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ABSTRACT

Child marriage is the practice of marrying an individual below 18 years. The drivers of this practice include poverty, gender inequality, cultural and religious norms among others. While Ghana is one of many countries worldwide in which child marriage is practised, the literature on cultural underpinnings and implications of the practice in Ghana is sparse. This paper aims to discuss how constructions of adolescence, gender and sexuality in Ghana affect the practice of child marriage. It further examines the implications of child marriage for married girls and argues for research into the causes and mental health implications of the practice.

Introduction

Marriage is a sacred institution in the African community that is usually accompanied by cultural and religious practices and merrymaking (Amoo, 2017). The joy of marriage, however, eludes some individuals as they are compelled to marry at a very early age due to an intersection of cultural, religious, and financial reasons. Research (Glinski, Sexton, & Meyers, 2015; UNICEF, 2001, 2018) indicates that child marriage is practised worldwide and cuts across cultures, religions and ethnicities. UNICEF (2018) reported the prevalence of child marriage to be 9% in South America and the Caribbean, 5% in the Middle East and North Africa, 44% in South Asia and 18% in sub-Saharan Africa. Global measures to reduce the practice of child marriage have yielded some results with significant reductions being recorded in the last 10 years (UNICEF, 2018). The persistence of the practice of child marriage may be a result of cultural and religious factors that underlie its practice. In Ghana, several factors (social norms, protection from teenage and sexually transmitted infections, and poverty, among others) have been listed as drivers of child marriage (de Groot, Kuunyem, & Palermo, 2018). One of the major underlying factors for the practice is gender inequality which stems from the cultural constructions of gender and sexuality.

Early or child marriage has been defined as any marriage (formal and informal unions) where one or both spouses is/are less than 18 years (Mourtada, Schlecht, & DeJong, 2017).

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Global statistics indicate that, though boys are likely forced into child marriages, the majority of child marriages tends to involve young girls (Alhassan, 2013). Child marriage is considered to be a violation of the rights of its victims since most victims are either coerced through physical or sexual threats and/or abuse, and psychological pressure (Women Living Under Muslim Laws [WLUML], 2013). Furthermore, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 2015) upholds the individual's right to grant free and full consent to a marriage as a universal right. Consent, therefore, may not be considered "free and full" when at least one partner is very young and was forced (UNICEF, 2001). Moreover, Ghanaian legislation (The Marriages Act in Ghana) prohibits marriages before the legal age of 18 years for both males and females (de Groot et al., 2018).

Global estimates of child marriage show that currently 650 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthday (UNICEF, 2018) while about 250 million were married before turning 15 years, which is more than one in three girls (Prameswari & Agustin, 2018). Of the most recently married girls worldwide, about one in three are in sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2018). Global trends indicate a 15% decrease in the practice of child marriage worldwide during the past decade. This trend is similar in sub-Saharan Africa where reports suggest a decrease in the practice of child marriage though at a slow and modest rate (UNICEF, 2018).

In Ghana, child marriage is unlawful and seen as a menace that successive governments have been trying to curb. The right of a child to refuse and be free from marriage has been documented in several international and regional conventions of which Ghana has assented to. In line with the decrease in global trends indicated above, the prevalence of child marriage in Ghana has shown a slight increase by 7.9% between 2014 (27%) and 2018 (19.3%) (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS] 2014, 2018). The Ghana Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey [MICS] (GSS, 2018) reported that 5% of women in Ghana were married before age 15 and 19.3% of women are married by age 18. More girls in the three northern regions of Ghana are affected where the prevalence is 1 out of 3 girls (34%) who are below 18 years. A 2014 UNICEF report also recorded about 21% of child marriages occurred before age 18 and about 5% occurred before age 15. In Ghana, the prevalence of child marriage among boys exists, though it is not commonly practised. Compared to females, only 2.3% of males are married by their 18th birthday (Alhassan, 2013; de Groot et al., 2018), reflecting the gender disparity.

