

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Implementation Strategies to End Child Marriage in Kogi State, Nigeria

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The study assesses the effectiveness of multi-sectoral strategies aimed at ending child marriage in Kogi State, Nigeria. Utilizing both primary and secondary data, the study synthesized government policy frameworks, international reports, academic literature, and qualitative data from key stakeholders, including adolescent girls, community leaders, educators, and policymakers. Data collection involved purposive sampling, with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions analyzed thematically using NVivo 8.0. Findings reveal that several initiatives have yielded positive outcomes. Health-focused programmes such as the Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health Week (MNCHW) expanded access to essential services in underserved communities, indirectly addressing child marriage drivers. Capacity-building initiatives, free medical testing, and life skills education, particularly under the Participation Initiative for Behavioural Change in Development (PIBCID), enhanced women's health literacy and autonomy. Educational interventions like the Girl-Child Education Support Programme (GCESP) improved school enrollment through scholarships, delaying early marriage among beneficiaries. Legal reforms such as the enactment of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Law and the establishment of specialized courts have strengthened the legal framework against child marriage, while community-based awareness campaigns have improved rights literacy and social support for girls' education. Cultural practices, such as the Ovia-Osese Festival, were also observed to reinforce norms that discourage early marriage, though concerns around human rights compliance were noted. Despite progress, challenges persist, including sustainability of programmes, funding limitations, inadequate infrastructure, cultural resistance, and uneven enforcement of laws in rural areas. The study underscores the need for sustained, context-sensitive, and scalable interventions that address the socio-cultural and economic root causes of child marriage. Strengthening cross-sector collaboration and ensuring community ownership are essential to achieving long-term impact.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Kogi State, Intervention, Impact, Challenges

Introduction

Child marriage continues to be a critical global human rights and public health concern, disproportionately impacting girls in low- and middle-income nations. Annually, around 12 million girls worldwide are married before reaching 18 years

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of age (UNICEF 2021). This practice, entrenched in gender inequality, poverty, cultural norms, and inadequate legal protections, frequently undermines girls' education, exacerbates the risks of gender-based violence, and elevates maternal and infant death rates (Walker 2012). Notwithstanding international and national commitments such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, which advocates for the eradication of all detrimental practices, including child marriage advancement has been sluggish and inconsistent, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa [SSA] (UN Women 2020).

In Nigeria, a nation with a significant prevalence of child brides, the practice endures due to intricate interactions of tradition, religion, economic adversity, and deficiencies in governmental enforcement. The problem is particularly severe in areas like Kogi, where child marriage rates persistently stay elevated despite initiatives by governmental and non-governmental organizations to mitigate the practice (Girls Not Brides 2023). The health concerns linked to child marriage are significant. Early pregnancies in child brides may lead to difficulties like obstetric fistula, preterm birth, and low birth weight children. The mental health of child brides is negatively impacted, resulting in heightened occurrences of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder owing to early marriage and ensuing abuse or neglect. This psychological trauma is exacerbated by social isolation and inadequate support systems. These health challenges are reflected in India, where early marriage correlates with elevated maternal and newborn mortality rates. Child marriage economically constrains women's access to employment and financial autonomy. Child marriage correlates with elevated maternal and child mortality rates, obstructed socioeconomic advancement, and increased incidences of divorce and societal discord.

Despite the implementation of diverse interventions such as community sensitization, educational initiatives, and legal reforms, their efficacy is frequently undermined by suboptimal design, insufficient contextual adaptability, and deficient monitoring methods. In Kogi State, initiatives to mitigate child marriage have frequently been disjointed, reliant on external funding, and deficient in enduring sustainability or local customization. It is essential to advance from descriptive studies of prevalence and cause to research that assesses the processes, fidelity, and scalability of both existing and innovative therapies. This encompasses comprehending the operationalization of policies, the engagement of local stakeholders with anti-child marriage initiatives, and the contextual elements that affect implementation results.

The study is essential for formulating effective, context-specific strategies to address detrimental habits. It aims to comprehend the efficacy of treatments, the target populations, the contextual factors, and the methods for sustainably scaling successful strategies (Peters et al. 2013). In Kogi State, implementation study on child marriage might reveal structural obstacles to existing tactics and pinpoint avenues for more effective, scalable, and contextually suitable solutions. This study aims to reconcile policy aspirations with practical realities, so facilitating the expedited efforts to eradicate child marriage. The study offers evidence-based insights that can guide policy formulation, improve resource distribution, empower communities, strengthen monitoring and evaluation, and promote cultural change, ultimately aiding in the elimination of child marriage in the state.

Statement of the Problem

Child marriage persists as a widespread and deeply rooted problem in numerous regions of Nigeria, especially in Kogi State, where socio-cultural norms, economic hardship, and gender inequity converge to perpetuate the practice. Notwithstanding national legal frameworks like the Child Rights Act of 2003, which establishes the minimum legal marriage age at 18, and various international commitments, including Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 aimed at eradicating harmful practices such as child marriage, tangible progress in Kogi State has been slow and erratic (UNICEF 2020, Girls Not Brides 2023). The existing literature predominantly examines the causes and effects of child marriage in Nigeria, identifying poverty, insufficient education, religious and cultural views, and gender norms as significant factors (Afolayan 2019, Eze 2021). Research has recorded the detrimental impacts on females, encompassing heightened health risks (e.g., obstetric fistula, maternal death), school attrition, and vulnerability to gender-based violence (Okafor and Odu 2020). Nonetheless, a significant deficiency persists in converting this information into efficient and sustainable programming initiatives, especially from the perspective of implementation research.

