

## *Evaluation of Early Marriage Effects on Women'S Health in Kampala, Uganda*

### **تقييم تأثيرات الزواج المبكر على صحة المرأة في كامبالا، أوغندا**

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#### **Abstract:**

This study aims to investigate the effect of early marriage as a socio- cultural phenomenon on the social status, psychological, and overall health of women in Kampala, Uganda. It adopting both anthropological and bio- cultural approaches and utilizing both questionnaire and interview for data collection from the study sample. Results revealed that early marriage still widely spread in Kampala. Socially, it disrupts and destroys girls' future. Moreover, there are many undesired psychological and physiological outcomes of this type of marriage affecting women in Kampala.

**Keywords :** Early marriage; fistula; Kampala; Uganda; bioculture.

#### **الملخص:**

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى رصد تأثير الزواج المبكر كظاهرة اجتماعية وثقافية على الوضع الاجتماعي والنفسي والصحة العامة للمرأة في كامبالا، أوغندا. حيث اعتمدت هذه الدراسة على كل من المنهج الأنثروبولوجي والمدخل البيوثقافي. تم استخدام كل من الاستبيان والمقابلة لجمع البيانات من عينة الدراسة. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن الزواج المبكر لا يزال منتشرًا على نطاق واسع في كامبالا. على المستوى الاجتماعي، ترك الزواج المبكر آثاره على مستقبل الفتيات. علاوة على ذلك، هناك العديد من النتائج النفسية والفسيوولوجية غير المرغوبة لهذا النوع من الزواج الذي يؤثر على النساء في كامبالا. الكلمات المفتاحية: الزواج المبكر، ناسور الولادة، كامبالا، أوغندا، البيوثقافي.

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## ***Introduction***

Recently the topic of health and disease gained elevated attention in social sciences. Previously it was viewed as a pure medical subject but subsequent studies proved that man's health is not oriented biologically and treated medically only but there are several cultural, social, ecological factors should be considered as well. Consequently, social sciences especially Anthropology became interested in issues related to human health and diseases from different view.

Anthropological studies concerned with human health status undoubtedly proved that man's socio-cultural surroundings are fundamental factors for human well-being, and cannot be separated from the health status of man. Accordingly, the concept of health and disease became varied across different societies according to the diversity of the cultural norms of health and disease.

The African continent is found suffering from a triad of poverty, ignorance and disease. The state of poverty that dominates the majority of African countries often accompanied by a lack of awareness and ignorance of many aspects related to health and disease agents. Consequently, there are widespread diseases and infections in Africa related to cultural practices and beliefs that negatively impacted health. Female circumcision, wine drinking and early marriage representing prominent examples of practices related to culture and leave negative health Impacts.

Focusing on early marriage in Africa, it can be argued that, this phenomenon is forced by several economic, social and cultural factors. Economically, early marriage is performed in some regions in order to obtain the dowry from the groom by bride's father, which represents a type of financial support for the family. Therefore, these families are rushing to perform the girl's circumcision as a sign of maturity and suitability for marriage. Meanwhile, in other African regions, early marriage is practised due to socio- cultural factors as maintaining girl's chastity and the reduction of sexual desire until marriage, in addition to the fear of stigma attached to the girl and her family in case of indulging in sexual practices before marriage and the loss of her virginity. The aforementioned cultural practices have harmful impacts on both psychological and biological status of girls undergone these practices.

Early marriage is a multifactorial phenomenon in Uganda. Partially due to socio- cultural aspects, in addition to economic or political factors. It was argued that the most influential factor causing early marriage is the widespread of starvation in some Ugandan regions. These starvations forced many parents to exchange their daughters by food, which cause many young girls to be pregnant before they marry forcing the parents to get them married earlier as possible, in order to achieve some economic and social security. Moreover, some poor parents consider their daughters as an economic burden, or an asset owned by the family, which can be redeemed for money, property and livestock through marriage.<sup>1</sup>

Although several efforts were performed by the Uganda's government to reduce poverty, the number of Ugandan people under poverty line was 6,7 million people that represent 19,7% of the total population according to 2013 census.<sup>2</sup> Also, the study of Oguttu (2011) ascertained that armed conflict occurred in Uganda resulted in the displacement of many families from their homes and survives without shelter prompting a lot of girls to marry at an early age to ensure access to shelter and food.<sup>3</sup>

