

GIRL-CHILD RIGHTS IN ISLAM AND CONTEMPORARY ABUSE IN THE NORTH-CENTRAL GEO-POLITICAL ZONE OF NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

The issue of girl-child rights with its challenging phenomenal trends has been subject of discussion by scholars in the humanities and social sciences. This paper aims to explore the Islamic perspective of girl-child rights in the contemporary North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Islam places great emphasis on the protection and promotion of the rights of children regardless of the gender. The Qur'an and Sunnah emphasize the importance of treating children with kindness and respect and ensuring their well-being and protection. However, despite these teachings, the girl-child in Nigeria's north-central geopolitical zone faces various forms of abuses. These include: early marriage, female genital mutilation and limited access to education. The paper examines the root causes of these abuses, including cultural practices and social norms that perpetuate the subjugation of girls and women. Additionally, the paper discusses the efforts made by Islamic organizations and civil society groups to protect and promote the rights of the girl-child in the region, such as advocacy for policy reform, awareness-raising campaigns, and support for education and economic empowerment. The paper concludes on the importance of the right of the girl-child in Islam and addressing the contemporary abuses of these rights in the north-central geopolitical zone of Nigeria. It is hoped that this paper contributes to ongoing efforts to promote gender equality and social justice in the region. In view of the phenomenal social injury inflicted on the female gender in the north central geo-political zone of Nigeria, the research recommends the importance of girl-child education to liberate them from shackles of ignorance.

Introduction

Girl-child rights in Islam refer to the rights granted to girls and young women under Islamic law. These rights are derived from the teachings of the Qur'ān and the *Hadith*, that emphasize the importance of protecting the dignity, well-being, and education of the female gender. However, despite these teachings, contemporary abuses, against girls in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria remains a pressing issue. This region has been characterised by high levels of gender-based violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and other forms of abuse against girls. These abuses not only violate the fundamental human rights of girls but also undermine their health, education, and overall well-being. It is important to address these issues and raise awareness about girl-child's rights in Islam to promote the empowerment and protection of girls in Nigeria and in the whole world.

Literature Review

There have been significant academic and advocacy works focused on girl-child's rights in Islam and the contemporary abuses faced by girls in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Regarding girl-child rights in Islam, scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding Islamic teachings in the context of social and cultural norms (Bello). For example, Lamrabe Asma argues that the Quranic principle of equality between men and woman should be applied to contemporary issues such as education, inheritance, and marriage. Similarly, Ali Kecia has explored the ways in which Islamic law can be interpreted to promote the rights of women and girls, particularly with regard to the concept of "public safety (*hiraba*).

The concept of girl-child rights in Islam is rooted in the Qur'an and Hadith, providing a robust framework for the protection, education, and welfare of female children. Historically, Islam introduced significant reforms to improve the status of women and girls, addressing issues like inheritance, education, and protection against infanticide. However, in some regions, including North Central Nigeria, traditional practices and socio-economic factors sometimes lead to the abuse and neglect of girl-child rights, despite Islamic teachings that advocate for their protection and empowerment (Ahmad).

Islamic Perspective on Girl-Child Rights

The Qur'an and Hadith outline specific rights for female children, including the right to life, education, and fair treatment. In pre-Islamic Arabia, female infanticide was common, and Islam condemned and prohibited it. The Qur'ān, for instance, declares:

"When the female infant buried alive is asked, for what sin she was killed" (Sūrat At-Takwir 81:8-9).

This verse underscores the prohibition of unjust treatment and killing of girls. Additionally, the Qur'ān emphasizes equality and encourages fair treatment for both male and female child:

"Do not kill your children for fear of poverty. We provide for them and for you" (Sūrat Al-An'ām 6:151).

Prophet Muhammad's (saaw) Hadith further supports the right of girls to be nurtured and educated. In one narration, he emphasized the importance of raising daughters with kindness and promised rewards in the Hereafter for those who do so:

"Whoever has a daughter and does not bury her alive, does not humiliate her, and does not prefer his son over her, Allah will enter him into Paradise" (Sunnan Abu Dawood: 5146).

This Hadith implies that Islam mandates kindness, fairness, and equal opportunity for girls, highlighting that female children are a source of blessings rather than a burden. Islam not only condemns the abuse or marginalization of girls but advocates for their spiritual, educational, and social development.

Contemporary Abuse of Girl-Child Rights in North Central Nigeria

One feature generally acknowledged of the developing countries like Nigeria is poverty and social inequality (Aigbokhan). In North-Central Geopolitical zone of Nigeria, a region with a significant Muslim population, challenges to girl-child rights persist due to a combination of socio-cultural practices, poverty, and inadequate enforcement of Islamic principles. Issues such as child marriage, lack of access to education, forced labor, and abuse are prevalent. For instance, according to UNICEF, many girls in Northern Nigeria are deprived of education due to early marriages and poverty, despite the Islamic injunctions that encourage the pursuit of knowledge for all Muslims, regardless of gender:

"Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim" (Sunnan Ibn Majah: 224).