Eboh's (2020) study elucidated the socio-economic ramifications of child marriage in Anyigba, Dekina Local Government Area of Kogi State, demonstrating that early marriage adversely affects health, education, and economic prospects for young females. The Participation Initiative for Behavioural Change in Development (PIBCID/NWTF), in partnership with the Medical Women's Association of Nigeria (MWAN), initiated a capacity-building and complimentary medical testing program in Kogi State to address gender-based violence (GBV) and early child marriage. Notwithstanding these initiatives, the continued prevalence of child marriage in Kogi State highlights the necessity for focused implementation study.

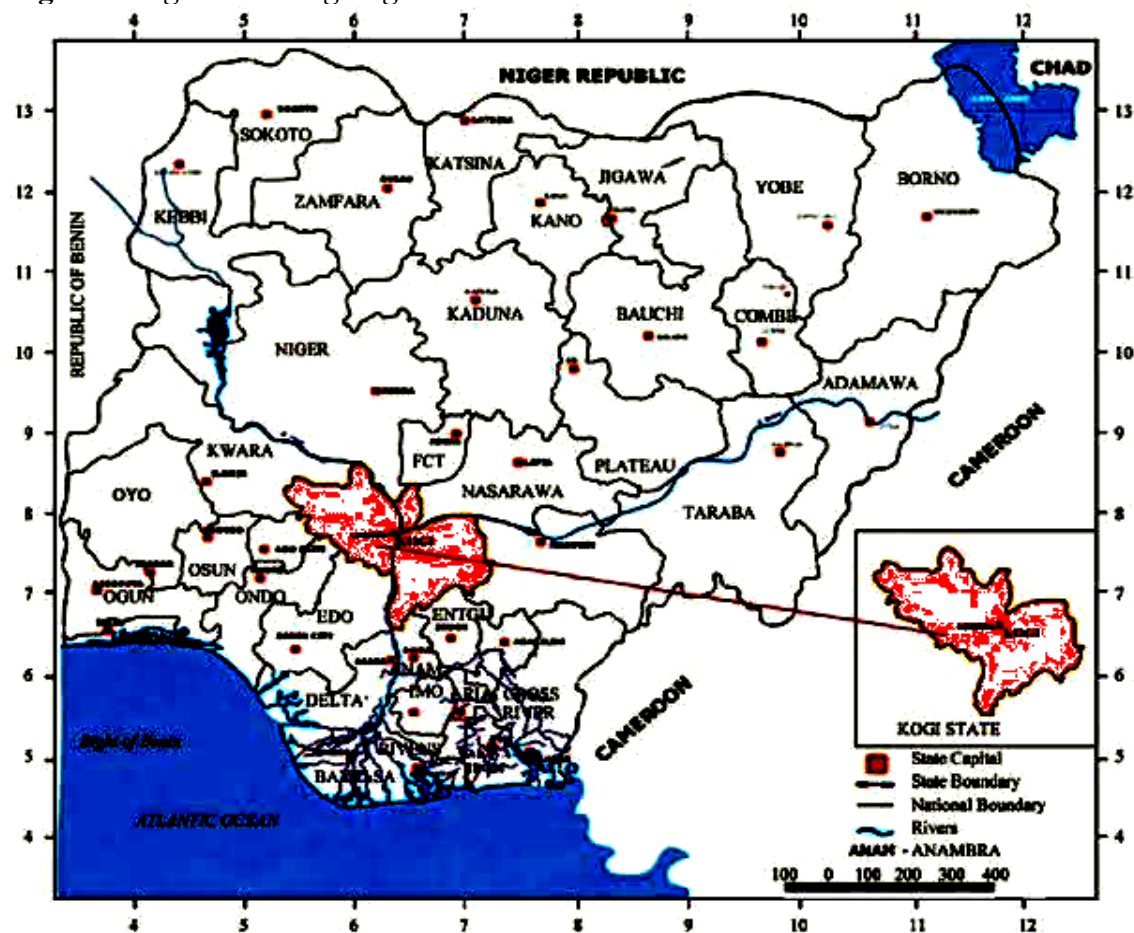
Moreover, although many states in Nigeria (e.g., Ekiti, Lagos) have implemented and assessed anti-child marriage initiatives with quantifiable results, qualitative policy related studies remain little researched in this context. Most previous studies have depended on cross-sectional surveys and minimal qualitative interviews, exhibiting a restricted geographic scope and little interaction with systems-level dynamics (Olawale and Ibrahim 2022). This study utilizes qualitative methods to examine the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions aimed at eliminating child marriage in Kogi State. The study distinguishes itself from previous studies by transitioning from problem identification to solution evaluation. The emphasis is on the success and failures of programmes currently being implemented in Kogi State. Thus, the study pinpoints obstacles to success, and guide the formulation of context-specific policies to eliminate child marriage.