Early marriage has negatively impacted the life of Ugandan people through different aspects. According to the socio-cultural impacts, early marriage caused leaking many girls from schools as a result of early pregnancy thereby reducing educational attainment level, which resulted in the deprivation of many development opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Also, early marriage caused limited women's opportunities to have a job due to the ongoing preoccupation with the care of children and household responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

The health impacts of early marriage are not confined to woman's health only but extended to the health of children that are more susceptible to death once or after childbirth period (Moses, 2013), additionally the majority of these children suffering from malnutrition diseases, low body weight and delayed mental development.<sup>6</sup>

Once happened, the early-married girl becomes more susceptible to complications of pregnancy and childbirth and more likely to the occurrence of death from birth as a result of pre-eclampsia, or bleeding after childbirth or obstructed labour.<sup>7</sup> The United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (**UNICEF**) confirmed that the girl who married under the age of 15 are more likely five times to die during pregnancy and childbirth compared to the girl, who married at the age of twenty years,

in addition to the possibility of vulnerability to disease of cervical cancer.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, other studies emphasized that girls who got married at an early age were more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases especially Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) due to age difference between husband and his wife, a matter which increases the man's probability to share many sexual intercourses before his marriage thus more vulnerable to infectious diseases. Also, physiologically the woman's reproductive system at early age may not be enough developed, consequently become more susceptible to damage and injuries that facilitate the transmission of infections especially viral ones from infected husband.<sup>9</sup>

Fistula is one of the widely spread diseases due to early marriage among women who give birth at an early age. The pelvis had not evolved properly to complete the process of birth and endure the hard process of birth causing obstructed labor due to inability of the fetus to pass through the birth canal. Consequently, high pressure is placed on the soft tissues surrounding childbirth canal, which impedes blood flow causing it to die, decomposed and forming fistula a hole between uterus and vagina<sup>10</sup> namely Fistula.

There are about 2 million young women in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have fistula, moreover, there are about 50-100 thousand newly emerged cases around the world every year,<sup>11</sup> and about 200 Thousand women suffering fistula in Uganda.<sup>12</sup>

Fistula is a multifactorial disease caused by several practices; abortion of pregnant not yet married girls, lack of awareness of causes and treatment of disease, shortage of knowledge available about curing.<sup>13</sup> In addition, delayed seeking formal health care,<sup>14</sup> traditional practices and poverty,<sup>15</sup> and many other factors.<sup>16\_17\_18\_19</sup>

Culturally, some Ugandan villagers believed that fistula is caused by; sexual intercourse during menstruation periods, irregular women use to contraceptives, trauma which infect the girl as a result of being raped, or due to the anger of the Gods when women lack certain cultural practices that are supposed to do upon completion of her marriage which is to buy a goat and offered to the Gods to please it.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, obstetric fistula negatively impacted women biologically,<sup>21\_22\_23\_24</sup> socially and psychologically.<sup>25\_26</sup>

**1/ Aim of the Study :**

The present paper aims to study the early marriage as a cultural practice in Uganda, then exploring the impacts of this practice on women's health. Consequently, the study would investigate the biological output of the cultural phenomena, which is the main theme of medical anthropology. Thus, the main aims of the study can be summarized as the following:

- Determination of causes of early marriage in Uganda;
- Investigating women's health and social status through early marriage;
- Exploring both psychological and social effects of women's injury by obstetric fistula.

**2/ Research Hypotheses :**

The present research is based on two main hypotheses that are:

- There is a strong relationship between early marriage and women's health in Kampala;
- Socio-Cultural aspects have a significant role in the emergence and spreading of early marriage related diseases.

**3/ Subject and Methodology:**

The present study was conducted on a sample of 95 individuals of ages between 15:45 years using 75 questionnaire and 20 interviews. The demographic characteristics of this sample were presented in (Table 1,2).