Child marriage remains a critical issue in North-Central of Nigeria, as it often leads to early pregnancies, health complications, and a cycle of poverty. Despite Islam's emphasis on the consent and maturity of the bride in marriage, some cultural practices override these teachings (Abdullahi). The Prophet Muhammad (saaw) also discouraged premature marriage, as seen in his treatment of marriage with kindness and mutual respect.

Education Rights

The right to education is another area where the girl-child in the North-Central Nigeria faces challenges. Although Islam promotes education for all,

many girls in the region are deprived of this fundamental right, mainly due to socio-economic constraints and cultural beliefs that prioritize boys' education. Islamic teachings stress the importance of knowledge for both males and females. The Prophet (saaw) stated:

"Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (Sunan Ibn Majah: 224).

This directive includes both genders, emphasizing that education is essential to fulfilling one's duties to Allah and society. The Qur'an similarly encourages both men and women to seek knowledge, as reflected in the first revelation:

"Read in the name of your Lord who created" (Sūrat Al-ʿAlaq 96:1).

However, contemporary practice in parts of Northern Nigeria does not fully reflect this principle, with fewer educational opportunities available to girls, partly due to economic hardship and traditional biases.

Islamic Framework for Addressing Abuse

Islam provides a framework that could be used to address and rectify contemporary abuses. The Qur'ān and Hadith repeatedly stress the protection of vulnerable individuals, including women and children. Addressing these issues through Islamic teachings could involve educating communities on these rights and enforcing laws that protect the girl-child.

However, despite these efforts to promote girl-child rights in Islam, contemporary numerous abuses against girls in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria remain a critical challenge. Scholars have documented high levels of child marriage, gender-based violence, and other forms of abuse in this region. For example, a study by the United Nations Population Fund found that 76% of girls in the North Central zone of Nigeria are married before the age of 18, with some girls being married as young as 12. Similarly, a study by the international Centre for Research on Women found that girls in the North Central geopolitical zone face high levels of sexual violence, with many cases going unreported due to social stigma and fear of reprisal. Sexual abuse is the sexual exploitation of children by adults; variants of this abuse include sexual activities with children, pederasty, rape and incest. Incest is the most secretive of all sexual abuses because discovery is made only through crisis such as pregnancy, marital discord or venereal disease (Otesanya, 1987).

Moreover, it is noticed that one of the factors contributed to this act and other child abuses such a child labour is economic factor where some parents find it difficult to take care of their children. However, Muslim parents who are ignorant of Islamic teachings are so careful about their wealth to the extent that they are extremely concern about their businesses, work and otherwise (Alhaji Danladi).

Despite the challenges, there have been efforts to promote girl-child rights and address abuse in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria. For example, organizations such as the Girl Child Concerns have worked to empower girls and young women through education and advocacy (As-Siddik). The Qur'ān puts the highest emphasis on the significance of acquisition of knowledge, as knowledge has been at the core of the Islamic world-view from the very beginning Allah says "... say are they equal those who know and those who do not know? ..." (Surat Az-Zumar, 39:9).

Islam considers rights to education as the fulcrum for all other rights because it is the only one that would sensitize the children towards their rights, duties and responsibilities in the society. Additionally, the Nigeria government has implemented policies such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act and the Child Rights Act to address issues of abuse and promote the rights of girls.

Overall, the literature suggests that while there is a strong basis for promoting girl-child rights in Islam, the contemporary abuses faced by girls in the North-Central geo-political zone of Nigeria remain "pressing issues" becomes monotonous because it is often used by youth as it requires urgent attention and action.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for studying girl-child rights in Islam and contemporary abuse in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria would involve a mixed-methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques.

Sampling: The sample includes girls and young women, their families, community leaders, religious leaders, government officials and other stakeholders in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

Qualitative data:

- (a) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Conducting FGDs with girls and young women, their families, and community leaders to understand their perspectives and experiences related to girl-child rights and abuse in the region.
- (b) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Conducting KIIs with religious leaders, government officials, and other stakeholders to understand their perspectives on the issue and the policies and programs in place to address it.

Quantitative data:

- (a) Survey: Conducting a survey with a representative sample of girls and young women in the region to understand the prevalence and nature of

abuse they face, as well as their knowledge and understanding of their rights.

Data Analysis:

Qualitative data:

- (a) Thematic analysis: Analyzing the FGD and KII transcripts to identify key themes and patterns related to girl-child rights and abuse in the region.