Materials and Methods

Study Area

Kogi State, situated in Nigeria's central area, is commonly known as the "Confluence State" since it is at the junction of the Niger and Benue rivers. It is situated roughly between latitudes $6^{\circ}30'N$ and $8^{\circ}50'N$ and longitudes $5^{\circ}20'E$ and $7^{\circ}40'E$, encompassing a land area of approximately 29,833 square kilometres (See figure 1). It borders ten other Nigerian states, including the Federal Capital Territory to the north, as well as Edo, Ondo, Ekiti, Kwara, Niger, Enugu, Anambra, Nasarawa, and Benue, establishing it as a strategic transit and economic corridor within the nation (National Population Commission [NPC] 2006).

Figure 1. Nigeria showing Kogi State



Source: Kogi State Ministry Lands and Urban Development, 2025.

The state has a tropical climate with two distinct seasons: the rainy season from April to October and the dry season from November to March. Annual precipitation varies from 1,100 mm to 1,500 mm, with humidity levels typically elevated throughout the rainy season. Temperatures generally fluctuate between $22^{\circ}C$ to $35^{\circ}C$, with the peak heat being from February to April (Nigerian Meteorological

Agency [NiMet] 2020). Kogi State is abundantly supplied with rivers, the most notable being the Niger and Benue, which meet at Lokoja, the state capital. In recent years, floods have intensified due to climate change and inadequate environmental management, impacting thousands of citizens and inflicting considerable damage on infrastructure and crops (Federal Ministry of Environment [FME] 2021, Adefolalu 2007)

Kogi State has an estimated population over 4.5 million, consisting of many ethnic groups, including the Igala, Ebira, and Okun (a subset of the Yoruba). The state exhibits linguistic and cultural diversity, with main communities primarily located in the eastern, central, and western regions, respectively. Lokoja, the capital, is a cosmopolitan city of historical importance, having served as the inaugural administrative capital of contemporary Nigeria (NPC 2006). Kogi State's economy is predominantly agrarian, with most of the populace involved in agriculture, fishing, and small-scale commerce. Principal crops are yam, cassava, maize, rice, and cashew. Besides agriculture, the state possesses abundant mineral resources, including coal, iron ore, and limestone, which are, however, underutilized. The existence of the Ajaokuta Steel Complex underscores the state's industrial potential. Notwithstanding these resources, unemployment and poverty persist as issues, intensified by insufficient infrastructure and restricted access to credit and markets (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS] 2021).

While there is evidence of decline nationally, state-level analyses reveal that Kogi State remains among those with persistently high rates of child marriage, even after multiple interventions and policy enactments. Moreover, in Kogi, local studies such as that in Anyigba, Dekina LGA, show that socio-economic deprivation, illiteracy, poverty, and rural location continue to drive early marriage practices, and that existing interventions may not sufficiently address these contextual determinants. Given that Kogi has existing government commitments (including policies on gender-equality in education), stakeholder initiatives, and ongoing capacity building, it is especially well suited for a study that aims to evaluate the effectiveness of implementation strategies, rather than simply document prevalence or impacts. Therefore, this study highlights how well specific strategies, interventions, or policies achieve their intended outcomes in reducing or ending child marriage in Kogi State.

Methods

To properly execute implementation research aimed at eradicating child marriage in Kogi State, a synthesis of primary and secondary resources is essential. Relevant materials comprise government policy documents, including the Child Rights Act of 2003, implementation frameworks from the Kogi State and Federal Ministries of Women Affairs and Social Development, as well as reports from international organizations such as UNICEF and UNFPA. Moreover, current academic literature, program assessments, and statistics reports from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) establish a foundation for comprehending prevalence, determinants, and intervention strategies (UNICEF 2020). Primary data collecting tools, including key informant interview guides and focus group discussion protocols, were utilized to obtain firsthand knowledge from stakeholders.

Purposive sampling was adopted to select community leaders, parents, educators, and policymakers who possess expertise or direct involvement in initiatives combating child marriage. Thereafter, stratified sampling was utilized to interview participants based on age and gender. In-Depth interviews focused on the efficacy of programmes initiated by the Kogi State government to eradicate child marriage, along with their impacts and challenges. The data were obtained from adolescent girls, governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), traditional leaders, and community-based organizations involved in policy implementation.

The research examines adolescent females aged 18, community stakeholders, and policy enforcers. Contextual variables regarding attitudes and cultural norms were also considered.

Six field assistants were trained in conducting interviews and documenting the proceedings. The interviews were documented using a tape recorder. Prior to the initiation of the interview, the interview guide was distributed to each participant to enable them to familiarize themselves with the topics and get supplementary knowledge that they may not possess readily. The participants were informed about the topic, procedure, and duration of the activity. The interview was structured to permit flexibility and to investigate additional aspects pertinent to the subject matter. In addition to the recording device, the researcher also took notes. This was executed to guarantee that all issues addressed were thoroughly documented. The recorded interviews were processed, and their contents were analyzed under various headings pertinent to the subject matter.