Methods for collecting and analysing literature

This paper which forms part of the doctoral study of the first author is based solely on the review and analysis of studies, literature and institutional reports on the various themes that are germane to the focus of this article. Several methods were used to conduct the literature review. Firstly, a literature search was conducted by the first author using Google search engines, Web of Science and Social Sciences databases. Terms such as "child AND early marriage in Ghana," "construction of adolescence in Ghana," "construction of gender in Ghana" and similar phrases were used as parameters for the search. For child and early marriage in Ghana, findings revealed two research articles and five government and institutional reports. For other themes such "construction of adolescence in Ghana," "construction of gender in Ghana" and "construction of sexuality in Ghana"

thirty-five research articles and literature were retrieved. These sources were examined by the first author of which twelve articles for the terms "construction of gender in Ghana," five articles for "construction of adolescence in Ghana" and seven articles for "construction of sexuality" were retrieved as they were deemed relevant for this paper (see Table 1). Other research articles and literature (eleven) also retrieved from Google scholar, Web of Science and the Sciences databases considered relevant for this paper were also included to the literature for this paper (see Table 1).

In addition, another search was conducted for literature on the "implications of child marriage in Ghana" which yielded no results. Given the sparse results, the search term "implications of child marriage for married girls in Ghana" was changed to "the implications of child marriage worldwide". This search yielded several literature on the implications of the practice of child marriage on married girls, however, six research articles were identified for the psychological implications of child marriage. This prompted a search for the psychological implications of child marriage for married girls which yielded little or no results. The search terms were modified to include other terms such as "mental health effect" "impact on mental health" of child marriage on married girls. This yielded two research article from Web of Science and six research articles and institutional reports. However, four were selected for this paper due to the relevance of the information they had and the credibility of the journals they were published in. The information gathered from these papers are discussed in ensuing sections of this paper.

Causes of child marriage in Ghana

The reasons for the practice of child marriage in Ghana are diverse and sometimes inter-related. The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection's national strategic framework on ending child marriage (MoGCSP, 2016) identifies the main drivers of child marriage to be gender inequality, poverty, teenage pregnancy, traditional and customary practices, social norms, peer pressure, poor parenting; ignorance, impunity and poor enforcement of the law.

Poverty is seen as one of the major reasons for child marriage in Ghana (Alhassan, 2013). The MICS 2011 reports that girls (41.2%) from poor socioeconomic backgrounds are four times more likely to get married compared to girls (11.5%) from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds (GSS, 2011). Furthermore, the report suggests that child marriage is very common among the poorest, uneducated population living in rural areas in Ghana (Amoo, 2017; de Groot et al., 2018). Moreover, the report revealed 36.2% of girls in rural areas compared to 19.4% of girls in urban areas are in child marriages. Tsekpo,

Table 1. Summary of themes and literature.

Terms	Research articles	Institutional reports	Books and Book chapter
Child AND early marriage	3	3	0
Child and early marriage in Ghana	2	5	0
Constructions of adolescence in Ghana	5	0	0
Constructions of sexuality in Ghana	7	0	0
Constructions of gender in Ghana	12	0	1
Implications of child marriage	2	7	1
Psychological implications of child marriage	4	0	0
Other supporting literature	6	0	5

Afram, Boateng, and Sefa-Nyarko (2016) found that in some rural fishing communities, young girls were lured to marry older men with the promise of being well catered for compared to the poor livelihood in their families. In contrast to these prevalence indicators, education has been identified to be a protective factor for girls against early marriage (Amoo, 2017). Across Ghana, girls with little or no education are twice more likely to be married in their childhood than girls with higher education (GSS, 2011; MoGCSP, 2016).

As alluded to above, gender inequality, grounded in the cultural constructions of gender and sexuality, is one of the main underlying factors for child marriage in Ghana (Tsekpo et al., 2016). This is evident in the number of boys compared to girls who are married before their eighteenth birthday (de Groot et al., 2018). Furthermore, the regional distribution of the practice of child marriage shows a significant widening of the gap between the northern patriarchal communities and central/southern matrilineal communities (GSS, 2011, 2014).