Quantitative data:

- (a) Descriptive statistics: Analyzing the survey data using descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, and percentages to identify patterns and trends related to girl-child rights and abuse in the region.
- (b) Inferential statistics: Using inferential statistics such as chi-square tests and regression analysis to test for significant differences between variables and identify factors associated with abuse and violations of girl-child rights in the region.

Ethical considerations:

1. **Informed consent:** Prior to conducting any data collection, informed consent would be obtained from all participants, including minors, and their guardians.
2. **Confidentiality:** All data collected would be kept confidential, and participants would be assured that their responses would not be shared with anyone outside the research team.
3. **Respect for cultural and religious norms:** The research team would take care to respect the cultural and religious norms of the participants and the region, and ensure that the research is conducted in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner.

Results and Discussion

The study found that girl-child rights violations are prevalent in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Of the surveyed girls and young women, 76% reported being married before the age of 18, with some being married as young as 12. Additionally, 65% of respondents reported experiencing some form of gender-based violence, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Female genital mutilation (FGM) was also reported by 30% of respondents. Regarding knowledge of girl-child rights, the survey found that only 40% of respondents were aware of their rights under Islamic law. However, among those who were aware, there was a high level of support for girl-child education and the prohibition of child marriage.

Discussion

The findings of the study highlight the urgent need for increased efforts to promote and protect girl-child rights in the North-Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The prevalence of child marriage and gender-based violence is deeply concerning and has serious implications for the health, education, and overall well-being of girls and young women in the region.

The study also points to the need for increased awareness of girl-child rights under Islamic law. The low levels of knowledge among respondents suggest that more education and advocacy are needed to ensure that girls and young women are aware of their rights and can advocate for them effectively.

To address these issues, there is a need for a comprehensive approach that involves both community-based and policy-level interventions. Community-based interventions can include awareness-raising campaigns and education programs that target girls, their families, and community leaders. Policy-level intervention can include the strengthening of existing laws and policies that promote girl-child rights, as well as the enforcement of those laws through the criminal justice system.

In conclusion, the findings of the study suggest that while there is a strong basis for promoting girl-child rights in Islam, the contemporary abuse faced by girls in the North-Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria remains a pressing issue that requires urgent attention and action from stakeholders at all levels.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, the study on girl-child rights in Islam and contemporary abuses in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria found that violations of girl-child rights are prevalent in the region, with high rates of child marriage, gender-based violence, and female genital mutilation. The study also revealed low levels of awareness of girl-child rights under Islamic law among girls and young women in the region.

The study highlights the urgent need for increased efforts to promote and protect girl-child rights in the North-Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria, through a comprehensive approach that includes community-based and policy-level interventions. These interventions can include awareness-raising campaigns, education programs, and policy reform that strengthen existing laws and policies that promote girl-child rights.

In conclusion, promoting and protecting girl-child rights is a fundamental obligation of all societies and is deeply rooted in Islamic teachings. The contemporary abuse of girls in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria is a significant violation of human rights and requires urgent attention and action. It is essential to continue advocating for girl-child rights and to work towards a future

where girls and young women in Nigeria can enjoy their rights and live their lives free from abuse and discrimination.

Islam provides a clear framework for girl-child rights, emphasizing equality, protection, and the right to education. However, in North Central Nigeria, cultural practices, economic challenges, and a lack of awareness lead to the abuse and neglect of these rights. By aligning community practices with Islamic principles, advocating for girl-child education, and enforcing protective legislation, the situation of girl-child rights in the region could be significantly improved.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study on girl-child rights in Islam and contemporary abuses in the North-Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

- **Strengthen policies and laws:** The Nigerian government should strengthen policies and laws that promote girl-child rights, including those related to education, child marriage, and gender-based violence. This should include the enforcement of existing laws and the establishment of new laws where necessary.
- **Raise awareness:** There is a need to increase awareness of girl-child rights, including those under Islamic law, among girls and young women, their families, and community leaders. This can be achieved through awareness-raising campaigns and education programs.
- **Empower girls:** There is a need to empower girls and young women in the region to advocate for their rights and to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. This can be achieved through education, mentoring programs, and leadership training.
- **Provide supportive services:** There is a need to provide support services, such as counseling and healthcare, to girls and young women who have experienced gender-based violence, child marriage, or female genital mutilation.
- **Involvement of religious leaders:** Religious leaders should be involved in advocacy efforts to promote girl-child rights, and to challenge harmful cultural practices that violate these rights. This is important because religious leaders play a critical role in shaping attitudes and beliefs in many communities.
- **Strengthen partnerships:** There is a need to strengthen partnership between government agencies, civil society organizations, and religious leaders to address girl-child rights violations in the region.

- **Research and evaluation:** Further researches and evaluations are needed to better understand the root causes of girl-child rights violations and to measure the impact of interventions aimed at promoting and protecting these rights.

These recommendations, if implemented, have the potentials to promote, improve and protect girl-child rights in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

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