This study's data modeling entails structuring acquired data into variables that represent the multifaceted dimensions of programmes implemented to reduce child marriage. Variables encompass programmes implemented, impacts of programmes, life skill acquisition, awareness of programmes, and policy outreach. The qualitative data gathered through interviews were used to unravel intricate successes and implementation obstacles, as well as the lived experiences of adolescent girls. All instruments underwent pre-testing for reliability and validity prior to deployment. The data analysis process encompasses the transcription and coding of qualitative responses for thematic content analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to discern reoccurring patterns and themes, aided by technologies such as NVivo version 8.0. The triangulation of data improved validity and facilitates a thorough comprehension of implementation efficacy (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018).

Results

Healthcare Services and Capacity-Building Training

The Kogi State Government launched the Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health Week (MNCHW) to provide essential healthcare services to women and children, including immunization, vitamin A supplementation, and deworming. This initiative aims to reduce maternal and child mortality rates, indirectly addressing factors that contribute to child marriage. The programme has produced several positive outcomes. A Director in the Kogi State Ministry of Health reported that: "MNCHW

has increased access to essential health services. Services such as immunization, vitamin A supplementation, deworming, antenatal care, malaria prevention, HIV counselling/testing, family planning, nutritional screening have been delivered to many mothers and children. There is expanded coverage of vitamin A supplementation. For example, in one round in 2017, 1,387,808 children aged 6 to 59 months received vitamin A, which was 97 percent of eligible children in Kogi State. Because MNCHW includes both fixed facility-based sessions and outreach/house-to-house components, it helps reach remote and underserved areas beyond what usual health centres might do." (Male respondent, Director, Kogi State Ministry of Health, March 2025).

There are concerns about sustainability and continuity. MNCHW is a periodic, bi-annual or week long burst of intervention. Routine services and follow ups may not always be sustained at the same level. Health education, follow up of malnourished children, antenatal care after the event, etc., need ongoing attention. Dependence on external partners, supplies, funding can lead to disruptions. Interruptions in funding or supply can affect service delivery.

In collaboration with the Medical Women's Association of Nigeria (MWAN), the Kogi State Government launched a capacity-building training and free medical testing campaign in Osisi, Ujagba, and Okpachala communities. The initiative was organised under the Participation Initiative for Behavioural Change in Development (PIBCID). The programme explicitly links health sensitization and testing with efforts to reduce gender-based violence and early child marriage. By building capacity and awareness, women are better informed about their rights, risks, and support structures.

The programme has empowered women with knowledge and skills to manage health effectively. Participants in the communities were educated on health issues including viral infections (HBsAg/HCV), malaria via Instant Malaria Test (IMT), plus hypertension, etc. This awareness helps women recognize symptoms early, understand risks, and seek medical care more promptly. Also helps demystify certain health conditions and reduce stigma. In shedding light on the success of the project, a female respondent stated: "The project provided free tests for malaria, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. Access to these tests in underserved rural communities has led to early detection which can improve treatment outcomes and reduce the burden of disease" (Female Respondent, Director, Kogi State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, March 2025).

By combining capacity building (training) with medical interventions, women gained both knowledge and practical access. This dual approach helps shift power in communities. A major concern is the sustainability and scalability of the initiative in other communities. Such initiatives often depend heavily on external funding (here via Ford Foundation/NWTF). If that funding lapses or reduces, maintaining free services, tests, and outreach becomes difficult. Regular monitoring, supplies (test kits, medical materials), trained personnel, logistic support, all need continuous resources.

Free testing is useful but unless there is effective system for treatment, follow-up, referrals, and managing chronic conditions, the benefit may be limited. E.g. identifying hypertension is good, but do people get medications? Hence, knowledge/awareness must be reinforced over time as one-off trainings may lose

effect. The PIBCID/NWTF 2024 initiative is a good but its impact will depend on how well the programme deals with sustainability, ensures ongoing access to services (not just testing), measurements of outcomes over time, and scaling without losing quality or community relevance.

The Kogi State Government has provided educational scholarships for girls in the state. The Director of the Kogi State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development asserted that: “The education and scholarship initiatives were organized under the Girl-Child Education Support Programme (GCESP), a collaborative effort involving the Kogi State Government and development partners such as Girls' Power Initiative (GPI), Plan International Nigeria, Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), and UNICEF Nigeria”. The programme was primarily implemented between 2024 and 2025, with key activities reported in these years. A female respondent in the Kogi State Ministry of Education disclosed that:

“This programme aimed to address the persistent challenges of low school attendance and early marriage among girls in Kogi State. Through the provision of scholarships that covered tuition and other educational expenses, the initiative succeeded in encouraging school enrollment and retention among girls, particularly in rural and underserved communities”. (Female respondent, Director, Kogi State Ministry of Health, March 2025).

By reducing the financial burden on families, the programme provided a strong incentive to keep girls in school, which in turn contributed to delaying early marriages. Furthermore, the involvement of multiple NGOs brought in technical expertise, community engagement strategies, and advocacy tools that enhanced awareness and mobilized local support for girls' education.

