

# The Socio-Economic Effects of Child, Early and Forced Marriages among the Muslim Communities in Cameroon: A Historical Analysis

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## Abstract

Child, Early and Forced marriages have been common practices among many ethnic groups in the world. However, marriage is regarded as a moment of celebration and milestone in adult life. Sadly, the practice of force and early marriages gives no such cause for celebration especially when the groom and most especially the bride are compelled to get married without their consent. This has been the case with most of the Muslim Communities in Cameroon. The phenomenon of forced and child or early marriages have being so rampant among the Muslim communities in Pre and Post Independent Cameroon. Most Muslim parents in Cameroon hide behind Muslim or Sharia law as pretext for sending their girls children to married early. In the three Northern Regions of Cameroon as well as the other Regions down South, the Western Region and the Anglophone Regions, where there is high concentration of Muslims, force and child or early marriages are still being practice, despite the sensitization done by government, NGOs and some foreign partners against those practices. This has constantly ragged or retarded the socio-economic development of the girl child in particular and the Muslim Community in Cameroon at large. The analyses employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework. Data gathered both from the primary and secondary sources were analyzed through the chronological, descriptive and analytical methods. Based on the sources used, we arrived at the conclusion that most victims of forced and child or early marriages in the Muslim Communities in Cameroon are victims of customs and not Muslim or Islamic law. It is now left on the government and Muslim authorities to do a lot of sensitizations and carry out, why not repressive measures to make sure that the phenomenon of forced and child or early marriages among the Muslim Communities came to an end.

**Keywords:** Forced Marriage, Child/Early Marriages, Muslim Communities, *Sharia* law, Islamic law, Customs, Sensitization.

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Child, early and forced marriage is widespread in Cameroon, and particularly prevalent in the North of the country. As a form of violence against women and girls, the practice is extremely harmful to the socio-economic status, sexual and reproductive health and psychological well-being of girls and women. Child or early marriage, defined as marrying before the age of 18, is a practice that affects mostly girls and often leads to violation of human rights for the girls who have to marry early. It profoundly affect a girl's life through lowering her education and future earnings prospect. It may also lead to health complications, compromised psychological well-being, intimate partner violence, and lack of participation and voice for the girls in their community and society at large. Forced marriage on the other hand is a marriage in which one or more of the parties is forced or obliged to get married without their

consent or against their will. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12) It should be noted that the practice of child, early and force marriage goes as far back as the Pre-colonial period in Cameroon.

Child, Early and Forced marriage remains highly prevalent in Cameroon especially among Muslim Communities. Physiological and social criteria suggest that most boys and girls aged 14 and younger are much too young for sexual, marital, and reproductive transitions, while many among the ages of 15-17 years old are also too young. Child/early and forced marriages, are known to have negative impacts on health as well as educational attainment, labour force participation, intimate partner violence, and empowerment. It becomes necessary to legally restrict marriage before the age of 18. Yet, despite such restrictions, many girls still marry early or are force to marry against their will by their parents and relatives, suggesting that more need to be

done to eliminate the practice (Adeyemo, 2013). If people cover themselves behind the Islamic faith saying it plays a role in the continuation of the practice, there should be a role for faith leaders and based organization in the fight against forced and child/early marriages.

The rights of the child all over the world are considered to be very important. But force and child/early marriages have become some of the ways the rights of children are being abused. In Cameroon, marriage under Islamic law; requires the consent of both parties and in strict respect of Islamic Law for the marriage to be consummated and for it to be recognized by Islamic authorities. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12) This article therefore aimed at shedding more light on why children are victims of forced and child/early marriages amongst Muslim Communities in Cameroon, and the effects and consequences of such marriages on the Muslim child and the society. The findings of this article are that child/early and forced marriages have harmful developmental, psychological and physical consequences on the Muslim girl child; have negative effects on the society and the Cameroon Nation at large; that scriptural assertions, in defense, are mere manipulative ideas to cover up moral failures; and that whatever reason is given for child/early marriage, history has taught us that the disastrous effects on the victims outweigh them and undoubtedly make child marriage a social evil. (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9) This article also aims at examining the socio-economic effects of forced and child/early marriages among the Muslim Community in Cameroon. It posits that child/early and forced marriages do exist in Cameroon and needs to be curbed and thereafter suggests strategies that will make for a better implementation of such laws to effectively curb forced and child/early marriages among the Muslim communities in Cameroon.

