

Empowering Daughters Before Marriage in Conflict-Affected Northern Nigeria: Education, Economic Skills, and Household Well-Being

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Abstract—In Northern Nigeria, marriage remains a central social institution, yet profound economic and security challenges increasingly require dual-income households for survival. Many girls enter marriage without adequate education or income-generating skills, particularly in conflict-affected settings such as Plateau State, where farmer–herder and ethno-religious violence have disrupted livelihoods for decades. This paper examines the need for parents to empower daughters with education and market-relevant skills before marriage as a strategy for strengthening household resilience, enhancing women’s bargaining power, and improving child well-being. Using a qualitative desk-based methodology and drawing on evidence from Plateau State, the paper demonstrates that women who enter marriage with prior education or vocational skills are better positioned to mitigate conflict-induced economic shocks and safeguard family welfare. Anchored in Human Capital Theory, the Women’s Empowerment Framework, and Conflict and Gender Theory, the study argues that empowering daughters before marriage is both a gender equity imperative and a critical component of post-conflict recovery and sustainable development in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: girls’ education; women’s economic empowerment; marriage; conflict; Plateau State; Northern Nigeria

I. INTRODUCTION

Marriage occupies a central place in the cultural, religious, and social life of Northern Nigeria. Across communities, parents often regard marrying off daughters as both a moral obligation and a means of securing their future. However, the socio-economic context within which marriage occurs has changed dramatically over the past two decades. Rising inflation, unemployment, population pressure, climate variability, and persistent insecurity have altered household survival strategies. In this context, reliance on a single income source has become increasingly untenable, and many households now depend on the combined economic contributions of both spouses.

Despite these realities, a significant proportion of girls in Northern Nigeria still enter marriage without adequate education or income-generating skills. This gap is particularly visible in conflict-affected states such as Plateau, where repeated farmer–herder clashes and ethno-religious violence have undermined traditional livelihoods in agriculture and livestock rearing. These disruptions have intensified household poverty, increased displacement, and shifted economic responsibilities toward women’s informal labor. Yet many women are ill-prepared for this role because they were married without prior economic empowerment.

This paper argues that empowering daughters with education or income-generating skills before marriage is an urgent necessity in Northern Nigeria. It contends that parental investment in girls' human capital strengthens household resilience, enhances women's bargaining power, and improves child well-being, particularly in conflict-affected settings. Using Plateau State as an illustrative context, the paper situates girls' pre-marital empowerment within broader debates on gender, conflict, and sustainable development.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on three complementary theoretical perspectives: Human Capital Theory, the Women's Empowerment Framework, and Conflict and Gender Theory. Together, these frameworks explain the pathways through which girls' education and skills acquisition before marriage shape household outcomes in conflict-prone contexts.

Human Capital Theory posits that investment in education and skills increases individuals' productivity, earning capacity, and long-term economic returns (Becker, 1993). In Northern Nigeria, where conflict and economic instability have weakened traditional livelihoods, women who possess education or vocational skills are better positioned to diversify income sources and respond to economic shocks. Parental investment in daughters' education before marriage therefore enhances women's future economic contributions and household resilience.

The Women's Empowerment Framework conceptualizes empowerment as the interaction between resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer, 1999). Education and skills represent critical resources that expand women's choices, while income generation enhances agency within household decision-making. Achievements are reflected in improved household welfare and child outcomes. In conflict-affected communities of Plateau State, women's access to resources prior to marriage has been shown to translate into greater influence over decisions concerning food security, education, and healthcare.

Conflict and Gender Theory highlights how violent conflict reshapes gender roles, power relations, and economic responsibilities (El-Bushra, 2007). In Plateau State, prolonged violence has disrupted male-dominated livelihoods, increasing reliance on women's informal economic activities. This framework underscores why marrying girls without economic capacity exacerbates vulnerability in conflict settings, while empowering them before marriage strengthens household coping and recovery mechanisms.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework guiding this study links parental actions to long-term household and child outcomes within a conflict context. The framework proposes that parental investment in daughters' education, vocational training, and financial literacy prior to marriage enhances women's economic capacity, including employability, income generation, and savings. Increased economic capacity strengthens women's bargaining power and agency within marriage, leading to improved household resilience through income diversification and enhanced coping strategies during conflict. Ultimately, these processes result in positive child outcomes, including improved nutrition, sustained school attendance, better health, and reduced vulnerability to early marriage.

Violent conflict operates as a contextual factor that intensifies risk for households lacking economically empowered women and magnifies resilience where such empowerment exists. Thus, pre-marital empowerment functions as both a preventive and adaptive mechanism in conflict-affected environments.

IV. METHODOLOGY

IV.I. RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper adopts a qualitative desk-based research design, relying on systematic review and synthesis of existing literature. This approach is appropriate for examining structural and contextual dynamics in settings where primary data collection may be constrained by insecurity and access limitations.