Despite these successes, the programme faced several limitations. Chief among them was limited funding, which restricted the number of beneficiaries and the geographical scope of implementation. The scholarships, while impactful, did not reach all the communities in need, and many girls in remote areas continued to face barriers to education. Additionally, the programme's lack of sustainability mechanisms such as integration into broader state education policy or guaranteed multi-year funding meant that some of its gains were difficult to maintain over time. Cultural resistance in certain communities and inadequate infrastructure in some schools (such as lack of female teachers or sanitary facilities) also hindered the full realization of the programme's objectives.

Advocacy and Awareness Campaigns

The Kogi State Government has intensified efforts for advocacy and awareness campaigns to end child marriage. Since 2018, the Kogi State Government, through its Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and the Child Rights and Child Protection Programme (CRCPP), has spearheaded extensive advocacy campaigns aimed at ending child marriage and promoting girls' education. Utilizing diverse media platforms such as radio, television, and social media, alongside grassroots outreach, these campaigns have significantly heightened public awareness of the dangers of child marriage. An 18-year-old teenager from Okene Local Government Area disclosed that: “As a girl residing in Kogi State, I recognize that I

possess rights intended to safeguard me from practices such as early or forced marriage”. (An 18-year old female respondent from Okene, March, 2025)

The girl's claim of her awareness regarding her rights indicates a commendable level of legal literacy. This can constitute protection against child marriage. The response from the girl is a testament to the fact that due to the advocacy and awareness campaigns, communities and families have been empowered to challenge harmful cultural norms, resulting in increased community engagement and support for girls' education. Consequently, school enrollment and retention rates among girls have improved, and local governments have been encouraged to adopt stronger legal protections for children. However, challenges remain, particularly in rural areas where traditional beliefs and economic hardships continue to influence early marriage practices. These advocacy efforts thus represent an important step towards the long-term eradication of child marriage in Kogi State, though sustained commitment is necessary to overcome persistent obstacles.

Legal Reforms and Policy Implementation

Further, the Kogi State Government's enactment of laws and policies aimed at prohibiting child marriage and protecting the rights of girls is part of a broader initiative to combat gender-based violence (GBV) and child abuse. This initiative is supported by enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance. In 2022, the Kogi State Government signed into law the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Law, which criminalizes various forms of violence, including child marriage. Additionally, a dedicated GBV Directorate was established in 2024 to oversee the implementation of these laws and coordinate efforts to address GBV and child abuse across the state. The implementation of these legal frameworks has led to several significant outcomes, including establishment of specialized courts, capacity building and awareness campaigns, and rescue and prosecution efforts. A social worker in the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development disclosed that: “The state government has set up nine family courts to handle GBV cases, ensuring swift and specialized adjudication of such matters. Through partnerships with organizations like ActionAid Nigeria and the Participation Initiative for Behavioural Change in Development (PIBCID), the government has conducted training programmes for social welfare workers and community members. These initiatives aim to enhance the response to child abuse and promote awareness of legal protections. Also, the government has rescued 39 abandoned babies and prosecuted 15 individuals involved in child abuse cases, including early marriage and violence-related offenses”. (Male respondent, Director, Kogi State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, March 2025).

These efforts reflect Kogi State's commitment to safeguarding the rights of girls and ensuring that legal protections against child marriage are effectively enforced. However, despite these achievements, challenges remain. Enforcement is uneven, particularly in rural areas where traditional customs and social norms still support early marriage. Limited resources and gaps in infrastructure hinder the consistent application of the law, and there are instances where victims and their families face stigma or pressure not to pursue legal remedies. Additionally, awareness about the new legal provisions is not yet universal, which limits the

law's deterrent effect. These challenges highlight the need for ongoing education, community engagement, and increased funding to ensure the reforms translate into lasting change on the ground.

Reinforcement of Cultural Values

The reinforcement of cultural values through the celebration of festivals that promote chastity encourages young girls to maintain their purity before marriage. For instance, the Ovia-Osesé Festival is an annual cultural event in Ogori community that celebrates the initiation of virgins into womanhood. The annual celebration of the Ovia-Osesé Festival reinforces cultural values that discourage early marriage. A community leader succinctly captured the significance of the Ovia-Osesé Festival: "It keeps alive Ogori traditions and forms of social identity. The rite, the dances, the music, the public recognition of maidens all reinforce shared values and communal memory. It promotes moral messaging and social discipline". By celebrating chastity and purity before marriage, the festival encourages sexual abstinence among the young, discourages early sexual activity (which can have public health implications) and may reduce risks such as teenage pregnancy. The festival draws together elders, families, youth, and the diaspora; it reinforces intergenerational ties and communal pride. It also offers a platform for social interaction, talent shows, health programmes, debates etc".