#### Definition of forced and child/early marriages

Forced marriage is a marriage in which one or more of the parties is married without their consent or against their will. A marriage can also become a forced marriage even if both parties enter with full consent, if one or both are later forced to get married. Parents may also force the two parties to get married against their will or without their consent.

Child or early marriage on the other hand can be defined here as marriage before the age of 18. As we earlier said, it is a practice that affects mostly girls and often leads to violation of human rights for the girls who have to marry early. Child or early marriage is known to have negative impacts on the health as well as educational attainment of the girl child (Kyari & Ayodele, 2014).

It is imperative to emphasize the differences between a forced marriage and an arranged marriage. They are not one and the same thing. In an arranged

marriage, both spouses are free to choose whether or not they wish to accept the arrangement (Nwogugu, 1996; Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi. 2003). In a forced marriage, this consent is lacking for one or both spouses.

#### Forced Marriage under Islamic Law

Under *Sharia'a* law, a woman cannot be given away in marriage without her consent, except in the case of a minor (WACOL 2003, 251). However, under the *Maliki* school of law, which is practiced by Muslims in Cameroon and other black African countries (Denmark Jan. 2005, 68), the choice of husband by a Muslim woman is subject to the *ajar*, or over-ruling power, of her father or guardian (Nasir, Jamal J. 1990, 20 33). *Ajar* allows the father or guardian to select a husband for his daughter based on her "wider interests" (Doi Abdur Rahman). According to a report by Theresa Akumadu, cited in a 2003 Center for Reproductive Rights report, a father's *ajar* allows him to "arrange the marriage of his virgin daughter, regardless of her age and without her consent" (Akumadu in Center for Reproductive Rights 2003, 83). A prevalent marriage practice in Cameroon and Northern Nigeria and Niger is that of *daurin aure*, where a girl continues to go to school until she completes her education before the marriage is consummated (WARDC and WACOL 2003, 69). However, forced marriage is generally limited to girls who have not been to school or who have not yet reached puberty (WARDC and WACOL 2003, 70). That said, before critically looking at forced and child/early marriages and what repercussion it has, let us first of all examine briefly how marriage is being celebrated among Muslim communities in Cameroon.

#### Marriage among the Muslim Communities in Cameroon

It should be noted that most marriage ceremonies amongst Muslim Communities in Cameroon usually take the *Fatiha* method. The *fatiha*, also spelled "*fatihah*" (WLUM 15 Mar. 2006), refers to the opening verse of the Qur'an (Mir-Hosseini 1997, 171; WLUM 15 Mar. 2006) which is read to "solemnize" an Islamic marriage (Mir-Hosseini 1997, 171). A 2004 journal article published in *African Population Studies* indicated that Hausa-Fulani Muslims in black Africa practice a marriage ceremony, referred to as the "wedding *fatiha*". (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9) Marriage Ceremonies amongst the Muslim Communities in Cameroon is first of all usually an all - male affair, lasting about ten to fifteen minutes. When the pure Islamic stage of tying the marriage is over, the celebration becomes a female affair. After the wedding, the responsibility of feeding, clothing, educating and sheltering of the lady is shifted from her father to the husband (*African Population Studies* Aug. 2004). On the wedding date, Imams or *Mu'alims* (Islamic scholars) are invited by the girl's parents to carry out the solemnization of their children's wedding with representatives of the boy's family in attendance and other well-wishers

present to bear witness and share the joy of the occasion. It should be noted that the Muslim dignitary who officiate the marriage is the Imam.