Construction of gender in the Ghanaian society

Gender has been defined by Bolin and Whelehan (2009, p. 33) as "the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being a male or female", signifying that gender is more than merely biological difference and impact on an individual's sense of social identity, experience and interactions. Individuals are socialised into their gender roles and in the process internalise societal constructions of gender. This, in turn, shapes how they behave in society and, furthermore, how they interact with others in their community. Findings on gender construction in Ghana report socially instituted role separations for men and women deeply rooted in cultural practices (Adinkrah, 2012; Ampofo, Beoku-Betts, Njambi, & Osirim, 2004; Opare, 2005). The cultural construction of masculinity and femininity in Ghana, according to Adinkrah (2012), is quite complex and dynamic and can be found in cultural expressions, values and norms (Ampofo, 2001).

Though Ghana practices both matriarchal and patriarchal family systems, the cultural constructions of gender and sexuality is mainly patriarchal in both family systems (Ampofo, 2001) with an emphasis on male supremacy and female subordination in all spheres of the Ghanaian life (Adinkrah, 2012; Fiaveh, Izugbara, Okyerefo, Reysoo, & Fayorsey, 2015). This unequal status leads to the relegation of women in economic, legal, social, political and educational spheres of life. Literature on gender roles in Ghana indicates that most households are traditionally headed by males who are also the sole decision-makers of their families (Brown, 1995). The women, in most instances, are not expected to contribute to decisions and when their opinions are sought, the men may decide not to take their inputs (Brown, 1995). This robs women of their agentic and decision-making abilities and makes them solely dependent on males (Kambarami, 2006).

One of the ways in which culture is used to ensure that individuals in the society recognise and respect their appropriate gender positions in society, is the use of language and linguistic nuances such as proverbs, idioms and figures of speech in daily discourse of the society (Asimeng-Boahene, 2013; Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013). For instance, the Akan of Ghana use specific phrases and words to describe and enforce gender roles and male supremacy. A woman who tries to behave like a man and veers from her feminine attributes is likely to be called *obaabarima*, the Akan appellation for "male-woman" (Ampofo

& Boateng, 2011). Furthermore, in trying to ascertain the sex of a newborn among the Akans, the father of the child is likely to be asked "*did your wife give birth to a human or a girl?*" This statement clearly depicts the importance and joy accorded to the birth of a boy instead of a girl with the girl status being depicted as less than human. This trend is also very common among other tribes in Ghana where patriarchy is practised and male supremacy is upheld. Additionally, Ampofo (2001) reports that the hierarchical power structures in Ghanaian society place women and children, especially females, at the bottom, subordinate to males. Other social structures, such as the family, marriage, initiation rites among others, are avenues for the construction of gender and sexuality (Nukunya, 1992).

The importance of a male in the Ghanaian society translates into how both males and females are treated. Parents are less likely to educate their girl child because they are perceived to be less intelligent than boys and are likely to get pregnant while in school (Alhassan, 2010; Amoo, 2017). Furthermore, marrying off girls is a source of income generation for the parents since they receive bridewealth from the girl's potential husband (Alhassan, 2010). Therefore, families may pull a girl from school and marry her off when faced with financial crises to reduce the financial burden on the family (MoGCSP, 2016). Reports indicated that in some Ghanaian cultures, girls are given out in marriage as gifts to wealthy men, either as compensation or settlement of family/communal issues including debt, inherited liabilities and religious obligations (MoGCSP, 2016).