However, there are limitations and tensions concerning the Ovia-Osesé festival. A major challenge lies in balancing traditional practices with modern human rights concerns. The requirement of virginity for participation could be challenged under rights to bodily autonomy, non discrimination, and privacy. The pressure on young girls to prove chastity has led to stigmatization of those who do not meet the criteria (for whatever reason). Modern norms around women's rights see this as restrictive. There is risk that in its enforcement or in social pressure, the festival contributes to secrecy, shame, or ignoring health education (e.g. regarding safe sex, or the possibility that some girls may have lost virginity for reasons out of their control). Also, the physical demands of the initiation rites sometimes conflict with schooling or other commitments.

Life Skills and Development Mechanisms for Girls and Boys

The Kogi State Government implemented skills acquisition and vocational training programs for out-of-school girls and young mothers to address the underlying factors of child marriage, including as poverty and gender inequity. The government is collaborating with NGOs to boost girls' savings groups, mentoring programs, and leadership activities. Boys and men are being enlisted as allies to transform detrimental gender norms and attitudes via focused behavioural change communication initiatives. The Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development is collaborating with the Ministry of Education to further the "Safe Schools" project, which aims to extend girls' educational tenure while integrating sexual and reproductive health education, mentorship, and rights awareness into the curriculum. A Director in the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development stated: "We

are currently expanding safe spaces for girls at risk of child marriage. These centres offer interim accommodation, counselling, and life skills training while longer-term solutions are arranged. The Ministry promotes conditional cash transfer programmes and empowerment initiatives for at-risk households to tackle the economic factors contributing to child marriage. We connect families to government and donor-funded poverty alleviation programmes”.

Table 1 delineates the life skills pertinent to the cessation of child marriage. The table utilises frameworks from UNICEF (2019), WHO (2003), and UNFPA (2016) regarding life skills education, critical thinking, and sexual and reproductive health and rights as vital instruments for preventing early marriage and fostering youth empowerment. These life skills encompass psychosocial competencies and interpersonal abilities that enable individuals to make informed decisions, solve problems, engage in critical and creative thinking, communicate effectively, cultivate good relationships, and manage their lives in a constructive and healthful manner.

Key life skills relevant to ending child marriage in Kogi State include:

Category	Specific Skills
Decision-making & Problem-solving	Choosing alternatives to early marriage, setting life goals
Critical Thinking	Challenging social norms around early marriage
Communication & Negotiation	Assertiveness in saying “no,” conflict resolution
Self-awareness & Empathy	Understanding one’s rights and recognizing others’ perspectives
Coping with Emotions & Stress	Handling peer pressure, dealing with trauma or coercion
Health Literacy	Knowledge of SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights), consent, menstruation, and hygiene
Financial Literacy	Budgeting, saving, vocational and entrepreneurial skills

Gender-specific skills are crucial for enabling girls and boys to make informed decisions and develop resilience against child marriage. Empowerment via education is essential for girls. Females frequently encounter educational disparities. Life skills must encompass study habits, career preparation, and knowledge of legal rights pertaining to early marriage (Sabiny Transformation Initiative 2024). Girls require education regarding puberty, consent, contraception, and health services related to sexual and reproductive health (SRH). This skill will enable girls to make educated choices, assert their rights, and obtain essential health treatments. Training in self-confidence and assertiveness can empower females to refuse unwanted approaches or arranged marriages. Understanding how to seek assistance when at danger of early marriage can represent safety and reporting competencies.

Likewise, SRH education is essential for males to comprehend the detrimental effects of child marriage on both genders (UNESCO 2024). They must comprehend consent, reproductive rights, and collective accountability in averting early pregnancy. Boys require life skills that promote respectful gender interactions and deter

detrimental practices. Instructing boys to regard girls as equals diminishes their capacity as facilitators or offenders of child marriage, fostering empathy and promoting gender equality. Training boys to serve as peer educators or champions against child marriage within their communities helps foster their perception as stakeholders in the battle against this issue. Nonetheless, deficiencies are there in the existing approach for life skills education in Kogi State. These encompass restricted access to life skills education in rural regions; absence of gender-specific programming; cultural opposition to subjects such as family planning, reproductive health, and gender equality; inadequate training for teachers and mentors; and poor integration into school curricula and informal community initiatives.

Discussions

The findings provide important insights into the effectiveness and limitations of the MNCHW interventions in enhancing access to essential health services, particularly for women and children. One notable success is the impressive vitamin A supplementation coverage in 2017, where 97% of eligible children (1,387,808 aged 6-59 months) received the supplement, highlighting the programme's reach and operational efficiency (Director, Kogi State Ministry of Health, personal communication, March 2025). The dual delivery strategy of the MNCHW through both fixed facility-based and outreach/house-to-house components has proven effective in reaching remote and underserved populations. This approach helps bridge the gap created by geographical and infrastructural challenges that often hinder access to health services in rural or marginalized areas (Director, Kogi State Ministry of Health 2025). These findings align with earlier studies, such as those by Odusanya et al. (2019), who noted that targeted outreach strategies in maternal and child health interventions can significantly improve service uptake and health outcomes in underserved communities.