Marriage among the Muslims Communities in Cameroon was a long but exciting ceremony. It was generally conducted strictly according to the laws in the Quran. The boy and girl or man and woman who were to get married had to agree between themselves before going to see their parents. The parents then exchanged some visits to indicate their approval. Even in earlier times, when Muslim parents arranged the marriage, they were compelled to consult the children before concluding the arrangements. It is said that this practice began when a girl came to Prophet Mohammed to complain that she had been given in marriage without being consulted. The Prophet is said to have directed that the girl was free to have the marriage dissolved. (B. Aisha Lemu and Fatima Heeren, 1978: 19)

When both parents of the boy and the girl finally agree on the marriage, preparations started. The family would bring a box full of wrappers and some money to the girl's family. The day of the marriage was then fixed. As preparations were going on, the girl's family fixes the dowry, the *Sadaki*, (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9) which the boy's family must pay before the marriage can take place. It should be noted that when a Muslim girl or woman was getting married, it was an essential part of the deal for the bridegroom to give her bride price of an agreed value. The bride price becomes the exclusive property of the bride. The Imam officiate the marriage. Each marriage is followed by heavy feasting and merry making. The girl was accompanied to her husband's house with her dowry, this time made up of her house whole belongings bought by the parents. A Muslim is allowed to get married to four wives, provided he is capable financially and also able to apply equal justice to them. (B. Aisha Lemu and Fatima Heeren, 1978: 19)

After the pronouncement of the couple as husband and wife, celebrations follow all through the night. In some families, Islamic preaching is observed all night, while in a majority, beating of drums and folk songs are engaged in with well-wishers joining the families in celebrations. Late in the evening of the wedding, the new bride is prepared for the journey to her husband's home. She goes round relatives to bid them farewell. Others give her final counselling and guidance for a successful marriage life. Then the parents finally hand over the girl and she is usually accompanied by a little girl and another married woman to her new home. In the new home, she is received into a newly prepared room by the groom's family. The entire ceremony is usually completed within 24 - 48 hours (*Studies of Tribes and Tribals* 2003, 106). A marriage is valid in Islam if it meets three conditions: First there should be offer and acceptance - and where the girl is a virgin (that is,

previously unmarried) and/or a minor (depending on school of law) the contract is entered into by her father or *waliyy* (guardian). Some schools of Law or thought say that the woman's consent in this case is not necessary - but the *Maliki* School, which Cameroon subscribes to, does not in general allow marriage even of a virgin against her will. However, if she does not object, her silence is interpreted as coyness and the father proceeds after asking her, whereas if she is previously married, her consent must be explicit. The second condition is that the *Mahr* [i.e., dower or bride price (Mir-Hosseini 1997, 225)] - a consideration which is fixed as a minimum in law - must pass from the groom to the bride. Thirdly, there must be at least two witnesses to the contract. Once these terms are met, whether or not there is a *fatihah* read and whether or not there is a formal ceremony and whether or not either party is present; so long as there is a *waliyy* for the bride and a *wakil* (agent) for the groom - a marriage is valid.

The schools of law differ over the combination of the agreements that must be fulfilled simultaneously and prior to consummation. In some schools where there is an offer and acceptance, witnesses, and a mention of the *mahr*, the marriage is valid even if the *mahr* has not been paid. It becomes a debt on the husband but he can have lawful access to the bride. Others allow the marriage to be contracted in private so long as witnesses are informed after the fact, while other(s) insist that witnesses must be present at the time of contract. But this believe sums up the positions. If such a marriage has been contracted (that is, a marriage that fulfills the three conditions) - and many customary marriages meet these requirements - then she is his wife. So the answer really is that there is no need for a formal *fatihah* and if indeed the above conditions are met, she is his wife in law. However if not met-say for example he did not pay or agree the *mahr* to her or her family - then she is free to leave on that condition. If there is a marriage, then she cannot leave unless he divorces her or she goes to a court of law.

The precedent in *Shari'a* courts is that forced marriages are nullified, and there have been such cases even in Cameroon and other Muslim countries. Also, if she can show that the conditions were not fulfilled, the courts will annul the marriage. Most victims of forced marriages are victims of custom and not Islamic Law and the judges tend to protect women who seek legal redress. This also applies to cases of maltreatment - including the inability to give satisfaction to sexual appetite. An example of such a case was in Fouban, Noun Division of the West Region of Cameroon and this was a girl called Aisha who was forced into marriage by her father. The court annulled the marriage on grounds of lack of consent. (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9)

### Causes of Child, Early and Forced marriage in Cameroon

There are several causes of Child, Early and Forced marriage in Cameroon. However, it should be noted that the phenomenon of Child, Early and Forced marriage is rampant among the Muslim communities, most especially up the northern regions of Cameroon. Child, Early and Forced marriage is estimated at 79 percent in that part of the country. The practice is very recurrent due to some misconceptions and cultural beliefs.

