needed to ensure rights are upheld. By combining legal change, educational flexibility, socio-economic support, and cultural dialogue, we can begin to dismantle the systemic barriers early marriage creates for girls in Kenema.

Method

This study employs a descriptive research approach. A descriptive study design is suitable (Creswell, 2018). To guarantee a thorough grasp of the problem, the study employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Sample Size

Potter (2011) defines the population of the study as a group of individuals taken from the general population who share a common characteristic such as age, sex, or health conditions. For this study, the population consists of youths (both men and women). The sample size will be drawn from school registers and the national commission registration authority. For the purpose of this research, sixty (60) respondents; comparison of forty-five (45) girls and fifteen (15) parents and stakeholders as a sample size.

Data Collection

Both primary and secondary data collection methods were employed to ensure a robust understanding of the research problem. The primary source of data is collected from the first-hand experience and has not been used in the past. The data gathered by primary data collection methods are specific to the research motives and highly accurate. It is subdivided into two categories: quantitative and qualitative methods. Secondary source of data methods, on the other hand, refers to the gathering of second-hand data collected by an individual who

is not the original user or researcher of the work being done. It involves collecting data that already exists, such as journals, published books, and online portals. It is less expensive and easier to collect than the primary source of data collection methods.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure a comprehensive interpretation of the findings. The data collected through interviews and questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 14.0. The statistics are presented using frequency tables and percentages. Relations between variables were recognized using frequencies and percentages.

Discussions and Findings

What are some of the causes of early marriage among teenagers?

Extent	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency (%)
Cultural norms and beliefs	23	50.0
Lack of education within family lineage	18	25.0
Poverty (Financial constraints)	14	18.8
Peer group influence	5	6.3
Total	60	100.0

Source- Primary Data: 2025

Data above shows that 23 (50.0%) of the respondents said cultural norms and beliefs led them to early marriage, while 18 (25.0%) of the respondents responded that lack of education within family lineage, 14(18.8%) of the respondents responded poverty (financial constrains), and 5(6.3%) of the respondents responded that peer group influence. Thus, the majority of respondents stated that cultural norms and beliefs led them to early marriage.

What are some of the challenges faced by girls in education in the context of Sierra Leone?

Why	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency (%)
Dropping out of school	22	40.0
Societal expectations	18	28.0
Economic challenges (Lack of funding)	11	18.0
Gender inequality	9	14.0
Total	60	100.0

Source- Primary Data: 2025

Data above indicated that 22 (40.0%) of the respondents responded that dropping out of school, while 18 (28.0%) of the respondents responded that societal expectation, and 11 (18.0%) of the respondents responded that Economic challenges (lack of funding) and 9 (14.0%) of the respondents responded that gender inequality. Thus, the majority of respondents responded that they had dropped out of school.

Summary of Findings

The study revealed that early marriage in Kenema City is primarily driven by cultural norms and beliefs (50%), followed by lack of education within family lineage (25%), poverty (18.8%), and peer influence (6.3%). These factors demonstrate how deep-rooted traditions, combined with socio-economic challenges, perpetuate the practice of child marriage despite existing laws. Regarding the challenges faced by girls in education, the findings indicate that the most significant issues are dropping out of school (40%), societal expectations (28%), economic constraints (18%), and gender inequality (14%). Early marriage often leads to premature school withdrawal, restricting girls' access to future opportunities and reinforcing cycles of poverty and dependency. Overall, the findings highlight that early marriage not only undermines girls' right to education but also exposes them to teenage pregnancies, gender-based violence, and long-term socio-economic disadvantages. The persistence of these practices is reinforced by weak enforcement of protective laws, traditional institutions such as the Bondo society, and lingering effects of past conflicts. The study concludes that tackling early marriage requires multi-faceted interventions, including strengthening education access, empowering girls with vocational and economic opportunities, enforcing statutory laws against underage marriage, and engaging communities in shifting harmful cultural norms.

Conclusion

To help reduce early marriage, programs can foster policies and norms that support later marriage and offer services, resources, and options to families to delay marriage. Assuring girls' school attendance, even if not at the appropriate grade for age, is protective of girls' reproductive health, fostering delayed marriage, delayed sexual debut among those sexually active, and increased contraceptive and condom use. Specific programs on a substantial scale, such as those in Nigeria and Ghana, have improved schooling outcomes for girls. The provision of economic opportunities can also delay the age of marriage. Unmarried girls' participation in wage-earning factory work in the garment industry in Bangladesh increases the average age at marriage, both among the 20 working girls and the non-working girls who live in the communities of origin of the working girls.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

- The government should adopt a community education programme for the sensitization of girls on teenage pregnancy.
- The government should recommend that rigid laws be designed to prevent parents from forcing their children into marriage.
- Government should provide support services to all types of vulnerable teenage girls within the Nongowa chiefdom, Kenema district, Sierra Leone.
- There should be increased public awareness campaigns that reflect the diversity of teenage girls within the Sierra Leone context.

Firstly, the study is based on a single district; therefore, the results from this study cannot be generalized or taken as final and conclusive. It is recommended that similar studies be conducted in another district or the whole region. Secondly, another study of a similar nature can be conducted by using different methodologies.

Declarations

Competing interests: The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Publisher's note: Advanced Research Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

References

- Government of Sierra Leone. (2007). *Domestic Violence Act* (Act No. 19 of 2007). Government Printing Department.
- Government of Sierra Leone. (2007). *Devolution of Estates Act* (Act No. 21 of 2007). Government Printing Department.
- Government of Sierra Leone. (2012). *Sexual Offences Act* (Act No. 12 of 2012). Government Printing Department.
- Government of Sierra Leone. (2019). *Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act* (Act No. 8 of 2019). Government Printing Department.
- United Nations. (n.d.). *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 48/104.
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018*. WHO. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240022256>