However, the findings also underscore pressing concerns regarding sustainability, continuity, and systemic dependency. Since MNCHW operates as a periodic intervention, typically bi-annual or week-long—it does not substitute for sustained, routine health service delivery. Services like antenatal care, nutritional follow-up, and health education require consistent and ongoing engagement, which the MNCHW alone cannot provide. This gap raises the risk of losing the gains achieved during the campaign periods if routine health services remain weak or poorly coordinated (Director, Kogi State Ministry of Health 2025). Furthermore, the dependence on external partners, such as WHO and UNICEF, for supplies and funding introduces a layer of vulnerability. Interruptions in donor support or national-level supply chains can disrupt service delivery, undermining the effectiveness of the intervention.

Another key issue is the persistent need for improved community engagement and behavioral change. While the MNCHW can deliver services effectively, their uptake depends heavily on community trust, awareness, and willingness to participate. Social and cultural beliefs, logistical challenges, and even indirect costs (e.g., time off work, transport) may deter participation, even when services are free (Director, Kogi State Ministry of Health 2025). This concern is echoed in the work of Fagbamigbe et

al. (2020), who emphasized that health intervention success in Nigeria is often limited by low health literacy, cultural resistance, and infrastructural barriers.

The implications of the recent capacity-building training and free medical testing campaign carried out by the Kogi State Government in collaboration with the Medical Women's Association of Nigeria (MWAN) extend beyond healthcare and touch significantly on broader social issues, including the elimination of child marriage in Kogi State. At its core, the initiative not only addressed the health needs of underserved rural communities in Osisi, Ujagba, and Okpachala but also served as a platform for engaging women and families on critical issues affecting girls and young women. By providing free access to healthcare services and involving the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, the project reinforced the importance of women's and girls' well-being, which is intrinsically linked to efforts aimed at ending child marriage.

Moreover, the presence of trained health professionals, particularly female practitioners through MWAN, created role models for girls in these communities. When young girls see women in leadership and professional roles, it challenges traditional gender norms and expands their understanding of what is possible beyond early marriage. The visibility of successful, educated women in positions of influence helps to shift community attitudes and aspirations for girls. In addition, the involvement of the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development provided an avenue for integrating child protection messaging into the campaign. While the primary focus was on health, the structure of the initiative allowed for broader discussions on girls' rights, including the legal and social consequences of child marriage. These integrated approaches, where health interventions are coupled with social advocacy, have been shown in previous development frameworks to be more effective in addressing complex, deeply rooted issues like child marriage.

Comparatively, earlier anti-child marriage efforts in Kogi State and similar regions in northern Nigeria often faced challenges due to weak community engagement or lack of integrated service delivery. What sets this recent initiative apart is its community-based approach, its focus on inclusion, and the provision of immediate, tangible benefits (i.e., free testing), which helped to build trust and open up space for dialogue on sensitive issues like child marriage.

The establishment of the Girl-Child Education Support Programme (GCESP) represents a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach that directly targets the root causes of child marriage; namely, poverty, lack of access to education, and entrenched gender norms. The programme was designed to mitigate low school attendance and early marriage by offering scholarships that covered tuition and other associated educational costs. This approach appears to have positively influenced enrollment and retention rates among girls, especially in rural and marginalized areas. When compared to earlier efforts in the state and similar interventions in Nigeria, the GCESP represents a more coordinated and inclusive model. Previous studies, such as those by Adebayo and Akinyemi (2019), found that while past programs aimed at reducing child marriage often lacked consistency and long-term funding, current initiatives like GCESP show promise due to their comprehensive design and government-backed implementation.

The results underscore the significant impact of advocacy and awareness campaigns in the ongoing efforts to eliminate child marriage in Kogi State. Since 2018, the state government, through its Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and the Child Rights and Child Protection Programme (CRCPP), has implemented multifaceted advocacy initiatives to curb early and forced marriages. The campaigns have employed both traditional and modern media platforms, including radio, television, and social media, complemented by community-level outreach. These strategies have proven effective in raising public consciousness about the dangers and illegality of child marriage, particularly among young girls, parents, and community leaders.

A compelling illustration of this impact is seen in the testimony of an 18-year-old female respondent from Okene Local Government Area, who noted her awareness of her rights to be protected from early or forced marriage. This response highlights a rising level of legal literacy among girls in the state, a critical factor in preventing child marriage. Moreover, the campaigns appear to have positively influenced community attitudes and behaviors, particularly regarding girls' education. There has been a noticeable increase in school enrollment and retention of girls, which aligns with earlier research findings that link educational access to lower incidences of child marriage (Walker 2012). By reinforcing the value of education and encouraging legal protections at the local government level, the initiatives have laid the groundwork for more systemic change.

Compared to previous findings, this recent data suggests a more pronounced shift in social attitudes. For instance, earlier studies in Kogi State reported limited community engagement and persistent cultural resistance to anti-child marriage policies (Adewuyi and Odu 2016). In contrast, the current findings indicate growing support at both household and community levels, suggesting that sustained advocacy is beginning to erode entrenched norms. However, the persistence of early marriage in rural areas illustrates the ongoing challenges. Traditional beliefs, patriarchal structures, and economic pressures continue to drive child marriage in less urbanized regions. These findings echo past research, such as that by Efevbera et al. (2017), which emphasizes the complex interplay between poverty, gender inequality, and tradition in sustaining early marriage practices.