While poverty was mentioned as a factor driving child marriage, traditional cultural norms were mentioned as the key drivers or causes. According to some dignitaries up north, a young single woman is perceived negatively, thought to be infertile and even sometimes considered to be a prostitute or a witch.

Families believe that girls should not have their first menstruation under their parents' roofs child marriage protect young girls from unwanted pregnancies and abortions. On the traditional and religious aspect, a young girl who gets married at early age is a pride for her family. It is equally believed that a young girl not married is negatively perceived in the community in which she lives. She is seen as infertile and sometimes considered as a prostitute. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12)

Many parents sell out their girls for financial gains and pay no attention to the risks and consequences the latter are exposed to. Marrying off daughters is also an income generation strategy. In exchange for girl's hand in marriage, a father receives payment, usually in the form of livestock, cash, or goods. Younger girls usually fetch a higher price. Marrying off a daughter also means one has fewer mouth to feed. The NGO known as the Association to combat violence against women abbreviated in French as ALVF, base in the Far North Region, reported that 65 percent of decisions were taken by the fathers of most young girls. (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9)

According to Braiman (2014), one of the primary underlying reasons for child marriage is poverty. Quoting from the National Bureau of Statistics, Braiman (2014:481) asserted that the rate of poverty level amongst Muslim Communities in Cameroon is very high. Poverty in the Country undoubtedly encourages child marriage. According to Erulkar and Muthengi, child marriage is profitable to poor families in rural livestock and farming communities. In some cases, the betrothal of girls at a young age relieves parents of the costs and responsibilities of raising a girl. This is the case amongst the Fulani and Hausa Muslim Communities in Cameroon. In the Northern Region of Cameroon as well as areas of high Muslim concentration down south, that is Douala, Yaounde, Ebolowa, Bertoua, and even going down to Bafoussam, Bamenda and Bertoua, most

Muslim girls drop out of school early and are forced to get married in their tender ages. (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9)

The second reason asserted is the claim of morality and honour. According to Audi (2006), the desire to maintain "*family honour*" in terms of ensuring that young people marry into a particular, approved family or community, or to control unwanted behaviour in a child (such as perceived promiscuity) or to protect cultural or religious ideals which are misguided or out of date (Audi, 2006: 218). Braiman (2014) agrees and asserted that child marriage protects girls from social ills, such as promiscuity and to avoid dishonour and the shame attached to pre-marital sex. Muslim girls are married off before reaching puberty. (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9)

A third reason adduced for forced marriages is to maintain that strong African family ties. In many cases, forced marriages are organized to maintain and strengthen family or community links (Giyana, 2009), or to ensure that land or assets remain within the family (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). Forced marriages can also be motivated by immigration and citizenship purposes (Williamson, 2014), and organized to enable a family or community member living outside their own land to move back or remember their land of origin. Another important reason for forced or early marriages amongst Muslim Communities in Cameroon is that desire to ensure the Muslim culture and tradition within the couples. It is very difficult in Cameroon to see a Muslim getting married to a Christian. This is in strict respect of the Islamic Law. The only way out for the couples to get married is for the said partner, either the bride or the groom, to convert to Islam. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12)