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of Questionnaires sample

<i>Demographic characteristics of Questionnaires sample</i>							
	<i>Religion</i>				<i>Sex</i>		
	Born Again	Christian	Muslim		Female	Male	
Percentage	5.3	48	46.7		40	60	
	<i>Social Status</i>				<i>Age</i>		
	Widower	Divorced	Married	Single	41: Up	26:40	14:25
Percentage	-	1	54	45	21.3	40	38.7
	<i>Educational level</i>						
	.M.A	Bachelors	diploma	secondary	Preparative	primary	
Percentage	-	60	9.3	21.3	9.3	-	
	<i>Income</i>						
	unemployment		High		Medium		Low
Percentage	10.7		5.3		49.3		34.7
	<i>Tribal affiliation</i>						
	Tooro	Munyankoli	Muganda	Alur		Baganda	
Percentage	1.3	8	42.7	2.7		32	
	Musoga	Murundi					
	Percentage	5.3	8				

**Source:** By Authors.

**Table 2:** Demographic characteristics of interviews sample

<i>Demographic characteristics of interviews sample</i>							
	<i>Religion</i>				<i>Sex</i>		
	Born Again	Christian	Muslim		Female	Male	
Percentage	15	40	45		30	70	
	<i>Social Status</i>				<i>Age</i>		
	Widower	Divorced	Married	Single	41: Up	26:40	14:25
Percentage	-	-	70	30	20	60	20
	<i>Educational level</i>						
	.M.A	bachelors	Diploma	secondary	Preparative	primary	
Percentage	5	30	35	15	5	10	
	<i>Income</i>						
	unemployment		High		Medium		Low
Percentage	10		15		40		35
	<i>Tribal affiliation</i>						
	Tooro	Acholi	Lugbara	Ankoli		Baganda	
Percentage	10	20	5	10		55	

**Source:** By Authors.

The present research adopted the biocultural approach as a main entrance for studying human health and disease anthropologically. Where, the main aim of the biocultural approach is to find the link between cultural beliefs and practices from one side, with health status on the other side. Where, man's health and disease is considered as a reflective mirror for his cultural, social, and natural environments.

#### **4/ Results and Discussion**

Walker (2012) defined marriage as early when the girl to be married is under the age of eighteen and she did not have the ability whether physiologically or psychologically to bear marriage responsibilities.<sup>27</sup> Despite early marriage is punishable by Ugandan law, but that early marriage of girls continues.<sup>28</sup>

The present study found that 60% of the study sample indicated that early marriage is still rampant in Kampala despite the highly civilized status and higher education level compared to the other Ugandan districts.

##### **4.1/ Causes of early marriage in Kampala**

It is apparent from the results that, Poverty comes first as a main cause of early marriage in Kampala, followed by the desire to achieve economic and financial security for the girl and her family, in addition to other mentioned factors. (Table.3)

**Table 3:** Causes of early marriage

<i>Causes of early marriage</i>	<i>%</i>
Poverty.	60%
Economic security for the girl and family.	22.7%
Traditional and cultural practices.	21.3%
Desire to get dowry.	20%
Chastity and protecting girls from pre-marriage sex.	20%
Increased respect and position for women in the society.	16%

**Source:** By Authors.

Also, interviews with the study population revealed family desire to get rid of poverty and poor conditions in which they live. Consequently, parents were interested to have their daughters married early to get the dowry and transfer the girl's responsibilities to her

husband. On the other hand, some parents oblige their girls to marry at an early age when these girls become pregnant before marriage as a result of indulging in unlawful sexual practices. Thus, parents looking for a culprit in this pregnancy to marry the girl. Here the girl's father may waive some of their rights in the dowry for his desire to avoid society's reaction towards him because of the infamous deeds of his daughter.

Moreover, in some cases, parents who have a married daughter that died leaving children, they prefer to have their younger daughter married to the husband of her died sister in order to look after her sister's children. Additionally, the widow who lost her husband tended to marry off her daughters at an early age to get rid of the economic burden of those girls.

Previously, early marriage occurred regardless the girl's desire, but at the moment this marriage is established according to her desire and consent. The basic motive behind this is the desire to get rid of poverty experienced by her family.

