

The Place of the Mass Media in Curing Child Marriage Ugwu Nnenna Jovita

Department of Publication and Extension, Kampala International University,
Uganda

ABSTRACT

The media are champions of human rights. They act as the eyes, ears and voices of the public, drawing attention to abuses of power and human rights, often at considerable personal risk. Through their work, they can encourage governments and civil society organisations to effect changes that will improve the quality of people's lives. Journalists, photographers and programme-makers frequently expose the plight of children caught up in circumstances beyond their control such as early marriages or abuse or exploitation by adults. Hence, this paper opines that it is equally important to consider the children's angle in more conventional news coverage. The way in which the media represent or even ignore children can influence decisions taken on their behalf and how the rest of society regards them. The media often depict children merely as silent victims' or charming 'innocents'. By providing children and young people with opportunities to speak for themselves about their hopes and fears, their achievements and the impact of adult behaviour on their lives, media professionals can remind the public that children deserve to be respected as individual human beings. Media professionals have an obligation therefore, to respect children's human rights, in how they operate and how they represent them.

Keywords: human rights, media and child marriage

INTRODUCTION

The Child Rights' Act (2007) defines a child as one who is below the age of eighteen years [1,2,3,4]. It categorically provides that such a child's best interests shall remain paramount in all considerations [5,6,7]. A child shall be given such protection and care as is necessary for its well being, retaining the right to survival and development and to a name and registration at birth [8,9]. In Nigeria, due to inconsistencies in legislation and the absence of any stipulation of a minimum age for marriage before the adoption of the Child Rights Act in 2003, early marriages continue to take place, in many cases as a means to preserve chastity. Section 18 of the Marriage Act allows persons under the age of 21 to get married, provided that parental consent is given [10]. The official report admits that the age of marriage is a highly controversial issue and varies from place to place [11,12,13]. The federal authorities seek however to make 18 the minimum age of marriage, not only in law, but also in practice. Nevertheless, customary positions on that issue differ and important parts of the population are

still not aware of the negative effects early marriages can have on girls. In most cases, it limits the opportunities for girls to accede to education, putting them in a disadvantaged position [14]. But, even more worrying, early marriage can also be detrimental to girl's physical, mental and emotional health. Apart from the fact that it deprives girls from their rights to have control over their body and reproductive health, it puts them in a position of complete dependency on their husbands. Consequently, this paper aims to evaluate the ability of the mass media to end this practice across the nation.

Child Marriage in Nigeria

Child marriage is a fundamental violation of the human right. In west and central Africa, girls with eight or more years of schooling marry before age 18. Poverty leads many families to withdraw their daughter from school and arrange marriage for them at young age, hence, the girls are denied of the proven benefits of education [5,6,7].

Globally, adolescent mothers tend to be poorer, less educated, less exposed and less nourished than older mothers. They

also face greater social disadvantages. In Nigeria, the north in particular, has some of the highest rates of early marriages in the world. The child rights act, passed in 2003 raised the minimum age of marriage to 18 for girls. However, only a few of the country's 36 states have begun developing provisions to execute the law. According to [1], early girl-child marriage is triggered by some factors such as financial constraint, lack of education, traditional beliefs, and insecurity. She further notes that health risk is one of the consequences of early child marriage. Abimbola and Adekola [2] asserted that adolescent girls marriage is a global problem that is common in many part of the developing world, adding that it is a globally recognised as a blatant violation of fundamental human right. Accordingly, the menace of early child marriage continues to thrive because of a variety factors such as: extreme poverty, lack of education, job opportunity, insecurity, custom and tradition, and many others.

i. Culture and Tradition: In several cultures and societies, parents are under pressure to marry off their daughters as early as possible in an effort to prevent her from becoming sexually active before marriage. A woman who does so bring dishonour to her family and community because marriage often determines a woman status in many societies; parents also worry that if they do not marry their daughters according to social expectation, they will not be able to marry them at all. Forced child marriage also in a route to cementing family, clan, and tribal connection or settling obligation; for example, in Pakistan's Northwest frontier province, Afghanistan and in some parts of the middle east, marrying young girls is a common practices to help the grooms' families off set debts or to settle.

ii. Poor Education & Economic Options: The absence or little schooling strongly correlates with being married at a young age conversely, attending school and having -higher levels of education protects girls from possibility

early marriage. In many countries, educating girls is often less of a priority than educating boys, when a woman's most important role is considered to be a wife, mother and homemaker. Even when poor families want to send their daughter to school, they often lack access to nearby, quality schools and the ability to pay school fees. Hence, it becomes safer and economically more rewarding to spend limited resources on educating sons and daughters. This scenario presents families little or no choice at all than to marry off the girl child early.

iii. Inability to Manage Families: Statistically, women who marry early are likely to bear more children than those who married late. Young mothers exercise less influence and control over their children and have less ability to make decision about their Nutrition, healthcare, and household management.