### Manifestation of Child, Early and Force Marriages in Cameroon

Amongst Muslim Communities in Cameroon, child marriage is a traditional practice that is greatly influenced by culture (Elizabeth, 2009). According to United Nations Population Fund (2013), about 30 per cent of Muslim girls in Cameroon are forced into marriage by age 15, while over 78 per cent are married by age 18. These appalling statistics led Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille (2007: 2-9) to describe the life of a girl child in Northern Cameroon as pathetic. To buttress her assertion, she maintains that, while the ideal marriage age of women, though varies, is between 20 and 26 years old, in the Cameroonian towns of Maroua, Garoua, Ngaoundere, Douala, Yaounde, Bamenda, Bertoua and Bafoussam, little Muslim girls who have started menstruating are considered mature for marriage. In some cases, a girl of 14years old can be given out for marriage based on this premise (Braiman, 2013). For example, Faouzia Yaya, a 14 year old girl from Maroua, the Far North Region of Cameroon was forced to get married by forced to someone she never loved. She even

ran to her Uncles place, but they still found her. According to Faouzia, during her brief marriage, she endured constant violence from her husband. He used to beat her daily. Thank God, Cameroon recently adopted a new law passed in the National Assembly to protect girls like Faouzia. (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9)

It should be noted that under Cameroon law, a girl must be 15 year old to married and a boy must be 18. Also, Cameroon law article 52 of Order number 81-02 of June 29, 1981 on the civil service stipulates no marriage may take place if the girl is younger than 15 or the boy is younger than 18. However, forced marriage is still on the rise in Cameroon. Girls are given to married without their consent. Bride price are often paid to the parents by the husband who is sometimes many years older than the girl. Since a price has been paid, the girl is considered the property of the husband. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12)

Child, Early and Force marriage is estimated at 80 percent in Cameroon among the Muslim community. It goes as far back as the pre-colonial period. Some members of the Muslim community link it to Islam. It is so attached to the culture and tradition of the people. (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9) During the periods of the Mandate System and later on the Trusteeship Administration, the French and British Administrators tried to fight and why not eradicate the practiced in their respective spheres of influence, but they never succeeded. As such, even after independence of the two Cameroons, up to the late 1980s and early 1990s, Child, Early and Forced marriage among the Muslim communities continued. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12)

Beginning from late 1990 and early 2000, Some Muslim dignitaries and authorities were able to stop some of the forced and child/early marriages by appealing to parents and potential husbands. They went to court and insisted in the annulment of some of those marriages, especially those not consummated and they were able to get young girls divorced even when marriages were consummated. Most of the appeals were fairly easy for them because they worked with the community, but still traumatic for the girls and with the courts annulments have been difficult but, what was hell was the reaction of the family and that seems to be the main problem. People/communities who believe they have a right to force their daughters into marriage do not take it kindly and in one of the cases that occur in Northern Cameroon, the girl had to leave home and, one of the women's human right group had to unofficially adopt her (WLUML 15 Mar. 2006).

Still looking at forced and child/early marriages, according to Itebiye (2016), Justice and Equity are the hall mark of every society that operates under the rule of Law. When Justice, the revealed perfection of God's nature and infinite righteousness,

which entails rendering to everyone that which is his or her due (Ottuh & Itebiye, 2015); and the rule of law, which govern a given society (Nwogugu, 1996), are consigned into oblivious status over and above narcissistic intentions (Shryock, 2008), anarchy sets in. The betrothal of female children to adult males has been and is still a regular occurrence in many places, especially among the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group of Cameroon (Elizabeth, 2009) and, to a lesser extent, is prevalent also in other parts of the black African countries (Braiman, 2014).

Despite the prevalence of child marriage in the country, child marriage is illegal in Cameroon. According to Akinwunmi (2010), Cameroon and Nigeria are signatories of many international and regional instruments which regulate the rights of children. Most African countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 16 April 1991, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Children's Charter) on 12 July 2001. Additionally, African countries took steps to domesticate both instruments in the form of the Child Rights Act (CRA). However, irrespective of some African countries passing of the Child Rights Act in 2003, child marriage is still being practiced. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12) In other words, some black African countries have continued to violate the provisions of Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Children's Charter and the Child Rights Act. Many human right groups are calling on the Cameroonian Muslim dignitaries, Religious and State Leaders to re-examine the issue of forced and child/early marriages. (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9)