The family in Africa is recognised as the bedrock of every society and a basic unit that plays a significant role in society (Boateng, 1995). It is seen as the epicentre of all social institutions and organisations and a means to regulate social issues on sexuality and reproduction, socialisation of the young, enforcement of social norms and transmission of the culture of the society (Mann & Takyi, 2009). Family responsibilities are particularly gender stratified (Ampofo et al., 2004) with young girls socialised to look up to men and boys as stronger, wiser, and more responsible, while boys are socialised to lead the family and control women (Boateng, Adomako-Ampofo, Flanagan, Gallay, & Yakah, 2006). Boys are raised to be the breadwinners of the family while girls are raised to be dependent on males, be supportive wives and nurture the home and family by engaging in activities such as childcare, food preparation and managing household chores (Adinkrah, 2012). This socialisation has several implications on the development of identities of both males and females which then translates to the development of self-worth and an awareness of social positioning. According to Tsekpo et al. (2016), girls who are socialised to believe that they are inferior to males will likely internalise these beliefs and roles enforced by culture. Such girls may limit their dreams and aspirations and often feel the need to seek the support of males in order to achieve their life goals. They may, therefore, want to find a man who will marry them when they reach puberty who will satisfy all their needs and help them achieve their goals (Tsekpo et al., 2016), thereby promoting child marriage. Furthermore, when parents themselves believe that their girl child belongs in the kitchen, they are less likely to fund her education or help her to achieve her goals but are more likely to marry their girls off to the most eligible bachelor or man when they are perceived to be sexually matured. Moreover, being an older educated woman also attracts negative perceptions. Alhassan (2010) reports that educated women are perceived to be empowered and difficult to control. In view of this, men are reticent to marry educated women and would rather marry younger and less matured women or girls as they are perceived to be more

submissive and easier to control than educated women. The perception that women belong to their husbands also discourages many parents from sending their girls to school or even to invest in them (Alhassan, 2010).

Construction of sexuality in the Ghanaian society

Sexuality is believed to be beyond biological sex assigned at birth and includes how individuals are socialised into their gender roles, their physical and psychological development with respect to their body image, the social relationships they develop, and future social aspirations (Fiaveh et al., 2015; Murphy & Elias, 2006). Society plays a significant role in the socialisation of sexuality defining what is appropriate for males and females regarding their sex-roles, behaviours and functions (Anarfi & Owusu, 2011). In Ghana, the mediums through which individuals are socialised about sexuality is usually informal with structures such as family, state and religious organisations among others being relied on for sexual socialisation (Anarfi & Owusu, 2011). Typically, the discussion of sexuality is done secretly (van der Geest, 2001) and, until recently, the open discussion of sex was viewed as immoral and deviant (van der Geest, 2001). There is a strong emphasis on girls maintaining their virginity and sexual purity before marriage and strong disapproval for premarital sex by the Ghanaian society and religious bodies (Amoo, 2017; Osafo, Asampong, Langmagne, & Ahiedeke, 2014). To reduce premarital sex and possible out of wedlock pregnancies after a girl has reached menarche, parents may feel pressured to marry them off early since sexual initiation is socially expected to coincide with marriage (Osafo et al., 2014). Reaching puberty and menarche, rather than age, is a prime consideration of whether an individual is perceived to be ready for marriage (Osafo et al., 2014). Education on sex is typically done during the puberty rites and traditional preparation for marriage. Topics cover responsible parenthood, prenatal/ post-natal care, menstruation, menstrual care and hygiene and tend to emphasise what the bride should or should not do to please her husband (Anarfi & Owusu, 2011).

When it comes to decisions on sexuality (specifically sexual and reproductive issues), in most patriarchal societies in Ghana, men exercise the sole decision-making rights despite the fact that women are the ones who carry reproduction responsibilities (Dodoo & Tempenis, 2002; Takyi & Dodoo, 2005). A study conducted in the Northern region of Ghana on the use of contraceptives revealed that systems in the patriarchal societies prevented women from taking decisions regarding their sexual reproductive health (Bawah, Akweongo, Simmons, & Phillips, 1999). The inability of the female to exercise control over her life makes it difficult for her to make decisions about when and whom to marry since that decision rests largely with her father and family whose wishes she is expected to obey. This may lead some of the girls into child marriage before reaching the legal age of marriage. Furthermore, since women are perceived to be the homemaker, a girl who reaches puberty and is perceived to be sexually matured is also perceived to be matured enough to cater for the home and can thus be married.

