



# New Voices, Stronger Communities – Shifting Norms to End Child, Early and Forced Marriage.

*National Dialogue on the Very Young Adolescent Survey.*





**Context Setting**

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**Panelists**

- » Dr. Amina Hanga, Executive Director, Isa Wali Empowerment Initiative
- » Joan-Anne Jummai Idonije, Special Assistant Technical, Women Affairs and Community Engagement to the Minister of Women Affair
- » Prof. Michael Kunnuji, Professor, University of Lagos
- » Victoria Bello, Deputy Director, Centre for Girls Education (CGE)

**Moderator**

Maryam Ado Haruna, Program Advisor, Policy Innovation Centre (PIC)

## Background and Introduction

Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) continues to be one of the most pressing challenges undermining gender equality, human rights, and development outcomes in Nigeria. Despite notable progress at the policy level including the passage of the Child Rights Act (2003), which sets the minimum legal age of marriage at 18, child marriage remains widespread especially in rural Nigeria. National data shows that 44% of Nigerian girls are married before age 18, and about 18% are married before age 15, with the highest prevalence in the northern regions.

**CEFM has devastating consequences:** it curtails girls' education, increases their risk of maternal mortality, exposes them to gender-based violence, and traps them in cycles of poverty. The practice is deeply entrenched in a mix of social norms that prioritize marriage and childbearing over education and empowerment, and non-normative factors such as poverty, weak enforcement of laws, and inadequate services. The side session "New Voices, Stronger Communities" at the national dialogue was convened to spotlight these challenges and highlight emerging community-driven solutions. Bringing together government officials, grassroots activists, civil society actors, and survivors, the session provided a platform for candid reflections on both barriers and opportunities in the fight against CEFM.



# Highlights from The Session

## Normative Drivers of CEFM

The session highlighted multiple ways in which harmful social norms sustain child marriage:

- 01. Gender Inequality and Patriarchy:** Girls are often valued primarily as wives and mothers rather than as individuals with independent aspirations. As Amina Hunger shared, “Sometimes I feel like just being female already puts us at a disadvantage... girls are more or less groomed for marriage, and as soon as a suitable suitor comes, she’s sent off.” This norm is reinforced by intergenerational practices that perpetuate the idea that a girl’s worth lies in her reproductive role.
- 02. Family Honor and Shame:** Families marry off daughters early to preserve honor and avoid the perceived disgrace of premarital pregnancy. Girls who drop out of school are often viewed as vulnerable to shame, with marriage presented as the only way to “protect” family dignity. One panelist explained, “For many families, the question is not about the girl’s dreams but about protecting the family name.”
- 03. Bride Price and Economic Value:** In some communities, daughters are seen as economic assets. The practice of bride price reinforces transactional views of marriage. A participant noted, “The way families talk about girls sometimes is in terms of what they will bring when they marry not what they will become if they are educated.”
- 04. Silence Around Sexuality:** Parents often avoid conversations about sexuality and reproductive health, leaving girls uninformed. This perpetuates dependence on parents and gatekeepers for decisions that shape their lives. “We don’t talk to our daughters about these issues,” one panelist said, “and because we don’t, they are not equipped to make informed choices.”

## Non-Normative Drivers of CEFM

- 01. Poverty and Economic Insecurity:** Families facing financial hardship often see girls’ education as a “waste” and marriage as an economic relief. “An empowered family is a key to solving these issues... when families have money, they will not look for how to marry off their daughters,” a panellist explained.
- 02. Weak Policy Implementation:** Although Nigeria has domesticated the Child Rights Act across all 36 states, enforcement remains weak. As one Ministry of Women Affairs official put it, “We can’t force states. All the ministry can do is high-level advocacy, because we operate a federation.” This lack of enforcement means many communities continue the practice unchecked.
- 03. Education Gaps:** School systems often fail to retain or motivate girls to remain in school. Overcrowding, poor teaching quality, and lack of safe, gender-sensitive facilities discourage continued school attendance. A speaker emphasized, “If parents can see that their children finish primary and secondary school without being literate, they ask - what’s the point?”
- 04. Institutional Weakness:** Local government structures often lack resources or commitment. Civil society groups struggle to partner effectively with ministries that are reluctant to even name the issue. One advocate noted, “Sometimes ministries don’t want to use the term child marriage, so even getting recognition is a challenge.”

## Case Studies and Illustrations

- \* **Safe Spaces for Girls:** Safe spaces emerged as a proven strategy. These provide girls with literacy, life skills, and mentorship, offering them a vision beyond early marriage. One panelist shared, “Through safe spaces, girls start to see there’s another way, they will still get married later, but with skills and education.”
- \* **Role Models and Representation:** The importance of role models was stressed. Female leaders such as Professor Rukaiyah and Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala were cited as examples that education and cultural identity can coexist. “When girls see veiled women succeed in politics or academia, it tells them they can hold onto their values and still achieve,” a participant observed.
- \* **Community-Led Approaches:** Sustainable change must be rooted in community leadership. As one panelist said, “Don’t bring somebody from outside... let them be from within the community. They are known; they can speak about these issues.” Community-driven interventions have more legitimacy and impact compared to externally imposed campaigns.
- \* **Youth Advocacy:** Young voices are increasingly central. The session highlighted that young women who have escaped early marriage or benefitted from education are some of the strongest advocates. Their testimonies resonate with families and communities.

## Recommendations

- Shift perceptions of girls from economic assets to individuals with potential. Promote storytelling and role models that highlight the benefits of education and delayed marriage.
- Invest in improving the quality of schools, provide gender-sensitive infrastructure, and integrate life skills and SRH education. Addressing education quality will counter the perception that schooling is futile.
- Implement family-centered economic empowerment programs that reduce the financial incentives for early marriage. “When families are secure, child marriage becomes less of a survival strategy,” one speaker emphasized.
- Improve state-level enforcement of the Child Rights Act and harmonize legal frameworks. Close loopholes that allow for cultural or religious exceptions.
- Work with traditional rulers, religious leaders, and grassroots advocates using culturally sensitive approaches. Encourage dialogue that allows communities to own the problem and lead solutions.
- Scale up safe spaces, mentorship, and youth leadership programs to provide girls with alternatives, voice, and agency.
- Improve coordination between federal, state, and local structures, while ensuring CSOs have access to resources and legitimacy to complement government efforts.

## Conclusion

The session reaffirmed that ending child marriage in Nigeria requires addressing both normative drivers (harmful social and cultural beliefs) and non-normative drivers (poverty, weak institutions, poor services). These forces intersect to sustain the cycle of early marriage.

However, the discussions also highlighted pathways for change. From safe spaces and youth advocacy to stronger schools and empowered families, solutions exist and are already working in pockets across the country. As one participant concluded, “To break the circle of poverty, girls’ education is the investment that will do that for us.”

Speakers framed child marriage as both a rights violation and a developmental bottleneck. It was emphasized that ending CEFM is central to achieving Nigeria’s commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to health, education, and gender equality.

As the moderator explained the purpose of the dialogue: “This is not just about laws on paper — it is about how families, communities, and leaders can shift the way they view girls. Until we change those underlying beliefs, we will continue to see the same outcomes.” Another participant linked CEFM to broader socio-economic realities: “In many households, marrying off a daughter is not seen as a choice, but as survival.” This framing underscored that strategies to address child marriage must simultaneously tackle cultural beliefs, economic constraints, and institutional weaknesses.