There have being so many instances in Cameroonian towns like Douala, Yaounde, Bamenda, Bafoussam, Bertoua, Ngaoundere, Garoua, Maroua, where girls were forced to get married to husbands chosen by their parents or relatives, much against their will. For example we had the case of Amina in the Northern Region of Cameroon in early 2000. We also had the case of Aisha in the West Region of Cameroon. In Yaounde, more precisely in the Briqueterie neighborhood in the late 1990s. There was also the case of Hadiza and Hajara in Bamenda in the early 2000. We also have the cases of Amina, 15, Fatima, age 17, Hapsatou, age 14, Aissa Doumara, age 16 and Hawa, age 14, in the Far North Region in early 2000. (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9) All of these are concrete examples of young Muslim girls who are forced by their parents or relatives to get married to men they never loved, older than them or against their will. What is even very regretting about these forced marriages amongst Muslims Communities in Cameroon is that, most of the girls are still underage. Moreover, once these marriages take place, the girls are force to drop out of school. Some or majority of the men who are often older than the girls resort to gender violence like rape in case the bride refuse to have sex with him. The girls also face serious health

problems when pregnant, most especially when they are about to deliver. Some of them may end up losing their lives or have health problems for the rest of their lives.

### How forced and child marriages take place

According to Adeyemo (2013), forced and child marriages often entails extreme pressure from family members. This can include physical and emotional violence. Emotional blackmail is common with families trying to coerce a victim by telling her that if she does not agree to marry the designated husband, she will be bringing shame on her family (An-Naim & Howard, 2000). Families can also threaten to disown a victim, leave her without any parental support (financial and emotional), with no contact with siblings or other family members, and with nowhere to live (Audi, 2006). In some cases, families use religion as a means of coercing children and young people, saying that it is against the Muslim religion to refuse to marry (Brammah, 2014). Physical violence, in some extreme cases, is used as a means of coercing children and young people into forced marriage (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12).

Children and young people can also be taken abroad to be married against their will-in such cases, the victims are often tricked into going abroad and are not aware that they are being taken overseas to be forced into marrying someone. Sometimes, they may have no access to money, their return ticket or passport, and no one to talk to about their situation (Otoo-Oyortey, & Pobi, 2003). When the girls find themselves in those desperate situations, they are bound to get married to the proposed groom. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12)

In other words, the victims are most often placed in situation where refusing to go ahead with a forced marriage can lead to severe consequences. In some cases, they may be taken prisoner in their own home as their families may fear them talking about the attempted forced marriage if they meet up with others such as at school. In some rare cases, refusing a forced marriage can result in murder or so-called "*honour killing*" (Williamson, 2014).

### Consequences of Child, Early and Forced Marriages

Child, Early and Forced Marriages have significant consequences in Cameroonian society. It led to the abrupt end of their education and a rupture in their personal development. It leaves girls defenseless and anxious, and they have little confidence and personal autonomy. As a result, they are unable to advance in everyday life and they are not very active in their communities. Married girls are at an increased risk of insults, injuries, and rape. Many young girls who were already mothers reported experiencing grave complications during child birth and having children born with birth defects, including brain damage. According to a 2005 Amnesty International (AI) report, in Muslim dominated black Africa, a girl who attempts

to run away from her husband or his family risks "harsh punishment" (AI 31 May 2005, 5). One form of punishment involves an "acid bath," where the former partner or a relative throws acid at the woman with the intention of mutilating or killing her.

The Amnesty International report further states that girls who run away from their husbands are often unable to seek protection from their own family who arranged the marriage. (Doumara, Aissa and Sike Bille, 2007: 2-9). A 2002 report on women's human rights indicated that young girls forced into marriage is "one of the causes of prostitution in Northern Cameroon, Douala, Yaounde, Bamenda and Buea, where we have large concentration of Muslim population, as the young girls flee their marital homes and take refuge in hotels or brothels (*gidan karuwai*) in urban centers" (WARD and WACOL 2003, 70).