Construction of adolescent development and sexuality

Koops and Zuckerman (2003, p. 346) define adolescence as "the period in life that bridges the gap between childhood and adulthood." By this definition, adolescence is seen as the

transitional period and is marked by the onset of puberty. The concept of adolescence as a separate transitional period in the life of an individual is considered a modern perspective (Macleod, 2006) while the construction of adolescence is different across cultures and historical contexts (Saltman, 2005). Adolescence is marked with rapid biological, cognitive, social and psychological development (Shefer, 2004). According to western perspectives, adolescence is a stressful and emotionally turbulent period (Macleod, 2006; Shefer, 2004). Hall (1904) describes adolescence as a period of "storm and stress," associated with psychological distress for the child who is in the process of becoming an adult. These psychological implications result from the individual being preoccupied with rapid physical changes while handling the need to conform to social pressures and the psychosocial meaning of growing into an adult (Shefer, 2004). Accompanying these developmental changes is the experience of sexual feelings and desires and the lure to experiment with these sexual drives. The emergence of sexual desires in adolescence, while a natural phenomenon, is regarded as problematic since engaging in sexual activities is considered an adult activity and the adolescent is still considered a child by the society and community (Macleod, 2006).

In some parts of Ghana, the cultural construction of adolescence may be a misnomer. Historically, adolescence starts for girls with menarche or initiation and ends with marriage or child-bearing (Awusabo-Asare, Biddlecom, Kumi-Kyereme, & Patterson, 2006). The period culturally considered to be adolescence is usually a short period because as soon as a girl has her first menstruation, she is sent off to be initiated into womanhood. Ampofo (2001) notes the initiation is done to celebrate the girl's fertility for her or her husband's lineage and her maturity for marriage thus as part of the initiation rites, girls are adorned in rich clothes and beads and paraded through their communities to announce their readiness to marry. Before they are introduced to the community, the initiates are secluded and given rudimentary instructions on the secrets of sexuality, how to be a good wife and mother (Ampofo, 2001). For males, the growth of pubic hair, breaking of voice and having his first wet dreams mark puberty and are important milestones leading to apprenticeship (Awusabo-Asare et al., 2006). While there are no initiation rites for boys, Awusabo-Asare, Abane, and Kumi-Kyereme (2004) indicate that after reaching puberty boys are trained in vocations such as hunting, farming, fishing and craftsmanship which conform to societal expectations of them becoming the head and provider of the family. These initiation rites are developed to help young people transition into adulthood. They are also instituted to prepare the individual for the cultural prescriptions of his/her gendered adult roles but also to prevent adolescents from engaging in premarital sexual activities and to ensure that sexual activities take place in marriage since any form of sexual activity outside is considered deviant (Osafo et al., 2014). In the girls' initiation rites, a test of virginity forms a core part of some of these rites (Asampong, Osafo, Bingenheimer, & Ahiadeke, 2013; Osafo et al., 2014). Culturally, premarital sex is considered a taboo bringing dishonour to the family of the adolescent, especially the girl, who is perceived to have engaged in any form of sexual promiscuity (Awusabo-Asare et al., 2004; UNICEF, 2001).

Although maintaining virginity before marriage is upheld by society, it is not practised by many young people. Adolescents in Ghana are perceived to be increasingly sexually active which has been attributed to rapid social, cultural and economic changes occurring both locally and internationally (Asampong et al., 2013). Several studies have reported

early sexual debut with some adolescents engaging in sex in their mid-teen years (Glover et al., 2003; Zaba, Pisani, Slaymaker, & Boerma, 2004). Early sexual debut has been associated with high risks for STIs and HIV/AIDS (Awusabo-Asare et al., 2006), and with teenage pregnancy which has health, social and economic implications for the mother and child (Agyei, Biritwum, Ashitey, & Hill, 2000). Early childbirth for young girls can lead to infant and maternal mortality due to birth complications, or in some cases, the mother can develop chronic health issues as a result of the pregnancy (Zabin & Kiragu, 1998). Nour (2009) reported that adolescent pregnancy or childbirth poses dangerous health risks to the mother and to her child because her adolescent body is not physiologically developed to give birth.

Most ethnic groups in Ghana historically encouraged early marriage and childbearing (Awusabo-Asare et al., 2004; Nukunya, 1992). Although the current Ghanaian society has undergone social change due to modernity and westernisation, early marriage still persists especially in rural areas and poor urban areas (Awusabo-Asare et al., 2004) due to entrenched cultural and religious traditions still being practised and financial considerations.