IV.II. SOURCES OF DATA

Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and development reports produced by organizations such as UNICEF, UN Women, UNESCO, the World Bank, and the International Labour Organization. Special attention was given to studies focusing on Northern Nigeria and Plateau State, particularly those addressing farmer–herder conflict, ethno-religious violence, women’s livelihoods, and child welfare.

IV.III. DATA ANALYSIS

The study employed thematic content analysis, organizing evidence around key themes: parental investment in girls’ education, pre-marital skills acquisition, women’s economic participation, household resilience in conflict, and child well-being outcomes. Triangulation across multiple sources enhanced analytical credibility.

V. EDUCATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Female educational attainment in Northern Nigeria remains among the lowest in the country, with conflict-affected areas experiencing the most severe disruptions. In Plateau State, school closures, displacement, and insecurity have disproportionately affected girls’ education. Evidence indicates that educated women are more likely to engage in income-generating activities, access health services, and invest in their children’s education (World Bank, 2020; UNESCO, 2023).

Parental prioritization of girls’ education before marriage equips daughters with cognitive skills, confidence, and adaptability. These attributes are particularly valuable in unstable environments where livelihoods are uncertain. Education thus serves as both an economic and protective asset, enabling women to contribute meaningfully to household welfare.

VI. VOCATIONAL SKILLS AND LIVELIHOOD ADAPTATION IN CONFLICT SETTINGS

Given the dominance of the informal economy in Northern Nigeria, vocational and entrepreneurial skills are critical pathways to women’s economic participation. In Plateau State, women trained in tailoring, food processing, petty trading, soap making,

and agro-processing have played central roles in sustaining households during periods of violence and displacement. The International Labour Organization (2019) emphasizes that such skills enhance resilience in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

In communities affected by farmer–herder conflict in Bassa, Barkin Ladi, and Riyom Local Government Areas, women’s small businesses often became the primary household income source after men lost access to farmland or livestock. Daughters married without skills were less able to contribute, increasing household stress and vulnerability.

VII. PLATEAU STATE CASE NARRATIVES: CONFLICT AND HOUSEHOLD SURVIVAL

VII.I. FARMER–HERDER CONFLICT

Farmer–herder clashes in Plateau State have resulted in loss of lives, destruction of farmland, cattle rustling, and displacement. In many affected households, male livelihoods collapsed, forcing families to rely on women’s informal economic activities. Women who entered marriage with prior skills or education were better able to stabilize household income and sustain children’s schooling. Conversely, households where women lacked economic capacity experienced food insecurity, school dropout, and reliance on negative coping strategies.

VII.II. ETHNO-RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

Ethno-religious conflicts in Jos North and surrounding areas have fragmented communities and restricted economic mobility. In these contexts, home-based enterprises became critical survival strategies. Women with pre-marital education or skills navigated constrained markets more effectively and supported household recovery, highlighting the risks of marrying girls without economic preparation in volatile environments.

VIII. ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION, BARGAINING POWER, AND CHILD WELFARE

Women’s economic participation significantly shapes household decision-making. Duflo (2012) demonstrates that women’s income is strongly associated with increased spending on children’s health and education. Evidence from Plateau State aligns with this finding, showing that economically active women prioritized school continuity and nutrition despite conflict disruptions. These patterns underscore the intergenerational benefits of empowering daughters before marriage.

IX. DISCUSSION

This study reinforces existing literature linking girls’ education and women’s economic empowerment to improved household and child outcomes (UNESCO, 2023; UN Women, 2021). It extends this literature by foregrounding pre-marital parental investment as a decisive factor shaping women’s capacity to cope with conflict-induced livelihood shocks. In Plateau State, women empowered before marriage demonstrated greater resilience, supporting arguments by the ILO (2019) on skills development in fragile contexts.

Engaging Kabeer’s (1999) framework, the findings show how access to resources translates into agency within marriage, particularly in decisions affecting children. Conflict and Gender Theory is also affirmed: while conflict heightens vulnerability,

it can reshape gender roles in ways that elevate women's economic importance. However, such transformation is contingent on pre-marital empowerment.

Counter-arguments suggesting that women's economic empowerment undermines marital harmony are not supported by the evidence. Instead, empowered women contributed to household cooperation and resilience. Nonetheless, limitations include reliance on secondary data and uneven availability of localized gender-disaggregated evidence. Future research should employ mixed-methods approaches to capture household dynamics more deeply.

X. CONCLUSION

In conflict-affected Northern Nigeria, particularly Plateau State, marrying daughters without education or income-generating skills exposes households to severe economic and social risks. This paper demonstrates that parental investment in girls' education and skills before marriage strengthens household resilience, enhances women's agency, and improves child well-being. Empowering daughters before marriage is therefore both a gender equity imperative and a pragmatic strategy for post-conflict recovery and sustainable development.

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