#### ***4.2/ Impacts of Early Marriage***

The results revealed that only 60% of the study population is well aware that early marriage leaves a lot of negative effects on the girl. These impacts were categorized as follow: -

##### ***4.2.1/ Social Impacts.***

Early marriage disrupts and destroys the future of girls, as it deprives them of education and employment opportunities, especially as soon as pregnancy, childbirth and the consequent preoccupation with raising children and caring for their families as a whole. Thus, they no longer had enough time and effort to work or education. Where, taking responsibility for rising and charring for her children at an early age at which a girl isn't eligible for that which overburden forces. This often causes failure in raising these children as a result of inexperience or a complete lack of conviction of her marriage, in addition to depriving the girl of enjoying youth period due to compliance with upbringing children at an early age. Moreover, when the girl marries undesired man due to any stressor as poverty and financial status, especially when there is a big age difference between woman and husband. This would have negative impacts on the whole family especially children.



#### **4.2.2/ Psychological Impacts.**

Girl's sense of suffering and psychological torture as a result of unsustainable responsibility at an early age and inability to cope with the new situation that has become experienced. Also, the weak capacity of the girl for self-defense and claim rights, especially in the case of marriage to the older man. In addition to, physical and mental deterioration of the girl and the ability to think and make decisions related to the family, especially the children. Moreover, hatred of women to children resulted from this marriage, and subsequent lack attention to their right upbringing. Finally, tendency of women to consume alcohols and drugs.

#### **4.2.3/ Health Impacts.**

The study population mentioned several health effects due to early marriage, where early-married women are not vulnerable to have problems in the uterus as a result of giving birth at an early age, but they are more vulnerable to obstructed labor as a result of incompleteness of physical growth and unsuitability for pregnancy. Moreover, they have greater likelihood of urinary tract infection, developing fistula, having abortion due to their young age and physical inability to bear the burdens of pregnancy.

Additionally, the involvement of women in sexual practices outside marriage with people of the same age, especially when they married older man would increase the possibility of infection with AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Finally, the death of women during childbirth due to obstructed the fetus out of the birth canal.

On the other hand, Part of the study population claimed that early marriage has many positive impacts on girl, such as:

- Early married women acquires both respect and higher position in the society;
- This early marriage not only protects the girl from having illegal sexual relationships, but it acts as a protective action against undesired pregnancy from the outside sex practices and sexually transmitted diseases as well;
- Became a source of safety and confidence by the partner;
- Protecting women from exposure to abortion faced by older women;
- Early marriage provides a good chance and time to upbringing her children;

- Early marriage act to withstand the girl of responsibility at early time.

Consequently, facing and limiting early marriage isn't only medical, but it should be mainly formulated and built on cultural bases, which aims at changing some cultural concepts related to marriage and health to raise people awareness. But to change some cultural aspects in the Ugandan society or at any African society isn't an easy way to go through, as it would require a great strategy and strong efforts to perform such a task.

Moreover, the confrontation strategy shouldn't marginalize and ignore the role of the community that surrounds the diseased women. Where, women's community has a great effect in the treatment by knowing how to deal with the infected women and not avoiding them in order to limit the negative psychological effects they may have, a matter which requires improving and raising the degree of awareness not only to the patient and his family, but also to the surrounding community as well.

On the other hand, the formal sector represented by the government and its institutions should have a complete policy and programs to confront such cases. Where, the desired plans shouldn't base only on the ways of treatment and cure of diseased women but should greatly depends on the ways of prevention of disease. This prevention wouldn't be achieved without having a clear plan to improve and raise the awareness of the whole community members whether the diseased or the healthy persons.

## **5/ Conclusion :**

It is apparent from the study results that, the previously proposed research hypotheses were emphasized. Where, there is a strong relationship between early marriage and women health, which is a negative relationship. As previously mentioned, there are harmful consequences of early marriage on women's health. These consequences are revealed by the emergence of diseases.

Also, the second hypotheses was completely emphasized, where the results showed that there is significant role of socio-cultural factors in emerging and spreading of early marriage diseases especially fistula.

Additionally, the role of the government mustn't be limited to the intangible aspects only, but there should be financial support as well. Where, poverty acts as a main barrier for many patients to receive the

required treatment. Thus, the government must help the people in need financially, whether this participation is partially or totally.

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