Gender, sexuality and child marriage

The discussions above depict women in the Ghanaian society in a disadvantaged position and the Ghanaian culture as a hegemonically patriarchal one that preserves the practice of child marriage. Research has indicated that countries with high gender inequality have a high prevalence of child marriage (Glinski et al., 2015; Nasrullah et al., 2014). Patriarchally, early marriage is posited to help control the personalities and sexuality of the girls as it is believed that older girls or women are more difficult to regulate especially when they have been educated and become independent (Chowdhury, 2004; WLUML, 2013). Marrying girls off seems to be the ideal way for parents as responsibility for their upkeep now shifts to the husband. Usually, most parents believe that when girls are married off early, the honour of the family is protected as marrying them early will prevent them from engaging in premarital sexual activities and advances from men (Sabbe et al., 2015; UNICEF, 2001). In view of this, a number of practices (puberty rites and early marriage) have been designed by some communities to protect the girls from "sexual immorality" and sexually transmitted diseases which can bring dishonour to her and her family at large (Nasrullah et al., 2014). Furthermore, most cultures in which child marriage is practised, the concept of adolescence is foreign (UNICEF, 2001). A girl child who reaches puberty is considered an adult and can bear a child (Anarfi & Owusu, 2011). She is expected to be ready to take on responsibilities of motherhood, home keeper and a respectful wife, which are socially desirable roles. It is common for parents in these communities to withdraw their children, especially girls, from school fearing that exposure to male classmates or teachers can put them at "risk" of sexual activity or transgression (WLUML, 2013).

Implications of child marriage

Child marriage, aside from being a violation of the human rights of the woman, affects its victims in diverse ways. It has detrimental effects on the development of such children since it is an abrupt shift from childhood activities and pastimes to adulthood without

adequate preparations (Bruce & Bongaarts, 2009; Das Gupta et al., 2014). Additionally, it hinders (often curtails) the educational attainment of its victims, which comes with associated rippling effects. For example, lower educational attainment results in difficulty in finding employment. This, in turn, makes girls more susceptible to violence, psychological distress and economic hardship (Jensen & Thornton, 2003) locking them into dependency. Low educational levels among married girls also affect their children due to the inability of the young mothers to provide proper nutrition, immunisation against childhood diseases which in turn result in high mortality rates among such children (Lloyd & Mensch, 2008; Nguyen & Wodon, 2012).

Child marriage also poses severe reproductive health risks. Girls who marry early usually experience physical pain associated with sexual intercourse due to their underdeveloped reproductive organs (Mathur, Greene, & Malhotra, 2003). Childbirth may lead to obstetric fistula (the tearing of vagina, bladder and/or rectum during childbirth) because of prolonged child delivery (Glinski et al., 2015). Exposure to sexual abuse and sexually transmitted infections is often high among this population (Presler-Marshall & Jones, 2012). It has been revealed that married girls in Ghana are less likely to use contraception to space their childbearing with only 13.6% of girls using contraceptives (WiLDAF Ghana, 2014).

Furthermore, child marriage has negative economic implications. Girls who are married are usually unable to have access to education which will give them the needed skills, knowledge and employment prospects to support their families (WiLDAF Ghana, 2014). This advertently leads to an increasing number of girls who cannot contribute to the national economy, thus putting pressure on the country's economy and national development prospects.

The psychological consequences of child marriage also persist and cannot be overlooked. Although research in this field is limited (Glinski et al., 2015; UNICEF, 2001), studies have found that girls who marry at an early age show poor mental health and report higher rates of social isolation and depression (John, Edmeades, & Murithi, 2019; Le Strat, Dubertret, & Le Foll, 2011; Raj, 2010). A recent study also revealed that young girls once married or having received any form of marriage requests were significantly more likely to have had suicidal thoughts than girls who are not engaged in any marriage process (Gage, 2013). Le Strat et al. (2011) also found that most women who married as children in the United State reported higher rates of depression and nicotine dependence in their lifetime when compared with women who married as adults. These psychological consequences may be due to, but not limited to, the loss of adolescence, forced sexual relations, emotional and physical violence, and denial of freedom and personal development (UNICEF, 2001).