Some young mothers said that they fear sexual relations and are now HIV-positive or have had other sexually transmitted infections. Psychological trauma has resulted in some suicide attempts. According to WLUML (2013), forced marriage is a global phenomenon but is most prevalent in Africa and Southern Asia. There are reported cases of forced marriage in developed Nations, like United Kingdom, but in most cases, it involves South Asian families, Middle Eastern and African families (Williamson, 2014). However, our case study is the Muslim Community in Cameroon. Historically, it has been established by many research works carried out that forced and early marriages in Cameroon Muslim Communities have devastating consequences. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12)

Forced marriage involving anyone under the age of 18 constitutes a form of child abuse (UNICEF 2005). According to Adeyemo (2013), a child who is forced into marriage is at risk of significant harm through physical, sexual or emotional abuse. In other words, forced marriage can have a negative impact on a child's health and development. Giyan, H. A. (2009), further posits that a child in such a situation would be absent from school resulting in the loss of educational opportunities, and possibly also future employment opportunities.

There are numerous detrimental consequences associated with forced early/child marriages, and in particular, forced marriage involving children, including physical, developmental, psychological and social implications. One serious consequence of forced marriage is physical abuse in the form of domestic violence and sexual abuse (An-Na'im & Howard, 2000). According to WLUML (2013), women who marry younger are more likely to be physically abused by their spouses. In addition, anyone forced into a marriage faces a serious risk of rape or sexual abuse as they may not

wish to consent, or may not be of legal age to consent to sexual relations (UNICEF, 2005). Young women forced into marriage may also face unwanted or enforced pregnancy and in many cases enforced abortion. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12)

### **Cameroon Government and other stakeholders attempted Solution to curb Child, Early and Forced Marriage**

Cameroon has put in place so far many legal instruments to counteract the practice of child, early and force marriage. The Penal Code in its article 356 makes provisions to punish forced marriage by 5 to 10 years in jail and with a fine amounting from 25000 to 1million CFA francs. (Adair, Tim, 2007: 1-12)

The 1989 United Nation Convention on the Rights of the child, ratified by Cameroon, sets the minimum age of marriage at 18. Agencies of the United Nations like UNICEF, UNESCO, as well as NGOs like PLAN International Cameroon have always been preaching against Child, Early and Forced marriage. Most of these NGOs go down to the field, organized workshops and sensitized the concerned population on the negative effects of Child, Early and Forced marriage.

### **CONCLUSION**

The rights of the child anywhere in the world are important and should be protected. Forced and early/child marriages are some of the ways in which the rights of children are being exploited. Child marriage is declining amongst the Muslims in Cameroon, but only slowly. Part of the reason for this is that the practice is deeply rooted culturally, and it is seen as recommended or even mandated by the Muslim faith in the Cameroonian Muslim communities. The role of local religious leaders therefore may matter greatly for the elimination of early/child or forced marriages since these leaders are almost universally viewed as the most influential people in the lives of the Muslim communities and their spiritual and moral guidance has a profound effect on daily life. These are the Imams, Muslim teachers, Mallams or Ulemas, Muslim Traditional Chiefs like the Lamido, Sultan, Ardo and Sarki.

This article is of the view that the main underlying factor in the issue of forced and early/child marriages in Cameroon's Muslim Communities or anywhere else in the world is moral depravity and notes that there should be no religious or cultural justifications as it always constitutes a breach of human rights. Furthermore, the article notes that whatever reasons are given as excuses for forced and early/child marriages amongst the Muslims in Cameroon, the disastrous effects on the victims outweigh them and undoubtedly make child marriage a social evil. The article therefore, posits that scriptural assertions in justification of forced and early/child marriages are mere manipulative ideas to cover up moral failures. Moreover, it is clear that the

rights of the girl child in respect of marriage are not adequately protected by law.

Very important recommendations to be made here is that, firstly, in order to protect the Muslim girl child from early/child or force marriages, there is a need to enact a 'Prohibition of Child Marriage Act' which should deal broadly with the issue of child/early or force marriage. Such law should supersede religious and cultural adherences, and every religious and cultural practice that encourages child marriage should be sanctioned by law.

Secondly, the Cameroon government should see the failure to comply with its international and regional human rights obligations in the right perspective. As a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CRC, the African Children's Charter and the African Women's Protocol, Cameroon is bound to uphold its contract for the protection of women, which includes the girl child. Therefore, for the Cameroon government to observe its treaty obligations in good faith, it must make a concerted effort to realize the implementation of the provisions pertaining to child rights in order to combat the adverse consequences of forced and early/child marriage.

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