iv. Poverty: It is a known fact that many poor families marry off their daughter at an early age essentially as a strategy for economic survival; it means one less mouth to feed, clothe and educate. In Asia and Africa, the importance of financial transaction at the time of marriage also tends to push families to marry their daughters early, e.g. in sub-Saharan cultures parents get high brides price for a daughter who is married near puberty. Globally, forced child marriage is much more common in poor countries and regions and within those countries, it tends to be concentrated among the poorest household. For example, a girl from a poor household in Senegal is four times more likely to marry as a child than a girl from a rich household. In improvised situations, many parents see few alternatives for their daughter, aside from early marriage.

vii: Insecurity: When families live in unsafe region, parents may genuinely believe that marrying their daughter is the best ways to protect them from danger. In war affected areas like Afghanistan, Burundi, Northern Uganda, Somalia or in the north eastern part of Nigeria for example, a girl may be married to a warlord or another authority figure

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that can ensure that she and her family remain safe.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employed agenda setting theory. The theory posits that the media are not always successful at telling us what to think, but they are quite successful at telling us what to think about. According to [3], cited in [4], in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to the issues from the amount of information in a news story and its positions. Wimmer and Dominick [5] observe that the theory on agenda setting by the media proposes that the public agenda or what kind of things people discuss, think and worry about is powerfully shaped and directed by what the media choose to publicize. The theory is relevant to the study because the media can be used to set the agenda against child marriages in Nigeria, so that the people will think along that line.

The Role of the Mass Media in ending Child Marriages in Nigeria

The media have a very crucial role to play in the promotion of human rights in any country. The media, according to [4], are agents of social change that can bring about positive attitudinal change in the audience; they set agenda for the people to follow in any society. The mass media are crucial to opinion formulation and eventual outcomes of events. The media are champions of human rights. They act as the eyes, ears and voices of the public, drawing attention to abuses of power and human rights, often at considerable personal risk. Through their work, they can encourage governments and civil society organisations to effect changes that will improve the quality of people's lives. Journalists, photographers and programme-makers frequently expose the plight of children caught up in circumstances beyond their control or abused or exploited by adults. It is equally important to consider the children's angle in more conventional news coverage. A good way of testing the

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value of changes in the law or fiscal policy, for example, is to consider the extent to which children will benefit or suffer a consequence. The way in which the media represent or even ignore children can influence decisions taken on their behalf and how the rest of society regards them. The media often depict children merely as silent victims' or charming innocents'. By providing children and young people with opportunities to speak for themselves about their hopes and fears, their achievements and the impact of adult behaviour on their lives, media professionals can remind the public that children deserve to be respected as individual human beings. Media professionals have an obligation to respect children's human rights, in how they operate and how they represent them. International Federation of Journalists (2005) notes that all journalists and media professionals have a duty to maintain the highest ethical and professional standards and should promote within the industry, the widest possible dissemination of information about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and its implications for the exercise of independent journalism. Media organisations should regard violation of the rights of children and issues related to children's safety, privacy, security, their education, health and social welfare and all forms of exploitations, as important questions for investigation and public debate. Children have an absolute right to education, the only exceptions, being those explicitly set out in these guidelines. Journalistic activity, which touches on the lives and welfare of children, should always be carried out with appreciation of the vulnerable situation of children.

Furthermore, by providing children with opportunities to speak for themselves about their hopes and fears, their achievements and the impact of adult behaviour and decisions on their lives, media professionals can improve the representation of children's' issues. The challenge is to cover these issues within

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the context of journalist independence and in a manner, which respects the ethical issues involved. The media as the watchdog of the society have a crucial role to play in protecting the girl child from early marriage in Nigeria. The media serve as an effective network for educating and informing the people of the down sides of early marriage and also, making those who often trample on people's rights to know that they are doing the wrong thing. The media generally, could be of immense assistance in this direction. The role of the media in ending child marriage cannot be over-emphasised. Through the media, the people can be aware of their fundamental human rights and the constitutional protection of their rights. Through constant vigilance on infringement of such rights, the media can bring about a significant rise in public awareness of these issues.

The media can be used to fight against child marriages in Nigeria and the world

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The media can play an important role in protecting the girl child from early marriage. This is because, they are agents of information and they can educate the public on their fundamental rights. Thus, this paper recommends the following:

- i. The media should be massively employed to discourage the issue of child marriage in Nigeria, because they are persuasive in nature.
- ii. The media, whether broadcast or print, must understand that the issue of child marriage is

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beyond. This implies that the media can create awareness about gender issues. In societies where human abuses are rampant, the media can be used to raise international and national awareness of human rights. Only the media can presently fulfill this watchdog function of ending child marriage [6]. Pate argues that the role of the press in the protection and advancement of human rights within the context of its social responsibility in the society includes: exposing cases of human rights abuses and violations; exposing perpetrators of human rights abuses for moral, condemnation and legal actions; publicising the plights of victims for people to know or see, so that they could wake up, react and demand for justice; discouraging human rights abuses, helping to secure redress or compensation for victims, enlightening and sensitizing the general public on possible human rights violations.

fundamental; hence it should be addressed effectively and efficiently.

- iii. There is the need to pass and implement laws banning early marriage practices that normally keep girls out of schools. When a girl marries at a very tender age, it limits her chances of getting quality education, and becoming a better and independent woman.

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