Additionally, married girls are often socially and physically isolated from friends, family, and other social networks, which in turn render them reliant on their husband and in-laws for their basic needs. This situation often persists throughout the girl's lifetime and translates into a lack of control over financial resources, and restricted access to information and social support system or networks (Malhotra, 2010). Additionally, studies have revealed that girls in child marriages are at a higher risk of sexual, physical, and emotional violence (World Health Organization, 2002). Although the psychological implications of child marriage are very important to the design and implementation of policies and interventions, literature suggests little research on this field of enquiry (Glinski et al., 2015).

Arguing for research on child marriage in Ghana

In Ghana, studies have been conducted to examine the antecedents and impact of the practice of child marriage. For example, Alhassan (2013) found that poverty was the major reason for the practice of child marriage in the Northern region of Ghana. Undergirding the practice of child marriage was the perceived high cost of educating the girl child and the parents' inability to meet the financial needs of the family due to low household income and meagre resources. This led parents to marry off their daughters early in order to get them out of poverty. Although Alhassan's (2013) focus on poverty as a causal factor for the practice of child marriage is helpful, it leaves a gap in understanding other causal drivers of child marriage.

A similar study conducted by de Groot et al. (2018) also examined the prevalence of child marriage among the population in the Northern and Upper East region of Ghana in a sample of 1349 ever-married women aged 20–29 years. The findings revealed that child marriage is a common practice in northern Ghana and is associated with poor health, adolescent pregnancy, increased child mortality, and low agency among women. A limitation of this study is that the above-mentioned topics were not examined in detail since the use of structured questionnaires didn't allow participants to share their experiences. A research study is needed that affords participants the opportunity to give discursive accounts of their subjective experiences with child marriage and the impact on their lives.

A study conducted by Tsekpo et al. (2016) that focused on the practice of child marriage in communities along the Volta Lake in Ghana reported that children are not always forced into child marriage but may be lured into the practice due to early sexual escapades, incentives for sex, and sexual promiscuity, arising from interplay of other contextual factors, including poverty, single parenting and parental neglect and teenage pregnancy. Although this information is very useful, it, however, presents a gap on affected adolescent girls' views on whether or not they accept the practice, the implications of resisting such practices and their awareness of alternative avenues available to them instead of early marriage.

These limited number of studies, according to de Groot et al. (2018), present a lacuna in the literature on the practice of child marriage in Ghana and necessitates a broader qualitative study into child marriage that seeks to examine a holistic view of the practice by exploring the social and cultural causal dynamics and dimensions undergirding child marriage in Ghana.

Relatively little is known about the psychological impact of child marriage on the lives of married girls. Literature on the psychological impact of child marriage on its victims in Ghana is scant though studies have revealed that the practice has dire psychological consequences on its victims (Gage, 2013; Nour, 2009) as well as other consequences on their children (Jensen & Thornton, 2003; Lloyd & Mensch, 2008) and the society (Glinski et al., 2015). Against this background, it is imperative to conduct research that seeks to explore the contextual drivers and understand the psychological experiences of children in child marriage. Such a study would be relevant in Ghana given the country's high prevalence of child marriage with 21% of girls in Ghana being estimated to be married before they are 18 (UNICEF, 2016), but rates can be as high as 39% in the northern part of the country (GSS, 2014). Findings from such a study will contribute to the understanding

of the cultural, social and psychological impact of child marriage on the quality of life of Ghanaian girls. With the launch of the Ghanaian government's national campaign in 2016 to end child marriage, explorative research will further help inform state departments, agencies and organisations develop interventions and policies addressing the aetiology, practice and impact of child marriage based on the perceptions and experiences shared by participants affected. Research should focus not only on the married girls but also on their parents and elders in the community to understand the social and cultural antecedents of the practice. Information can also be garnered from organisations providing support services to this vulnerable population. Findings from these sources will help psychologists, social workers and other professionals plan and implement interventions that are better tailored to the mental health needs of married girls and affected individuals. The experiences and recommendations of NGOs rendering support to vulnerable groups such as child brides may provide valuable data to inform policy and intervention development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

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