The enactment of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Law in 2022 and the establishment of a dedicated Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Directorate in 2024 mark critical milestones in institutional efforts to protect children, particularly girls, from early and forced marriages. These legal reforms demonstrate a shift from policy rhetoric to actionable mechanisms, including the creation of nine family courts and the prosecution of child abuse cases, which indicate an operational commitment to justice and child protection (Kogi State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 2025).

The partnership with civil society organizations such as ActionAid Nigeria and the Participation Initiative for Behavioural Change in Development (PIBCID) also reflects a collaborative approach that strengthens community-level capacity through training and advocacy. These efforts are crucial in enhancing legal literacy and equipping stakeholders to identify, report, and respond to incidents of child marriage and related abuses. When compared to previous findings, these developments represent a significant evolution. Earlier studies had consistently highlighted the

lack of legal enforcement and poor institutional coordination as key barriers to the elimination of child marriage in Kogi State and other parts of Northern Nigeria (Eze 2020, UNICEF 2021). For instance, prior to the VAPP Law, existing child protection frameworks lacked specificity and often failed to address the root causes of early marriage, such as poverty, gender inequality, and cultural norms. Moreover, the absence of specialized courts meant that GBV cases were often delayed or dismissed in the general judicial process (Adegboye and Olanrewaju 2019).

Despite the evident progress, current findings echo long-standing challenges, particularly the gap between policy and practice in rural communities. The uneven enforcement of laws, coupled with persistent traditional practices that endorse child marriage, continues to undermine the impact of legal reforms. Victims' reluctance to report abuses due to social stigma and fear of retribution further complicates enforcement, suggesting that legal measures alone are insufficient without sustained community engagement and attitudinal change.

The findings regarding the Ovia-Ose Festival in Ogori, Kogi State, reveal both the potential and the complexities of using cultural frameworks in the elimination of child marriage. The festival, which celebrates chastity and marks the initiation of virgins into womanhood, acts as a socio-cultural mechanism that discourages early marriage and promotes abstinence among young girls. By publicly recognizing and celebrating virginity and maturity before marriage, the community cultivates an environment where early sexual activity and by extension, early marriage is socially discouraged. The festival also serves as a preventive measure against teenage pregnancy, a key driver of child marriage in many Nigerian communities (Walker 2012). However, the limitations of the Ovia-Ose Festival must be acknowledged. The emphasis on virginity as a prerequisite for participation may perpetuate harmful gender norms and infringe upon the rights of girls. The societal pressure to conform to chastity standards may lead to stigma and shame for those who do not meet the criteria, whether due to personal choices or circumstances beyond their control, such as sexual abuse. This reinforces gender discrimination and may deter openness about sexual health, thereby undermining broader public health goals (Nnamuchi 2008).

Additionally, the festival's physical and time demands may conflict with formal education, particularly for school-aged girls. This could have unintended consequences on their academic progress and overall empowerment, both of which are essential tools in ending child marriage (UNESCO 2015).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The MNCHW has demonstrated substantial short-term success in expanding access to maternal and child health services in Kogi State, especially among hard-to-reach populations, its periodic nature, reliance on external partners, and challenges around sustainability and community engagement limit its long-term effectiveness. While the campaign was primarily health-focused, its implications for the elimination of child marriage in Kogi State are significant. It demonstrated how health interventions, when thoughtfully implemented, can serve as entry points for social change. The GCESP initiative demonstrates that government commitment, when

paired with community engagement and strategic partnerships, can yield tangible progress in addressing child marriage. These findings not only reflect a positive trend in Kogi State but also offer a replicable model for similar contexts across Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa. The intensified advocacy and awareness efforts in Kogi State have made significant strides in empowering communities and reducing the prevalence of child marriage, the findings also point to the need for sustained, context-specific interventions. The Ovia-Osese Festival illustrates how cultural institutions can be leveraged to combat child marriage in Kogi State, but it also highlights the importance of aligning tradition with modern human rights principles. While the Kogi State Government has made measurable strides in combating child marriage through legislative and institutional reform, these efforts must be reinforced with long-term investment in public education, rural outreach, and infrastructure development. Bridging the gap between urban legal institutions and rural social realities is essential for the full realization of girls' rights. As such, future interventions should prioritize community-based dialogue, the empowerment of traditional leaders, and the systematic monitoring of implementation outcomes.

Strengthening routine health services, building local capacity, securing sustainable funding, and fostering ongoing community dialogue are critical to building on the successes of the MNCHW and ensuring sustained improvements in maternal and child health outcomes. By empowering women, increasing access to female role models, promoting health education, and engaging local communities, the project contributes meaningfully to a broader, multi-sectoral effort to end child marriage and promote the rights and well-being of girls across the state. Continued investment in education, legal reform, and economic empowerment especially in rural communities remains essential for achieving the long-term eradication of child marriage in the state. To maximize impact of the Ovia-Osese Festival, it is crucial to integrate reproductive health education, ensure inclusivity, and protect girls from stigmatization or coercion. Future interventions should focus on reforming such cultural practices to make them more inclusive and rights-based, without eroding their communal and moral value.

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